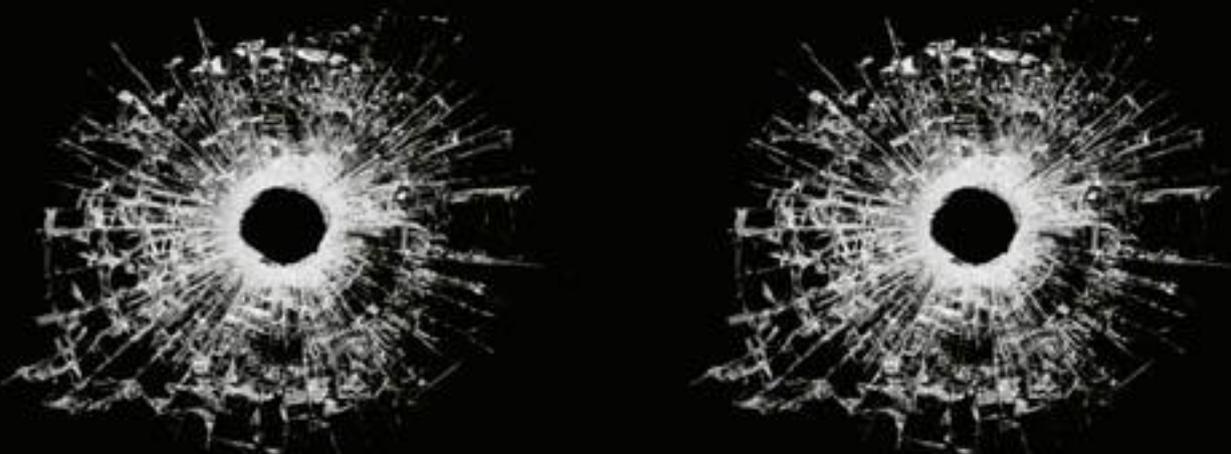




EXIT



STRATEGY

He just wanted to retire -
They just wanted him dead ...

A thriller by
MAX DRAYTON

THE STRATEGY TRILOGY

Part 1 - EXIT STRATEGY

A thriller by Max Drayton

My thanks to Joy Tilbury, who pushed some words into place
and Mandy, for keeping them there.

There is strong language, violence and scenes of an adult nature.

Cover by Phil Lewis

If you enjoyed this novel, please let me know.

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

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EXIT STRATEGY

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE - PETROS COSTAS

It was a dismal but warm Thursday afternoon, some place in Edgware. With a heightened feeling of dread, I stepped into the grubby hotel. Not a good beginning to my momentous day. I was nervous, it's not every day you try to kill somebody.

My hands were sweating, and a tingling in my skin, so I waited a few seconds more before I knocked a third time on room 105.

Was that a noise? I pressed on the door. The heavy door resisted at first and I felt my hands shaking as I pushed harder. It quietly opened and let me into the killer's lair.

The lights were off, making it difficult to see. A standard narrow corridor from the door, past a small bathroom and into the bedroom itself. From where I stood, only a small part of the 'L'-shaped room was visible. A small looking double bed, chair, dressing table and a built-in wardrobe.

'Hello?' I muttered weakly, standing by the door and feeling foolish.

'Come in', someone murmured. So quiet I was unsure if I'd heard.

Moving towards the bedroom, I caught sight of myself in the full-length mirror. I'd questioned earlier what to wear for this meeting. I thought casual, but that might give the wrong impression. Know what I mean?

So, I went for the dark suit, white shirt and bright tie, I looked smart. Hair slicked back, the way Sharon likes it, emphasising my classic Greek God looks. Dark eyes, strong chin. What's not to like? I felt more confident in how I'd presented myself.

I jerked in surprise. The door shut behind me, a hard bang that sounded like a cell door. Loud in the silence of the room. Why are hotel room doors always so noisy? Yeah! It made me nervous again.

I slowly entered the bedroom part. He was sitting in a chair, his back to the window, the curtains pulled, leaving the room in darkness.

He seemed at ease, you know what I mean? His legs crossed, hands resting on the wooden chair arms, never taking his eyes off me. He didn't invite me to sit, but just ... studied me for a moment.

No wasted conversation, he got straight to the point. ‘Who’s the t t target?’

He wasn’t what I expected, you know? Overweight, balding and a stutter. His hands shook, and his eyes were...strange. Somehow, not...balanced. Is that the right word? Know what I mean?

He blinked often, and his left eye continually wept. He used a large grubby white handkerchief to wipe it away. His voice soft and had a slightly what sounded like a Scottish accent.

I was so ill at ease by now I was sweating and took a few moments to react. My heart now beating faster, and I doubted everything about this meeting.

My mobile rang, naturally I answered it.

‘No ph ph phones!’ was the stern command.

Embarrassed, I thumbed it off and put it away. Hands sweating, I took an envelope from my pocket. ‘This is all I have. Where he lives, what he does, you know, where he goes, and that.’ I moved nearer to him and held it out.

A shaky hand took the envelope, and he left it resting in his lap. There was a strange smell coming from him. Not, you know, unwashed, more...I don’t know...stale?

His face still in strong shadow and I tried not to stare at him. I must’ve looked like a naughty schoolboy, as I kept staring at the horrific patterned carpet of the cheap room. Who stays in a place like this?

‘Why this m m man?’ a softly asked question. The stutter didn’t seem to bother him, but it was making me even more anxious.

‘Do you need to know?’ I said quietly, unsure of myself. He nodded. I glanced around the empty room and stammered, ‘He’s the guy I work for. My boss.’

‘You want him to r r retire?’ I nodded, afraid to give away more personal information than necessary. ‘What’s your b b business?’

‘Do you really need to know that too?’ I risked a direct glance at his face.

He remained silent for a moment, his hands folded in his lap. He spoke carefully, ‘I need to know w w what consequences I can expect from my efforts. Am I going to have the full f f force of the law hunting me for r r retiring a high-ranking Police Officer? A Mafioso boss removed and half of

the organised c c crime syndicates in Europe after my h h head? Or a b b baker's son seeking revenge on a shoestring b b budget?

I didn't know how to respond, 'None of those.'

'Well?' his eyes locked on to mine. They *were* miss-matched. One cloudy, was that a cataract? A hitman not able to see straight? What was I doing....?

He was still waiting for an answer, 'Catering supplies. Mainly.' I hoped it was enough of an explanation. Any more detail and we'd be there all day.

'Is this to be s s silent, or noisy?'

'Sorry?'

'P p public, or p p private? Do you want the world to know this man retired ahead of his t t time?'

'No! No fuss. Make it look like an accident. I want no connection with it at all, you know? Definitely an accident. Good, God! Accident. Yes.'

My legs were weakening, and my palms were even damper. I felt I was being interviewed for a career-defining job.

After a long silence, he looked like he wouldn't say anything, so I blurted out, 'I can rely on your discretion, know what I mean?'

He smiled, showing a set of crooked and stained teeth. He wiped his eye carefully and put the handkerchief away in a jacket pocket. Right then I wanted to reconsider everything. Was this the right man for the job? Can I still back out now?

He shifted in his chair before saying, 'I'm never going to r r reveal a client's involvement, I'd be implicating m m myself if I did. Timescale? I don't work to s s specific hours and minutes.....'

'Soon as possible, really.'

He sat and watched me before saying, 'W w what will you get out of his retirement?'

The question took me by surprise. I didn't know how to answer that, 'In what way do you mean, like?'

'Financially, what will you g g gain by his absence? How much will it mean to you? Say...in the first f f full year?'

What was this, the Inquisition? Was he becoming doubtful whether to take the contract? If he refused, I didn't know who else to go to. It was a matter of pure luck that I'd found this man.

It was a bugger of a job to find someone with these specialities and a bugger to get it done on the quiet, you know? I'd quietly spread the word, and, somebody knew somebody, who knew somebody – and so on, yeah? I thought this was my only way forward – know what I mean? Two weeks later I found a contact message in my jacket pocket!

So now I was becoming unsure whether the whole thing was still a good idea, I stuttered out an answer, 'I'll take his job. I get the extra revenue from the business, yeah? You know, cash business.'

'Into millions, then?'

'I suppose so. Why?'

'It'll affect the f f fee.'

It relieved me that he was still considering the job. But now I worried about the price. I didn't have a firm figure in my mind. How much is a person's life worth? Depends on the person, I suppose. Yeah?

'I don't have a budget, but there are financial limitations....' I tailed off. Partly because I didn't know what else to say, partly because of the way he was staring at me, you know.

He remained silent for a long time. He held the envelope lightly in his two fingers, almost as if he'd forgot it was there.

He glanced at his watch. I noticed, even in the dim light, a cheap wind up, which went out of fashion many years ago. Perhaps sentimental value? He was waiting. Was he waiting for me? To say something? What?

Finally, he spoke, 'I need time to c c consider this.' Was he going to refuse?. 'B b but if I go ahead the fee will be €300,000. I'll need €10,000 up f f front for expenses. When I'm ready, I'll c c contact you and ask if you wish to g g go ahead. If you say no, I'll k k keep all monies paid at that point. If you say yes, I shall p p proceed after p p payment of €100,000. The b b balance of the fee is to be p p paid immediately on c c completion of the contract. Is this agreeable?'

He stared at me, waiting for an answer. A high price! Too high? But as I expected to get millions more from my "promotion", it was acceptable. It concerned me someone might discover I was behind all this, more than the cost of the....retirement. I didn't think I should argue and negotiate with this man, so I nodded.

Once again he checked his cheap watch and with relief I felt the interview was over. There was a knock on the bedroom door, breaking the silence and making me jump. As it was his hotel room, I expected him to get up and answer it. He sat there staring at me until I got the message.

Someone from the hotel staff handed me an envelope. I wasn't anticipating this and didn't have any cash for a tip. I looked at the young man, but he left, not expecting anything. It surprised me to find my name on the envelope and opened it. My hands were steadier now, but still damp.

A small sheet of paper had a typed message on it, 'Will contact you shortly.' It was hand signed 'The Magician'.

That confused me. Why send me a note when he could've told me? Know what I mean? When I moved back into the room - he'd gone!

The room was empty. I opened the curtains to let light in. The window looked out on to the back of another building and was closed and locked.

'Hello?' I mumbled. I entered the small bathroom, there was a sealed window. Embarrassed, I even searched under the bed.

Nothing there.

I approached the wardrobe and slid open the door with trembling fingers. It too was empty. A few hangers, but no clothes hanging, just empty.

He'd vanished into thin air.

I'm seeing why he's known as The Magician. Not only did he make people disappear, he made himself disappear too.

Perhaps he *was* the right man for the job.

Know what I mean?

CHAPTER TWO - THE MAGICIAN

I'm always careful when meeting a new client, it might easily be a trap. By the police, a disgruntled agent, or a victim's relative. Many people want me caught, or dead.

I needed to get so much information from Petros Costas. Is he full of macho bluster? Is he serious? Does he have the personal courage to carry it out? Will he be overburdened by guilt and remorse? Is he cautious in his conversation, appraising me as hard as I'm appraising him? How tough is he, will he break under pressure and point a finger at me? If he brags about other sanctions he's fronted, naming names, or talks too much – I walk away. Forget him.

When Costas went to answer the mobile, I stopped him. Make him understand the rules early. I daren't risk covert photos being taken, conversations recorded. Much too risky. This potential client had come to me through personal recommendation, normally the best kind. Before agreeing to anything, I always want to meet them. First completing an in-depth research on Petros Costas.

There are rumours of an emerging London Greek Mafia, and Petros is one of its rising stars. Not adopting the Italian style of extreme persuasion, this organisation relies on more psychological intimidation, rather than terminal pressure.

I've experience with the Italians, I'm one-quarter Italian on my father's side. I've several clients who're clearly part of the fringe Nostra machine. I've helped them occasionally, so they leave me alone. I wasn't sure what insect nest I might be stirring up by helping the potential Greek competition.

I decided to circumvent client confidentiality, and approached a few of my more reliable Italian clients. They'd heard of this Greek outfit, and one even knew of Costas. None of them sounded concerned over my potential involvement.

Still, I hesitated. I'm cautious.

I reconsidered my long-term plan. When I reached €20 million in the bank, I was going to retire - in the true sense of the word. My savings were close to that goal. Being at the top of my game, to retire now would be a pity. I'd only one other contract in negotiation, so I decided I needed just one more after that, a boost to protect my income from another potential global financial slump. Proof against inflation.

In theory, I should've retired a few years ago, but the market decline wiped out some of my investments and it might happen again. So, I added a few more working years to the plan, fine tuning for the future.

I've always led a low-profile life and wanted to continue that until my dying day. I'm not, and never have been, purely motivated by money. But I do need a lifestyle I can appreciate. Particularly in retirement.

Still, I hesitated over Costas.

I insist on meeting any potential new client. A strong aspect of my professional approach consists of pure theatre. A dramatic entrance, or exit, promotes my reputation. So, I arranged for Costas to meet in a dramatic enough fashion and set up the stage for the main performance.

I'd rented the hotel room for three nights under the name of David Bamberg, a famous magician in the middle 1800's. I'd prepared the special effects carefully.

I chose a standard room, which was as obscure and unmemorable as possible. It was ideal in that, from the doorway, you couldn't see fully into the bedroom or the wardrobe door.

I carefully measured the inside of the wardrobe and took photographs of the materials that formed the inside walls and back. In my workshop, I made the matching panel, fashioned it collapsible and carried it into the room wrapped as a gift parcel.

It fitted well, making a hidden partition to one side of the wardrobe that was indistinguishable from the rest of the interior. When ready, I squeezed into the hole and pulled the panel shut over me.

A simple illusion, but extremely impactful and effective for a first-time meeting with a client. Especially as they wouldn't be expecting any illusion.

Impressing new clients is important. If they're not impressed, then I reconsider them as a client.

My in-the-flesh analysis of Costas was mixed. A tall, overweight, swarthy man. Eyes with a swollen look to them. His slightest movement was exaggerated as if he wanted to be everywhere at once.

I thought he was nervous and out of his depth, but he appeared determined to go through with his plan. His ambition outweighing his fear of failure. He might if handled properly, become a future client. But I was considering retiring soon.....

The hotel porter's message was delivered precisely on time as instructed. A large tip provided strict attention to detail and punctuality. His arrival

distracted Costas long enough for me to enter my hidden closet. A dramatic illusion to end the interview.

It was a good exit strategy and assumed it impressed. It should have done, I took time and effort to create it.

I now had to decide, go - no go. The material Costas gave me was not enough, in itself, to formulate a plan. I needed more. I needed to assimilate that on my own.

Early the following Sunday morning I stood in my bathroom, studying my clean-shaven face in the mirror. I've a normal mid-thirties face, quite lean with no real distinguishing features – a must in my line of work.

I'm toned, muscular and fit looking, which is why I normally choose to disguise my physique with padding, or a fat suit of some kind. My mid-brown hair is always cut short, but not close-cropped. I'm fastidious about anyone that sees me at work, are not able to recognise me out of the disguise. I'm a free man today because of it.

After showering I put on running gear and ate a good breakfast, as it might have to last all day. Plenty of protein and just a few carbs. I jogged to my workshop in Streatham, where I opened up, after making sure I was unobserved.

I call it a workshop, but the property has several functions. It's really a collection of old factory sheds all linked together. It's in a run-down part of town, where nobody wants to rent business facilities, nor are there any residential buildings.

I bought the whole site cheaply. At some time, someone might want to redevelop the area. By then, I'll be long gone and prepared to sell it at a profit. But for now, it was my storage area, a place to sleep in an emergency, a workshop, comprehensive wardrobe, a private gym, a kitchen, shower room, a garage and a place to sit and think quietly – undisturbed.

It appears run down from the outside, but inside I keep it clean and tidy. A lot of maintenance by me, but it's a vital part of my business. The tin roof can get noisy in the rain, but the rest of the structure is water-tight late 1800's brick. All the upper windows I've whited out and there are no lower windows, I bricked them up.

For this first reconnoitre I chose my moped with the student taxi driver's rack on the handlebars. From my extensive wardrobe, I selected out-dated tracksuit bottoms and padded hoodie top, a long neutral wig matched by a sparse false beard. Cheek and nose paddings added to the change in my appearance.

Placing a map on the rack I studied my destination. If I mark up a map in any way, I always make sure I destroy it afterwards. Leave no evidence – anywhere.

I re-read the details Costas had provided and decided on my approach. I wheeled the moped out of the garage and checked all around the quiet dead-end alley. I locked the small service door and alarmed the unit.

The silenced motor sighed into life. With my satchel over my shoulder, I headed for my first glimpse of the target.

The building sign read, ‘The Greek Orthodox Cathedral of Dormition’, or the ‘Mother of God’, and it dwarfed the buildings either side of it. Opposite, the small green park was a pretty sight in the early summer sunshine.

Arriving an hour before mass, I parked the moped out of sight in a side street. I walked into the park and scrutinised the area, quietly taking photographs of everything I thought might be relevant.

There was a cloudless sky and little breeze, the temperature might be described as pleasant. Birds were chirping, and I watched grey squirrels living excitedly in some of the trees. There were sounds of people enjoying the public parkland and the drone from some light traffic on the two roads that encompassed it.

Diagonally opposite the church, at the edge of the recreation area, was a small gravelled car park. I assumed mostly used by visitors to the common grounds and church. I strolled around the park absently. The roadside edge had trees that gave partial coverage and there were a few large buildings on the two other sides that seemed quiet on a Sunday morning.

The green offered the best observation position, with a swift escape route south to the A109.

Cars were now arriving in the car park and their occupants crossing the quiet road and heading for the church.

Costas’s information suggested that Georges Stephanos attended mass every Sunday at this church, arriving at precisely 11:50. He’d be driven to the Catholic Church in his Limo and attended by up to four bodyguards. It seemed Georges believed he was a big wheel in the Greek community, re-enforcing his position by showing off his spirituality, strength and wealth. Vanity - the downfall of so many men.

Walking to where I thought would be the best option shooting platform, I was carefully checking the time. I’d not ruled out a shot at the target. I always consider first the chance of a long-range rifle shot, even though, in this case, the Client wanted an accident scenario. I’ve known Clients change their minds at the last minute and I liked to be prepared for all eventualities.

In this instance, I'd consider a long-range dissolving dart with a poison, or virus.

I stood in the cool of the trees and slowly scanned the area. Anyone walking a dog, pushing a buggy, or driving past might notice me. To hold a rifle and wait for a person to arrive, or leave, might take many minutes. Plenty of time for someone to get suspicious and call the police. This was not looking good - yet.

A Limo was coming. It cruised into Trinity Road from the east and drove slowly to the front of the church and stopped. It was nearly a minute before anyone got out. First, two bodyguards, who scanned all around them, over-dramatically I thought. They stood by the passenger door and opened it for Mr Stephanos.

I stood further behind the tree trunk and focused powerful binoculars on the new arrival. A short, lean man got out. Hurrying into the church quickly, with a guard to the front and rear of him. I couldn't see his face. No positive identification.

The car slowly drove off to the west and I waited. A few minutes later the Limo was back, driving past me and purred into the car park. It was a dark charcoal Mercedes GLS class. A V8 engine and probably partially bullet-proofed doors and windows. £60 grand new, plus modifications, over £100 grand of ego-mobile.

The driver parked under the trees as I ambled along the tree line towards the car. I walked right past him and glanced into the window. The passenger windows were tinted and so was the rear. He was reading a paper and settled in for the duration.

I now wanted to alter my appearance and searched for somewhere concealed to change clothes. There were two trees close together on the south area of the park, with bushes around them. I found the right position and was completely hidden.

The changing area was cramped, but I managed to remove the tracksuit and hoodie, revealing a lightweight suit underneath. I slipped a tie loosely around my neck and did up the white shirt collar. I replaced my trainers with polished leather shoes. The tracksuit and trainers went into my shoulder satchel and I strolled towards the church.

There were even fewer people about now as the service was underway. I stood at the doors and scanned the whole area. There were no high places to take the shot from, and nowhere to hide while waiting at ground level. The escape route might also be a problem. I'd have to think of something else.

I'm not a religious man, I couldn't be and continue the career I chose. But, I do take an interest in religion generally. My understanding is that for

some people it's the primary thing that gets them through life, enabling them to function as a normal human being. For others, it's a blessing that a higher deity can be held responsible for every detail of their lives. That must be a great comfort for some. Many orthodox religions' services are not enjoyed, more endured. But they're certainly well-choreographed theatre. The priest in full costume, controlling his congregation, conducting the show, pulling all the emotional strings.

A spiritual lifestyle indicates accurately a person's actions, their thought patterns, their motives, their reactions - all can be predicted.

It can be argued that to take a life is acting like a God. But it's the man that pays me who really decides on the mortal fate of an individual, not me. I just carry out the instructions. For a fee, to salve my conscience.

I've been to a mass before, several times. Once in Spain. On the way out, I made the touch on the target and smoothly kept walking. Moments later he fell to the ground suffering a massive heart attack. I suppose God wasn't on his side that day. But with Stephanos, even without divine protection, the bodyguards wouldn't let me near him.

I found a seat at the end of a row where I'd a good view of Georges and his two henchmen. I just sat and watched. Both the henchmen were big guys, with broad shoulders. Both conventionally suited and, I'm sure, booted too. I doubt if they had guns, but weapons certainly. I didn't fancy having to get through both of them before I got to their boss. I might do it, but not quickly, or quietly enough. Not well enough for it to appear like an "accident".

The service seemed interminable to me. I let it go over my head while I studied Georges's every move. He appeared relaxed and reverent, hanging his head at the right time, making the relevant responses. At times he seemed lost in his own thoughts, at others he concentrated on the priest and his messages. He knelt for the prayers, as did his companions, although with their bulk they struggled to get off their knees.

Georges, initially, appeared a very God fearing man. Perhaps he needed forgiveness for all the sins of the past week and his sins about to be perpetrated. What sins, I wondered? I needed to find out. When it came to receiving the communion, he was out of his seat faster than anyone else. He was first in line to receive the wafer and sip of wine.

He sat down gratified. Had his sins been forgiven, had he proved he was a devout and worthy man to his peers and neighbours? I needed to check how deeply into the church he genuinely was. Did he give donations, have a hold on the clergy? It might be important.

I eased out of the church before the final prayers and dismissal. I strolled back towards the car park to check if the driver was still there. He was asleep at the wheel, his head resting on the side glass, he hadn't moved for nearly two hours. I moved away to find a more discrete position to observe.

He awoke suddenly and answered his mobile phone. I glanced at the church to watch the people streaming out. I expected the car to move and Georges be picked up at the steps. I was surprised. The target was hurrying back to his car, henchmen either side of him, gently fending off the crowd from accidentally touching him. A difficult enough shot at any range.

The driver got out of the Limo, stretched and opened the back door. As Georges arrived, the driver handed him a bottle of water which his boss drank eagerly as he got in the car. It was clearly thirsty work expunging one's sins.

The door was eased shut, and the guards squeezed in the other doors. Seconds later the motor purred into life and the car eased away down Trinity Road.

Now I had a dilemma. The target was too well protected for a close assault. There wasn't enough natural protection for a long-range shot. It seemed like Sunday morning was not going to be the prime opportunity.

The street was quiet again now, the last stragglers leaving the church, the car park nearly empty. 14:30. I changed back into the tracksuit clothes and walked back to my moped. I drove a circuitous route back to the workshop.

I wanted to find out what the target did the rest of the week, fill out my information sheet with all the data gathered so far. This was essential. I needed the whole picture, right there before my eyes.

Before I decided yea, or nay.

One week later I was back on the green again, feeling frustrated, but still optimistic.

I'd tracked Georges for a whole week and got nowhere. He rarely left his large house in Putney, home to his wife and two kids. Nor did he venture out from his few visits to his office, and always with at least two minders. This man felt seriously under threat. That made me wonder whether my client Petros had done something to make his boss so nervous.

Was this going to blow up in my face? Had Petros Costas tipped his hand pushing for his boss's job? Was Georges planning to retaliate and

eliminate my client? Where would that leave me? More questions than answers.

I'd been paid the up-front expenses – I don't undertake anything without that sign of client commitment. So, I wouldn't lose money, but I hate losing a contract. I'd have to work quickly, or not at all.

But how to get to the target?

Georges's company imported Greek food and drink products, supplying Greek restaurants in London, Manchester and Liverpool. When I say supplied, more force supplied. Anyone that didn't buy from Georges found their other supplies hijacked, or burned en-route.

Georges had a string of his own restaurants, but didn't eat in any of them on a regular basis. Strictly security paranoia, or was the food not so good?

Georges's office was in a large warehouse in Kilburn. The rear of this warehouse contained a small hidden studio, where pornography movies were made. Special clients invited to watch the proceedings comfortably over a glass of beer, or wine. There were also about ten illegal brothels that were managed by the organisation. Was this end of the business what Costas really wanted to get his sticky fingers onto?

Money lending was a valued revenue stream for the Stephanos organisation. Collecting the overdue debts was another area altogether.

I'd quickly established these areas of operations, which meant law enforcement agencies might too. So why were Georges's operations still running? Was there a kick-back to the local police? Would I have them on my tail if I changed the status quo?

I'm not judgmental, everyone must earn a living– but some ways are more acceptable than others. Any angst I may have about Georges's business morals I'd have to put on the back burner. After his retirement, Costas would step in and things wouldn't change much at all. But as a professional, having an opinion and acting on it was not part of my work ethic.

Costas was supposedly the Sales Manager, but he was the fixer. He ran the business, while Georges sat back and enjoyed the profits. Petros did all the organisation of transport and manpower. I understood why Costas thought he should be the boss and not the servant. The consigliere wanting to take the position of the Don.

So, here I was back in Trinity Road watching the car park. Believing this was my best option – if only there was a way to make it work.

Mass had been underway for over an hour, the Limo was parked in its regular place under the trees and unoccupied. The bulky chauffer was bending over the engine compartment of a cheap and clapped out Ford, parked nearby.

He was trying to fix a fault and the attractive blonde standing next to him was undoubtedly the motivation for his Christian act. The Greek Knight coming to the aid of a fair maiden in distress.

He'd removed his suit jacket and rolled up his clean white shirt sleeves and would be there for a few minutes longer. He had his back to me, so I eased over to the Limo and opened the back door. I had on my ultra-thin latex gloves, which are coloured to the exact same tone as my flesh. They're hard to detect, even close up. I have these especially made by a little guy in Edinburgh.

It opened easily and silently. It was clean and tidy, nothing left on the seats, except today's Telegraph. I reached in and pulled down the tray of the small drinks cabinet. It had soft drinks, bottled water, a sealed plastic carton containing olives and some small packets of nuts. I took a picture, closed the tray and shut the door quietly, moving on past the knight in shining amour.

From a park bench I watched the street slowing down for the afternoon. The church-goers had gone, the Limo had gone, and the old Ford with the blonde in it had long gone. I watched the church for the one person who hadn't gone.

It was almost three before a solitary figure came out of the front doors of the church and locked them. He pocketed the keys and hurried off east on Trinity Road. He walked into the large building at the end, a pub called O'Raffertys. I waited half an hour and went to join him.

Dressed in worn jeans and a shirt that had holes in it, I appeared a bit of a sight. My mother wouldn't recognise me. I'd a straggly beard and enlarged eyebrows, puffy cheeks and wide nose. My lenses were pale and insipid.

The pub was a throwback to the fifties. The décor was mostly untouched, everything was worn or faded. Brown was the dominant colour, including the carpet. That had every rainbow colour, at least when it was laid. Now it had morphed into shades of brown befitting the atmosphere.

Even the optics looked ancient and tired. Surrounded by numerous tat collected over decades, highlighting the landlord's memorable moments from his life.

I nursed a pint of non-alcoholic beer for a long while in a corner, closely watching the man from the church talking to his friends. He was becoming

increasingly animated after each pint he drank. Slowly his friends dispersed and left him alone at the bar. I drained my glass and went to stand next to him.

He was talking to the barman, while I was served a real alcoholic beer. The man's voice was loud and had a strong Greek accent. He was tall and thin with classical Greek features. His speech was slurred, and his arm movements were becoming increasingly exaggerated. I felt safe to use my soft Welsh brogue and sipped my drink.

We glanced at each other and I nodded. 'Is that your church up the road?'

He stared hard at me with his dark eyes trying to focus. 'Yes. I'm the warden. Are you a member?'

I shook my head. 'No. I... hate crowds. In fact...' I glanced around, '... I don't even like being in here. But I needed a drink...'

He nodded as if he understood. 'A tough day, eh?'

'No. A great day. A huge win on the horses.'

'Congratulations, then.'

I shrugged, 'But no one to celebrate it with.'

With a false smile he raised his almost empty glass and smiled, 'It would be un-Christian of me not to offer to help.'

By the time we were on the second round I knew all about his job, why he felt under-appreciated and why a pay increase would not be out of order. He felt bitter about the level of responsibility put upon him by the governors of the church and all the maintenance and paperwork that was required. All of which should be done by somebody else.

With a desperate attempt at concentration, he advised me that a willing horse always had more baggage put on its back. He was getting weary of having to handle the Public Relations side of the church; the meet-and-greet of new members; the security of the premises; the constant communications with other organisations and the higher officials of the church itself. He was almost in tears, so out of the kindness of my heart I ordered him another drink.

As he talked I studied him in detail. His clothes were cheap and worn. His fingernails were dirty, and I got the impression that a bribe would get me everything I wanted from this man. But he'd be unreliable as far as my personal future safety went. As we talked I was firming up my strategy.

He hefted himself uncertainly back on to the bar stool, after a visit to the toilets. I pointed to the huge bunch of jangling keys hanging from his belt. 'What're all those for?' I asked in awe.

The next five minutes he spent detailing each key and what it opened.

'You have your own office?' more awe on my part. 'What'd you keep in it, the Communion wine? A little sip every now and again, eh? To see if it's not gone off?' I laughed and drained my glass, ordering another round, but watching his body language.

He shook his head and laughed. 'No, no, no. You'd be disappointed. It's cheap wine, low proof.' He tried a conspiratorial wink and failed. 'Because of the children in the congregation. And besides, it's locked away, always. With the wafers and the ceremonial robes. Locked away.'

'And which key would that be on your massive chain there?'

He studied the bunch for a while before pulling one upwards. It was for a standard two tumbler barrel, which was easily bypassed with the proper pick.

I nodded in admiration, 'All those keys, you've no need for spy cameras then? Or patrolling policemen to keep the thieves from your bottles of wine?' I laughed, but his face grew serious.

'No, no, no. It's not the thieves who're the problem, you see. It's the drunks and drug addicts. They THINK there's something worth stealing and can get violent and disruptive when they find there's nothing they can steal and sell. Break things up....smash....everything. Anger. They have...anger. THAT's why we have the cameras.'

The beers arrived, and he was quickly distracted.

For the next few minutes I extracted the details of the security system from him, realising I'd little time left before his concentration was gone completely.

I winked at the barman. 'Will he be alright to get home?'

The man shook his head sadly. 'He'll sleep it off on my sofa back there. Every Sunday. Sad, innit?' I nodded and made my exit.

While walking around the corner I double-checked no one was following, or watching me. I got into my small van parked in the side street and started the engine.

When on a contract I never use the same mode of transport twice. It increases the risk of people recognising me. I don't want anyone able to

describe me in any form whatsoever. And repetition does improve recognition. I've a selection of fake number plates, each of which I use once and destroy.

My mind was digesting all the information and then questioning it all. The man was a drunk, was he deluded, was he showing off? Were the facts right? I needed to check.

It was a lot of work for minimal information, but you only get out what you put in, my father used to say. It was the way I worked. I'd knowledge I didn't have before. I had a plan, I didn't have before. To me all the extra effort seemed worth it. It'd worked for me in the past and would work for me now.

I drove back to the warehouse extra carefully. Although the warden might think I'd drunk a lot and was tipsy, I'd been careful what I swallowed. Although I was probably marginally over the limit, I was not drunk. Being stopped by the police was not good for business.

Parking the van next to my other vehicles, I gratefully removed the disguise. I needed time to think things through. Yes, I had a plan, now I needed to be sure the plan was viable.

I was undecided about making the exploratory entry into the despondent Warden's sanctuary. It was an added risk, but I needed to know the layout and how easy it was to get in again. I considered employing someone else to do the job, but that was an additional security risk. I'd already brought in one other to help, but there's no one else I trusted with this skill set.

The supposedly sophisticated alarm and camera security systems were simple to by-pass. I make it a priority to keep up-to-date with modern alarm systems. This one was several years old and way out of date, an earlier digital model. The locked equipment cupboard housing the video recording was no problem to open. So much for security, but then, this wasn't a bank. It was easy to erase any evidence of my entry and reset to a time after I'd left.

Getting into the church was easy. Getting into the Warden's office was simple and the cupboard a piece of cake. The room was small and clearly used more for storage than church administration.

An amateur could open the cupboard that housed the wine. There were six bottles inside, all with corks. I hate the modern plastic stoppers and screw tops. It's so damn hard to get a needle through them. I locked up the cupboard and left the building exactly as I'd found it.

Nothing to do until the next Sunday. So, I drew up a timeline graph listing everything that was relevant. I considered any potential complications, any possible areas that might go wrong, and built-in options to correct them.

Once I did that, I sat back, gave myself a few days off and did it all over again.

Sunday, I was wearing a baggy shirt and tired jeans. My hair was long and straggly and my eyes grey and lifeless. The false nose was different, without being too prominent. I'd a slouch that made me appear world weary and to be avoided. Torn tennis shoes finished the disguise. No one was going to strike up a conversation with me.

Georges had been dropped off for his God fix at the same time and place. The Mass was in progress as I ambled to the car park to do a visual check on the chauffeur, the Limo being parked in his favourite spot.

He was standing next to the Limo chatting to the blonde who he'd helped the week before. They were both laughing, she was flirting a little too obviously.

I continued to the end of the road and fully round the park, to come in from the other direction. Now I was at the opposite side of the car park. She was now sitting in the Limo with the driver.

Resting casually on a park bench, I watched as the driver got his phone call. Hastily he got the woman out of the car and said his goodbyes to her. She leant forward and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Even from this range there was surprise and delight on his face.

I just love a good romance.

She walked slowly away from him, his eyes never leaving her. He eased into the car and used the mirrors to see the last of her, as she got into her old Ford and drove away. Once the distraction had ended, he started the car and waited for his boss to arrive.

Georges walked towards the car, bracketed by the bodyguards, the chauffeur opened the door and handed him a bottle of water taken from the rear mini bar. The Greek tycoon grasped the bottle, opened it and without thanks got in the car. Within moments the Limo had gone.

The sun was warm on my face as I closed my eyes and I ran through the day's events in my mind. The routine panned out to be almost identical each week. There was only one conclusion. This was the way, this was the method. The target was in the cross-hairs. The contract was on.

I called Costas from a pay phone out in the country. Few and far between they are these days, there's more where the population is sparser. He answered at the first ring, making me think he'd got a burner phone solely for this project. I felt pleased about that.

'Yes?'

I used the accent I adopted when I first met him. 'D d d o I have a GO?'

'Yes,' he whispered nervously.

It's fundamental to be sure the client was genuinely giving the green light. If he was confused, or I misunderstood, terrible implications might happen later.

'Please acknowledge you k k k now who I am.'

He hesitated, 'You're a tricky customer. Full of tricks. Right?'

'Indeed I am. F f f or my next trick, I'll make s s something disappear. Is that agreeable to you?'

'Perfectly. Like, when's the performance?'

'You d d do not need to know. S s soon. I just need your approval to proceed.'

'Go ahead.'

'No turning b b back after this conversation.'

'No turning back. Go ahead.'

'I will comply as soon as payment is received. Good day to you, s s sir.'

The sanction was confirmed and I was on a mission.

The second time I entered the church I felt more relaxed, but still extra cautious. I wore a disguise, surgical gloves and my shirt smelt of alcohol. Should I get discovered I'd pretend I was inebriated. I always have a few ideas how to avoid detailed personal investigation if the worst paradigm happens.

As I was unsure which of the bottles of wine would be used the following day for the Communion, I had to inject them all. The concoction was my own. A lesser known wort, found in Morocco, and distilled with alcohol to

produce a thin dark syrup. It would go totally unnoticed by the imbibor, but it remained dormant in the blood stream for several hours, with no obvious effects.

There was a sense of irony that it was Greek wine, probably supplied by Georges's own company. I replaced each bottle as I'd found it and locked up.

I left the church and walked to my small car, surveying the area before leaving. I put the alcohol treated shirt in the boot and pulled on a T-shirt. I no longer needed to smell of drink.

It was three in the morning and the traffic was light, but I still watched my mirrors all the way back. I avoided any CCTV cameras I'd discovered along the route. Twice as long, makes it twice as safe.

The morning arrived sunny and bright. I shaved and enjoyed a substantial protean breakfast. I walked briskly to my workshop and laid out the disguise I'd selected the day before. It was full motorcycle leathers, slightly padded for an extra body mass impression, and a full helmet.

With the tinted visor down, I'd be unrecognisable. As an extra precaution I still added cheek padding and under-eye bags. Dark contact lenses, finished off with a pale make up. I've stayed a free man because of these almost obsessive over-precautions.

I'd some reservations about using such a high-profile costume. The cycle outfit stood out in a crowd, but it completely hid the man underneath. Full cycle suits are not uncommon in cities these days. As I'd nothing to do but observe, that was acceptable. The cycle itself had false number plates and was untraceable.

I timed my arrival to coincide with the approximate finishing time of the Mass. Someone in a full motorcycle suit had no reason to hang around for hours on a warm day with his helmet on.

My pulse slightly increased as I parked my bike at the south end of the car park. I couldn't see the driver in the front seat of his Limo. I checked my watch, within minutes the church congregation should be coming out and Georges would be approaching the car. I sat on the saddle and waited, apparently studying a map.

It was time to enter my personal zone. I've practiced doing this since I was a teenager. It requires knowledge of deep meditation and self-control of the mind. Tai Chi is an additional factor that I find helps. It takes me a few seconds, but the result is extremely powerful. I'm able to achieve one hundred percent concentration and little can deflect my attention.

As I opened my eyes my mind ticked off the seconds on the clock. I knew the time was near. Time seemed to slow down as my heart-rate ticked along at twenty-eight beats a minute. I can use this to judge the passing time.

I almost sensed the moment the phone call came. Although my head faced the Limo, from the corner of my eye I noticed movement at the church doors. I further slowed my breathing.

The Limo's rear door opened and the big driver appeared, helping the young blonde woman out after him. I was close enough to see the modesty screen in the car was raised, giving privacy to the two lovers from the driver's un-tinted side. They'd been alone in the back of Georges's Limo, unseen and uninterrupted.

The girl kissed him on the lips and hurried away. He watched her go in a daze. Was this his lucky day? I thought not. My heart-rate at a steady twenty-three beats per minute.

Just in time he remembered to retract the modesty screen and reached in for the bottle of water. He stood by the door as Georges and his henchmen arrived. The Greek boss almost snatched the bottle from the driver's hand and ducked into the rear seat.

Without moving my head, I watched the young woman drive her Ford out of the car park and turn east, within moments she'd disappeared. My heart-rate at twenty-two beats per minute.

The Limo moved smoothly forward. Suddenly it braked. There were a few moments of inertia before the back doors jerked open. The two bodyguards struggled to get their bulk out quickly. They were agitated and shouting at the driver. He was using a mobile phone. My heart-rate at twenty-three beats per minute.

I contentedly sat on the bike observing the scene. Everyone else in the park became interested in the drama unfolding, I was just another bystander watching the action.

The ambulance arrived in just under five minutes. During that time, the three minders fretted around the car and shouted in an increasingly agitated state. Momentarily they'd left the back door open, revealing the slumped form of Georges lying across the seat. He was unmoving. My heart-rate at nineteen beats per minute.

A small crowd had surround Georges's sarcophagus and the burly bodyguards were roughly trying to disperse them. I heard their anxious conversations from where I waited.

The ambulance crew didn't take long to remove the still form of Georges and put him on a trolley. They fully covered him, a good indication that the man was dead. But I still had to be certain, I started the bike quietly.

The two guards insisted they accompany their comatose boss in the ambulance. The argument was short and ended quickly with threatening gestures.

As the ambulance pulled away, I was a few hundred yards behind it. It hurried to St. Ann's Hospital and squeezed into a narrow slot at the A&E unit, while I parked my bike nearby. The problem with using cars for this work is that you must park them in large corporate car parks and that takes time – especially finding a space. With a bike, any small space will do.

I'd previously located all the hospital's CCTV cameras. I'd also checked out the other hospitals within the catchment area of the church, just in case the ambulance decided on another hospital as their destination.

I'd chosen this parking spot a week earlier, as it had the minimal of security camera coverage. The number plates might be found on the recordings, if anyone wanted to check that far, but they were false anyway. It wasn't a designated bay, but I was tucked between a blood wagon and ambulance car. No one would hassle me for the short time I'd be there.

I kept my darkened visor down and walked confidently into casualty reception carrying a small parcel, looking just like any other courier in a hurry.

The two bodyguards were pacing, still in a state of shock, hoping for a miracle resurrection. The trolley and their boss had disappeared, along with their job security. With the guards in earshot I couldn't risk asking the reception whether the admission was deceased, so I had to take a risk and approached the bodyguards.

'What was that all about?' I asked in a very neutral accent, muffled by the visor.

Two of them ignored me, one of them the chauffer. The other had tears in his eyes. 'He's dead!'

'Really? How?'

He wouldn't look at me, the floor was as far as he managed. 'I don't know. He just.....heart attack we think. One second he was there, the next....'

'Sorry to hear it, mate,' I said with a shake of the helmet as I left. The parcel now in my pocket, the delivery apparently made. As if anyone noticed anything in that fraught environment.

I'd confirmed the kill and returned to my bike. Easing back into traffic I drove a convoluted route back to the workshop. A route that was devoid of CCTV cameras and so unlikely to be tracked.

I'd no need to notify Costas of my success, he'd find out soon enough. I eased myself out of my zone and into a shower.

I'm not a cold-blooded killer without emotion, few Contractors are. I'm not a person who doesn't believe in a God and exists purely to kill. I avoid harming animals and ordinary people. It's just a job, but afterwards there's always a danger of feeling some..... uncertainty. Responsibility.

I don't feel guilt. If I was to have guilt it'd be before I made the hit, and I wouldn't carry it out. I've never felt guilt. I make absolutely sure my target is someone who'd not be a loss to humanity. As a professional, I can walk away from a hit without looking back. I've no fear that I've left some telling clue behind, that'll have the police knocking at my door.

Never had nightmares, although I can remember every contract I've ever undertaken – clearly and without remorse. I don't feel the need to share my burden with someone else. Nor to brag about how good I am at my profession. This was just the end of another job.

I'm confident and secure in myself and don't need the acclamation of others to feed my ego, but I do deserve some tangible reward for my efforts. A very personal and satisfying way of celebrating the end of a successful mission.

I have a personal tradition, I like to have company - specific company. Someone with whom I don't have an urge to divulge my exploits and experiences. Someone who's totally confidential about me, but who knows little about me – nor wants to.

It's probably a common trait in any individual who lives a secret life to want occasional release from their tension. What better way can a naturally occurring human desire be satisfied, than by employing a similarly dedicated professional? A series of one-night stands is risky, they can come back and bite you. Long term relationships - always end in disaster.

Her name is Lucie, a long-time acquaintance of mine who shares a bed with me at specific times in my life. There's nothing emotional in our relationship, nothing that couldn't end tomorrow and be forgotten.

My money is compensation for a life of risk and danger, spent anyway I wish. Lucie is an expensive indulgence and worth every Euro. I can't have a permanent woman in my life. What sort of woman would accept what I do? I'd be forever trying to conceal a deadly secret, making up lies for my

absences. What sort of a relationship survives that timebomb? What if we fell out, or got a divorce? That sort of ex-confidante might threaten my survival or freedom and I'd be making her my next target.

Only when I give up the profession would I consider a permanent relationship. Until then....Lucie.

She was fun and loving as always and we lay together afterwards in a warm glow of hard-earned contentment. 'You've had the ceiling painted,' I quipped with a relaxed smile.

Her "private" room was not decorated to my taste. I'm a simple man with simple taste. The room was a little garish for me, but I wasn't there for the décor.

Lucie is the kind of woman that's "girl next-door" attractive. Short dark hair and wide, startlingly clear blue eyes. Very slim, but pneumatic in the right places. All natural, she assures me.

'I got tired of pink.' she made her giggly, girlish laugh and hugged me. 'How did I do today, sweetie?'

I pretended to wonder what she meant. 'Just now?'

'No, silly. Earlier. Did it go well – whatever it was?'

'Yeah, fine, thanks. You did very well. Any problems?'

'Nah. He's a big softy. All big men are softies. Think with the dick. I like big men.' She moved closer to me.

'Just big men?'

'Well...small men too. And medium. And...men that look like you. And....'

'You like men, I get it.'

'It's my job. Speaking of jobs...what's the story? The chauffeur? Can I ask?'

'I'd prefer you didn't. Let's just say....you were a small cog in a bigger wheel.'

'So, I'm a small cog now?' She giggled again and rolled over on top of me. 'What's the water for?'

'The man gets thirsty.' I grinned.

‘There’s already one there. I just had to swap it, right?’ her lips forming into a fake pout.

‘Right. It was a truth drug. When I questioned him later, he told the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Right.... it’s been ten minutes. Where were we....?’

The whole truth was that the identical looking water bottle, Lucie had so masterfully swapped, contained *another* concentrated wort potion. The driver needed to be distracted while she did this – and Lucie was a great distraction.

Only when mixed with the *other* wort in the wine, which Georges sipped with a wafer, the combined plant extracts had an instant and violent effect on the human body. Showing all the signs of a heart attack, the victim would be dead in seconds. All untraceable, especially in the two completely separate delivery systems – wine and water. The water from that same bottle would be harmless to anyone who drank it. The church wine was also non-toxic on its own.

Direct poisoning, however invisible the potion is, can possibly be traced by forensics these days. Although the conclusion maybe they can’t tell HOW the victim was poisoned, or by WHAT - they can say they WERE poisoned. Doubt raised for an “accidental” death.

By the time detectives considered there might be two chemicals involved, if they ever got that far in their investigations, the plant extracts would’ve degraded, and no trace would be left after a few days. Georges was not a young man and heart attacks happen to people every day.

I’d reservations about asking Lucie to help me with this one, but if there’s anyone in the world I trust – it’s her. I decided I needed help with the chauffer. I thought about swapping out the bottle myself, but what if I’d got caught? The driver had seen me? He changed the routine at the wrong time? She was a small gamble and it paid off. This business is full of risks and the secret is to minimise them.

Lucie didn’t know what I did for a living and would never push hard enough to find out.

I met her several years ago when she was working for a pimp named Rico, nasty bastard. She was even more beautiful then. She was still only mid-twenties, but her profession wears the body out quickly and she looks mid-thirties now, but she’s still beautiful. She’s excellent as a lover and a lovely, loving person to wake up to.

Since Rico left, she’s never had to rely on him force-feeding her seedy customers. From that time on, only discreet and wealthy clients of her own choosing.

Once, during Rico's time, I needed some recreation after a particularly awkward contract and she had bruises that spoiled the effect for me. I asked her about them and she shrugged me off. The next day I tailed her and discovered the nasty Rico. Next time we met I managed to get her to open up about him.

To tell the long story short, Rico mysteriously disappeared and left all his assets to Lucie. At least, she thought the shopping bag full of money was from him. With my encouragement, she set up her own business, operating out of her newly refurbished apartment in Fulham. She's never forgotten my help, or "sweetness", as she called it. So now there's nothing she wouldn't do for me.

I still don't know whether she connects the disappearance of her nemesis to my career. I tried to make it clear I'd nothing to do with him leaving, I was just helping her solo career under way. I feel she's as safe as I can make her.

The dawn crept up on us, the new ceiling colour bleeding through my eyelids. I felt warm, relaxed and ...almost happy.

One thought clouded my blue-sky vision. When I retired, where was Lucie going to fit into my plans, if at all. I'd have to give that very careful thought.

What happened next made all those decisions for me.

PART TWO

CHAPTER THREE - MILO SPINETTI

Agents in my line of work, must all be cautious people. One slip and the consequences can be horrific. Having said a that, sometimes I think a contractor can go too far, be too careful.

Sometimes I think this “meet me in a crowded place” caution is over the top. Surely a deserted location, where no one can see you, is safer? Più sicuro, no? But then again, when being caught means a life in prison, or worse, I suppose it’s understandable the contractor who pulls the trigger has to be so careful.

As an agent myself, I know the value of the client being distanced from the contractor who makes with the hit. Degrees of separation, or something like that. Any legal, or vengeful pursuits mustn’t be allowed to affect the client. Rule number one.

So ... it’s vital the contractor I hire for the work is the right and trustworthy asset. I’ve had six assets in all, over nearly twenty years in the business. Now I’m down just to the one. Sign of the times, or something? I don’t know.

There was a time when I contacted assets and gave them the details over the phone, or in a package in a car park. But these days of surveillance, back-tracking your every move, CCTV, DNA, mobile phone photographs, videos, Bada Bing. Checking all the people you met in the last year, back-tracking to discover the real client. All contributes to putting together a cast iron case of deliberate involvement in the homicide. All so different now. All so much more dangerous now. Pericoloso!

Once I was so close to being prosecuted, I thought I’d had it. But I managed to stay out of the final court case and out of jail. The asset kept his mouth shut and took the full rap. I quietly paid his family handsomely for his consideration. Nessun problema.

Another actually died on the job. Failed to make a jump from one roof to another. Fortunately for me, it was after the successful hit. But it did all blow up, as it became an assassination attempt, whereas it was supposed to be just an “accident”. Client wasn’t happy. Neither was the asset. Mort.

One patrimoniale just....disappeared. I really don’t know why. If he retired, he wisely kept quiet about it. If he didn’t, he was probably moonlighting and upset the wrong people. You must be so careful in this business. Trust is fewer and farther between. Trust no one! I heard a rumour he was trying to get work directly from the two Italians that are

creating a lot of interest in the London area. Mario and Primo, cousins and third generation Brits. No real Italian connections any more, ashamed of their own nationality.

Two of my other assets retired. One, I think, managed to see the end of his days abroad somewhere. The other didn't.

I like to have a good relationship with the people I work with. You have to, it's a mutual benefits business. If it doesn't work for one of you, it's gonna fail for you both. Trust them, but not totally.

That's why my current, and only, asset is a dream. Totally reliable. Never caught, or been suspected of anything. A fantasma nella nebbia - ghost in the mist. A Magician, as he calls himself. Mago.

To contact him I have to put an advert in a specialist magazine and wait for him to call me. It's a little time consuming, but as he says...if the job's important enough, time should be allowed for proper consideration. A hasty decision to execute, can lead to a hasty decision to change the mind.

To look at him, you'd think he was anything but a Mechanic. He's gotta stoop and uses a walking stick. Balding hair, overweight and that horrible wart on his nose. But I know that it's mostly disguise. I assume it is, as I've never actually seen the real man behind the legend. I don't know anybody who has.

I do think Mago goes over the top at times. Most of the time, in fact. Well...every single time, really. But there's no denying the fact that he's still working, whereas all of my other contractors no longer can. He's the last of the elite breed. Totally reliable and efficient – if a little ... strano....weird.

It was a lovely day for a man like me, with mild agoraphobia, to be out of my house and the park was not unpleasant. Mago was sitting on a bench and I ambled towards him as if looking for somewhere to rest. His eyes were everywhere, searching for the suspicious movement. Even the squirrels were not safe from his gaze.

'You have something for me?' was spoken softly and without eye contact.

Was that a slight Norfolk accent? I wasn't sure, as my own home country is Italy, several generations back now, but my immediate family still retain the old Italian values and some language. I too now glanced around for anything, or anyone, that looked suspicious. But I was sure he would've been here some while checking everything was sicuro.

I sat down heavily, as I'm a big man. The gentle breeze rustled the leaves on the trees, now in full bloom. The sun was warm and I felt sweat prickling my forehead. I should've worn a hat, even though I hate them. I heard birds

calling to each other, some kids playing, a baby screaming, a child laughing. All safe and very middle England. Why then was Mago so nervous?

I sat in silence for a while before handing him the memory stick during a handshake. He put straight into his pocket, with a sleight of hand I almost didn't see.

It's a unique business I'm in. Acting as the go between, you're not a sinner, nor sinned against. My clients are an growing species of humanity, each in their own particular line of business. For them, an efficient way of removing an obstacle permanently is for someone else to do it for them.

They need to distance themselves from illegal and immoral acts. If something goes wrong, as it can do, they want no connection back to them. Being the middle man that ensures this safety net is the reason I can charge so much.

At the sharp end are people like The Magician. If it goes really wrong and they get caught, they take the full blame. We all rely on them keeping their employers' secrets to themselves. That's why they're paid so highly.

I know of only four agents like me in the Greater London area now. We're all kept employed, but try not to get in each other's way. I know for a fact The Magician works for at least two of them, as well as me.

Mago is an all-rounder, he can do anything. He has a hundred percent success rate over the last ten years. That's astounding, as it's so easy for any project to go wrong. It's vital that any repercussions are manageable. No one gets arrested; no one is blamed for the event. If anything goes wrong it's a bad mark against the asset. He takes full responsibility.

The Magician is special, very special. I can charge a huge mark-up when I use his services, because we know the job will be done discreetly and efficiently and in a timely manner. My clients respect that.

'How much?' The soft voice bringing me back from my reverie.

He was direct as always, and I whispered, '€500,000. You said this time you only wanted a project with a minimum of a half mil? Why, may I ask?'

He seemed to be deep in thought, this was not his usual behaviour. I looked closely now, thinking this might not be my Mago. Was this a set up? Was I being trapped?

Eventually he spoke quietly, 'This'll be my last.'

'Last what?'

'Last contract. This has to be my last. I'm retiring.' His head was away from me, so I couldn't read his eyes.

The breath left my body, it was a shock. I had so many plans, down the line. So much business.....

'You can't! Why?'

'It's time, Milo. It's just...time.'

'I need to think about this.' I was breathless.

'No, you don't. My decision to make, not yours. I'll do this, once I've checked it out. But that'll be it. It's been good doing business with you.' He stood and shuffled away.

I sat and felt miserable. This was not good. For oh, so many reasons.

As he disappeared amongst the children's swings and groups of people, I knew he was walking into trouble, perhaps more trouble than Mago was able to handle.

CHAPTER FOUR - LUCA LACUSTA

Yesterday I had a meeting with the most attractive girl I know. Well...she's attractive, in a frightened, undernourished, rabbit in the headlights sort of way. But that's the way it had to be with Olga, or as I call her, The Pantome.

She dreaded these moments when we'd meet, and I don't blame her. I sat her down in my office knowing she'd be intimidated by its grandeur. Wood everywhere and books, lots of books. Makes me look educated and upper class.

'What this time?' she asked in that soft Romanian accent I'm very familiar with.

'Another tough one, I'm afraid. Here are the details.' I gave her the memory stick wrapped in two £20 notes and watched her eyes. They dropped to the floor, the stick clenched in her bony fist. Her short-cropped, almost white hair, was long at the front and fell over her dark eyes. Her pale skin had a few areas of discolouration and she didn't look healthy.

I know there's strain and tension in this asset. She hates her job, working only under sufferance. Sometimes females can get into places and situations a male might find hard to handle. Occasionally a woman can be a better executioner than a man, they can be twice as vicious as many men. But her potential instability means I only use her for the more straight-forward assignments.

As I get referrals from several sources, there can be times when I don't have enough assets to call on. She's always a good and cheap back-up. Her long-range work has been faultless. This was one such commission.

The Pantome is always difficult to control. Sometimes I have to be hard on her. Sometimes, I admit – too hard.

Using my sympathetic voice, 'Are you all right? Are you looking after yourself?'

'I want to see my family, Luca. Now.' A direct stare, challenging.

'After this contract, Olga. After this, you can go for....two weeks.' There, a change in her eyes.

'You promise?' she leant closer.

'I promise.'

'You no break promise – like last time?' again a challenge.

'I'm sorry about last time. I didn't mean to....'

'You promise?'

'I promise. This won't be easy. Take your time. Do it right and your family will get you and the money. I promise.' I stood to give her the hint to leave.

She toyed with the stick, not daring to imagine what jeopardy I'd put her into this time. She stood, her slim athletic body graceful and lithe. If anything, I thought she was too thin. But then again, I'm sure she thought I was too fat.

She walked past me and out of my office. As the door closed behind her I heard her mutter, 'You promise.'

CHAPTER FIVE - OLA KOBAY

After I'd left that seedy, greasy man in his seedy, greasy, phoney little office, I caught two buses and walked rest of way home. Most of way my mind was occupied elsewhere.

Luca was evil looking man. His face was shrunken so his eyes were in deep sockets. He had pronounced cheek bones and thin pointed chin. Hair growing backwards on his white head. If I'd never known him, I'd instantly dislike him, which I do.

I hate Luca Lacusta with a passion I thought had died years ago in me. With him I feel trapped and out of control. I am nothing more than slave on long leash. That is what it feels like, that is what it is.

In moments of loneliness, I just imagine putting bullet into his head and taking all his money. Close-range, I want to see fear, him knowing it was me that end his miserable life. Then go home and do same to his bunch of thugs terrorising my family. But what can one woman alone do against these professional gangsters?

If I refuse his demand, my family in Hungary would be punished. If I am successful with job, they are rewarded. Either way, I felt punished. Bántalmazott ...abused.

Ever since he muscled into family home with his sleazy protection racket, my family has been doomed. He was nothing but low rent hollgan in Hungary, now he wants to make it big in UK.

Lacusta, and two other minor crooks he's brought with him, are dreaming of crime empire. Their dreams are big, but in reality they're all idioták ... morons. Perhaps Lacusta is a rank above idioták, but he is dangerous idioták.

On the toilet is where I read the words he had given me, I like smoke around me from my thick rolled cigarette. I sat in my cheap toilet in my cheap apartment and dreaded opening file on old cheap laptop.

I look at screen and thought it was joke, another sign of his total control over me. No name, one photograph of target – just time and place and some aerial photo from the Google Earth.

If I called Luca asking him to explain more, he'd be angry, and that meant trouble for my parents and brothers. I have to figure this out for myself. I dare not get it wrong. Madonna, get me through this hour!

I have routine I go through to process information and figure out my plan of operations - all these buzz words come from Luca. He says he's trained me to be efficient machine - I am. It's only common sense after all. I am only fully loaded weapon; he points me in right direction. I just have to pull trigger. The getting away afterwards only really difficult bit, that he leaves to me. If I get it wrong.....

Starting with a bottle of vodka and stack of pre-rolled cigarettes, I chain smoke and chain drink, until I'm happy with my plan of action.

I have cheap microwave which cooks almost all my meals. If not, there is always take-away and delivery, when I have some money. With pizza box open in front of me I start my final planning.

As I study brief details and local maps, I get an idea of lay of land. Places to hide, distances, cover and escape routes. I draw rough circle a mile radius around target, that gives me area of possible positions for strike.

By time vodka has gone I am finished. I can do no more until I can visit killing field itself. As I do not have car, that means lot of walking. That will be full day tomorrow. But for now, I am tired.

The TV is old and has just basic channels on it. As I lay on my bed the screen flickered in front of me, my mind wandered as I watch grainy movie. I can watch and think at same time.

This movie I've seen many times, 'A Streetcar Named Desire'. Never understood what that means, but good movie. Marlon Brando is my idea of real man. Vivien Leigh is beautiful Southern Belle. I must have drifted off into sleep. I awoke sometime later.

The cigarette ashes were pile in ashtray and bottle was empty. The signal on old TV was breaking up, as it did at this time in early morning. I felt depressed. There are times when girl needs her mother, this was time.

Luca did not like me calling home, he had control over phone in my parent's house. I was allowed one call a month, which lasted no more than three minutes. I'm allowed one visit a year, for three days only. I think number three is his lucky number. It is not mine.

Last time I was there, I smuggled mobile phone to my mother. It cost me a month's monies. I did without vodka for long time. I hope Luca's thugs have not discovered it yet. I use another cheap cell to call her once a week. I felt need to speak to her and pressed in dialling code.

I hope she had phone switched on and near her bed. I knew I'd be waking her up, but I was sure she would not mind.

After third ring she answered phone, in guarded tone. She hoped it would be me, not dreaded ugly, gravelly voice of Luca at other end, telling her that game was up. I said it was me and her voice changed to fear. Something had to be wrong if I called outside of agreed time.

I calmed her down quickly and talked about other things. Like how were my brothers, father and Géza. I wished I had more vodka in apartment. I wished I had more tobacco. I wish for lot of things. Many of them are not granted.

At least I can hear my Mother's voice. I held back tears for as long as possible. It was when she said my brothers send their love, that I cried. She knew it was more from frustration and anger than self-pity, or pain.

The sun was coming up as we said our goodbyes and I switched phone off. I returned it to its hiding place. Somewhere goons of Luca would not find it, in bag of organic rice, in tin. The ring of dust on shelf would alert me if someone had moved it.

It was going to be long hard day.

Public transport in London is not cheap. Some say it once was, I have never found it cheap. By time I had used Underground and two buses, I was several pounds poorer. Luca will not give me expenses, so it comes out of "pocket money" as he called it. Already my £40 had almost gone. Seggfej! Kibaszott seggfej to him! I sometimes think that swearing is only thing that keeps me sane. I am never sure it sounds so good in English, so I stick to Hungarian.

I sat on grass and watched fancy bandstand in front of me. A very British form of entertainment the Wiki showed me. I was one of many people sitting. I took my time and searched around. The park area was very large and had much grass and trees. Many people were around, doing the picnic and playing with the kiddies.

There were some tall buildings nearby, but I was looking further away. What I was searching for I found quite quickly. When you look at map, or even the Google Earth, you can only really get ...what do you call it...a birdies eye view of area. At ground level, it looks big deal different.

The strike was set for twenty-four hours from now. So, sun, if there was going to be any, would be in about same position. I stared directly at it and that would be my preferred shooting direction, shooting with the sun behind me.

Into the sun there were two blocks of apartments, side by side. Even from this distance, of about mile, they looked tired and in need of paint. I walked towards them.

From satellite view I marked off exact distance and used that in my range for shoot. The wind was soft on my face from west but should be breezier from roof of apartments.

I looked at my clothes and made decision. I was not smart, but who does these days? I pulled at my hair and made it more...ragged. I half pulled my blouse from jeans waistband, to add to natural scruff style.

I had reached ground floor entrance to first block, and hoping I'd fit in with kind of residents I expected to find there. People too hard-up for money to afford nice clothes. That was me too.

Two young men walked out of building, letting door shut behind them in my face. Their world like bubble, letting no one in, or any thought and emotion out, cocooning them from real world outside. Their two bubbles popping together to form larger bubble, where no-one else exists outside two of them. How I would like to have gun in my hand now!

I then realised that I was happy they had not even noticed me. I entered foyer, it was even worse inside than outside. Walls painted flat boring almost mustard colour, most of it stained and worn with time. It was quiet and deserted. There were four separate lifts, two on east side and two on west. I pressed all four buttons and stood back.

It took two minutes before last lift came down and doors opened. I stepped in and pressed for top floor, number sixteen. I looked at my old Seiko watch and timed journey. It took one minute and fifty-two seconds, without lift stopping at any floor. It was slow.

I stepped out into dull brown painted corridor, with rows of doors off each side, twenty in all. One of doors still had Police "Do not enter. Crime Scene" coloured tape across it. The corridor was empty. At end of corridor was fire door. I moved casually towards it.

It was metal door, which had panic bar. I tried it, it was locked. I looked closely at lock and smiled, it was easy. I checked edges of door. There were no wires leading from door, no alarms. I took out digital camera Luca had let me borrow and took photos.

I did not want to wait here too much, so I checked every detail of corridor while waiting for lift. The return journey was same as upward and once again I walked through deserted lobby.

The second tower was almost same. I passed several people, none returned my shy smile. These people were not neighbourly, friendly or interested in any strangers. I felt better about project.

For the next two hours I was walking around area, getting used to layout and searching for places I might use for my escape.

I sat with my cheap laptop and looked at ground plans again. I made my distance calculations and checked weather conditions for following day. I smoked my last cigarette and called Luca from apartment phone.

‘Olga. At last. Anything for me?’ his voice already had an edge to it.

‘I need something from you?’

‘Give me your list and I’ll get it for you.’

‘No. I need to buy them myself’ I sounded strong.

‘Is that wise....’

‘In this case, yes. I need money.’

‘Now, Olga. We spoke about the drink.....’ I recognised the whine in his voice. That usually meant trouble for me.

‘Not for drink. Tools... how you say...equipment.’

‘What sort of equipment, Olga?’

‘Something special. I need for your...our project.’ I wished I had a cigarette when having talk like this.

‘How much?’

‘Two hundred pounds.’

‘And what will you buy with that?’ the whine again.

‘I told you, something special.’

‘Comes in a bottle does it?’ the sarcasm not hidden in his gravelly voice.

‘If you want an end to this project. I need equipment. Yes, or no?’

‘Okay. I’ll want receipts.’

‘What are receipts?’

'Bill of sale. Evidence of what you spend the money on.' He was getting frustrated. Time for me to get off phone.

'Okay. Receeps.'

'I'll transfer money into your Switch account. Give it an hour, then you can spend. No more than two hundred. Don't make me angry about this. If you're trying it on with me....' again, the added gravel in the voice.

'No trying on. I need this ...stuff.' want to end talk now.

'Behave, Olga. We discussed consequences, did we not?'

'Always with the con see quences. Alright. Get me money. Time already running out. I have to get to charity shops.'

I hang up.

The day was warm and humid with some clouds hiding the sun. By time I had ridden on three buses and several long walks, I was sweating. I was wearing light vest and baggy shorts, a peaked sun visor and old trainers (£40). I came out of lift and stood in empty corridor on top floor.

I wheeled baby buggy (£60) quickly to emergency door and picked lock. These doors are supposed to remain unlocked, that is what they are for, an escape route from fire. Why they lock them? English are mad.

The door opened with creak and I pushed buggy out on to flat roof. The air moved slowly, and I heard distant music. I eased door until it looked like it was still closed and pushed rubber wedge (£0.50) under to stop door fully closing on me, as there was no exterior handle on it.

I lifted my heavy altered backpack (£40) from out of buggy where baby should be and walked to south side of roof. I stayed squatting and took slow peak over low wall, now wearing sunglasses (£15). In distance was the park where I had sat previous day.

The bandstand had seats all around and there were hundreds of people sitting in chairs, sitting on grass, or moving around. The band was playing some sort of military march and I sat down with back to wall and assembled my rifle.

I had been wearing surgical gloves (£2.00) since I left my flat, to ensure there were no fingerprints on anything I touched. The rifle I clean most days and keep free of fingerprints. Two pieces click together to form 41- inch barrel. The chamber clicks onto that and skeleton stock unfolds and slides into end of breech.

The .303 bullets are hand-turned and made by my father, as was rifle, and they slid smoothly into double chamber. After one shot is fired, gases from shot clicks chamber sideways to align second round and eject first shell.

The gun was only meant for deer hunting in my home village. Up in woods a mile is most you can see through those trees and it's designed for that range. It can shoot eye out of deer at a mile and second shot ready in less than a second.

The optical ranging sight is of Hungarian manufacture, local brand, but still very good. It is old and is what I am used to, I have used it for years. The silencer also hand-made by my father to suit weapon exactly.

I checked my watch and listened to music. I do not recognise piece, but I'm sure it has only just began. I pull grey balaclava (£8.00) over my face, with sunglasses now over the top. I rise slowly above balustrade.

The wall gives me my anchor points, I push my left elbow on to surface. I use two elasticated elbow supports (£9.00) to provide extra grip on the concrete. My left hand curled around barrel where metal is ribbed for better grip. My eye fits into sweet spot on scope and I rest my right elbow on wall. Two elbows and my eye socket complete tripod support stance. I start my series of slow breaths and find wind indicators near target area.

Through the scope I see slight flap of woman's scarf. A child's balloon drifting. A scrap of paper, all showing me breeze from west at about two miles an hour. I turn dial on sight to adjust for wind.

I've not had any professional training for this work, other than hunting deer with my father. The target there is always nervous and can move quickly in any direction, at any time. My years of practice with nervous animals had trained me for fast and accurate reactions. Human targets tend not to move so much and are easier for me to hit than wild animals.

I like to have ranging shot first. This so my sight is aligned and shot is to go where I want it to. To the centimetre, dead centre.

First, I had to find my target. I ran scope over crowd of people sitting listening to music. I was searching for large man, with his family.

There were about one hundred and twenty people seated. Some chairs were empty, and some had people who were on their own. I quickly found my target. I knew him from photo Luca had given me.

Vitto Scolari, part of an organisation that no longer wanted his services. According to details Luca gave me, he was wanted man for "skimming off" money. I think I know what that means. I have seen Godfather 2, I did not fully understand it. Perhaps I should have watched Godfather 1 movie first.

He was easy to spot as he was very large man, wearing lime green shirt. In his position I would have worn something quieter. In his position, I would not have had family day out in park at all!

He was seated with a woman, his wife I guessed, to his right and two empty seats to his left. Both of parents were looking to left. I panned scope bringing into focus a group of children playing together. I swung back to Vitto. I felt moment's sorrow for kids and perhaps some for wife. She knew what she was getting herself into. Just the kids then.

With wind changing often, I needed ranging shot. I placed four more bullets on wall within easy reach. I scoped around for something small, but at same range as Mr Vitto. A tree seemed suitable. I took large breath and let it out slowly.

In the crosshairs, one leaf stood out from others, as my breath left my body and I felt need to breathe in, I fired.

I saw the leaf jerk, a clean hit. The sights were ranged perfectly. The sound was soft phutt. No one heard it, no one would see bullet. They might hear sound as it swept through rest of tree and hit branch. But no one would know what it was. No matter, when five seconds later I fired my next shot into Vitto's neck.

I kept my eye to scope as I felt for two more bullets, ready to load. I saw the strike clearly, the arterial spray coming from his throat area. The head snapping back then quickly forward. The bullet had sliced through his spinal cord. When they put man into body bag, they have to be careful head does not drop off from body.

No need to see reaction from crowd. It would be seconds before anyone knew what had happened and that it was rifle shot. Maybe minutes before anyone thought of checking for where shot had come from.

I took apart rifle in six seconds, as I had practiced thousand times before. I collected two ejected shells from ground and packed away gun into specially pocketed and padded backpack. I hurried back to door, aware music had stopped.

Pushed backpack into buggy and pulled small hood down to cover fact no baby there. I removed wedge holding door open and went inside, re-locking door was time risk, but worth it to preserve forensic and police search that would follow. I did not want this place to be discovered as shooting platform, not for very long time.

I moved down corridor and pressed for lift. Still empty, I waited with growing worry. Right now, I wished I had wedged lift door open, so it would be waiting for me. But if I was delayed, or someone came out from one of flats, it would be very suspicious. It was lesser of two risks.

I pulled my hoodie over my head and put on sunglasses. The rest of my clothes were shabby and in line with others in these apartment blocks. All bought from charity shop, along with battered buggy. I had managed to get receipts for them all. I still had pounds left so I bought vodka and cigarettes with rest. No receipts for those.

The lift came, and I let out long sigh that it was empty. Now for other risky move, but one to help disguise me being there. I pressed several of floor buttons as door slid behind me. It delayed my exit slightly, but if anyone was in lobby, they might remember that lift did not come from top floor, hopefully not putting single mamma with a kill. The lift stopped, and everything was silent.

At lobby I slowly pushed my way to large doors, pretending trouble in opening them – though there was no one to see my added acting skills. Outside I slowly pushed to nearest road. I took sly glance around me, but the few people around took no notice of me. Another mamma with baby, one of many.

I finally came to the area I had found the day earlier. Behind two large wheelie bins used by restaurant, I changed my clothing and threw everything I did not need into both bins, but left the buggy little way down the alley. Someone would soon take that, never to be seen again.

When I walked into the road to catch the first of six buses home, I looked like an ordinary local resident with heavy backpack.

It took two hours before I was back in my apartment and gratefully opened vodka and lit cigarette. I lay on bed and let smoke curl up to stained ceiling and gulped tumbler of vodka.

It was done.

For a moment I almost went into sleep, as tension drained from me. I recalled children playing, wife brushing something off Vitto's shirt. Every day, normal happenings. All ended in an instant of flying blood and brains.

Now I felt sorry for kids. I thought of my own family and what they would do without me. In a way, they were already doing without me. That thought made me pick up phone.

'Luca. It is done. Can I go home now?' There was long pause at other end, I did not like. 'Luca?'

'Well done, Olga. Good job. Had confirmation from our man out there.' He did not sound as happy as I expected.

‘So...I can go home now?’

‘There’s a problem...’ Not happy voice.

‘No problem. You promised. No problem. What problem?’ I tried to resist showing the anger.

‘Something’s come up and only you can do it and it has to be soon. This will be it. I really promise....’

‘You always promise. But no going home. Promise mean nothing... egyáltalán nem!’

‘Just this one. High pay for you. I’ll get something to your family immediately. Today.’ He waited for my voice. I said nothing. ‘A thousand. But you must do this project. Then you go home. I promise on my mother’s life.’ Voice softer now, true?

I do not trust that voice. ‘Promise no good. I need sign from you, Luca. I want fifteen minutes call to my mother. All receipts ignored. Or...I not do project.’

From the silence he was thinking about it. I held my breath. I never trusted word he says. He is crook and ... hollgan... thug. I waited.

‘I do not make deals with you, Olga. This is not our relationship. You understand?’

‘After broken promises, there is no relationship. None. It finishes now.’

Softness gone, ‘Let me remind you of the position your family’s in. One word from me and they suffer. So do you. You cannot hide from me and you’ve no money to even try to hide. It’s my way only. I do not make deals.’

‘Then I do not work!’ I hung up phone with loud bang and shivered in anxiety. I had reached my limit with evil man. Had I gone too far? I looked at my meagre possessions and thought how quickly I might pack up and leave. With only basic survival skills, I must find somewhere to hide, even if it meant living in poverty. I was almost doing that now. I would miss cigarettes and vodka, but it was small price to try and get back home. I would use secret phone and warn my family. Hope they can reduce problems coming their way.

The phone rang.

‘Okay. Fifteen minutes, but this job is tomorrow. Day after that, you go home for two weeks. I’m doing this the once. I can’t lose this contract and you’re the only one available.’ He sounded gravelly, but not angry. I felt slightly less anxious. I remained silent, testing him further.

‘Olga?’

‘Okay. Send me details.’ I hung up before we both said too much.

I didn’t know then that this would be turning point in my life.

CHAPTER SIX - THE MAGICIAN

This meet was unsettling, Milo argued it was urgent and wouldn't take no for an answer. I'd asked if it was about the contract, he hesitated before saying, 'Partly.' There's rarely contact during a sanction, all parties are incommunicado. Which made his request unusual and unsettling.

I arrived at the meeting point an hour earlier than usual, wearing the same disguise I always wore for him. I made sure my mobile phone was off, nothing worse than that chiming during a delicate part of a conversation. How amateurish is that?

Another warm early summer day, forecast of light rain later. Yet Milo had on a short coat and bright red trilby. I'd never seen him wear a trilby before, he stood out like a sore thumb. Whatever that expression is supposed to mean.

He was a short and dumpy old man, his round face smiling every time I'd met him. His sunken eyes were shrewd and penetrating.

He sat for a long time before saying, 'You've put me in a very difficult position.' His voice soft, revealing restrained emotion. I remained silent. It was his subject, I wasn't going to respond until I knew why he desperately wanted to see me. 'You've left me in a bit of a dilemma. I've six contracts on the books and no operatives. Is your retirement screwing over your other clients too?'

There were tears in the corner of his eyes, he seemed under some deep routed strain. I watched his hands writhing in his coat pockets, the man was really on edge.

I spoke quietly. 'It had to happen sometime, Milo. I've given as much warning as possible,'

'Where're you going? What're you going to do?' After a pause, 'Why now?'

I shook my head as I glanced around me. The playground was getting busy as the mums picked up their kids from school. There were lovers holding hands and getting familiar with each other, oblivious to anyone watching. There were people reading, or with eyes closed enjoying the sun. Nothing that appeared a threat.

'How can I answer any of those questions, Milo? We've had a long and successful association and it's come to a natural end.'

'It's not good...in our business...when something radically changes. Questions are being asked, you know.' He wouldn't look me in the eyes.

‘Am I safe with all your little secrets? You know the answer to that question already.’ I kept my voice level and calm.

‘I know it.’ His sigh was world weary. ‘It’s convincing others that’s the problem.’

‘Find more assets, Milo. Borrow from others you know in the business.’

Now he looked directly at me. ‘That’s just not done, Mago.....see I don’t know what to call you. The Magician is your working name, it sounds odd to keep calling you that after eight years of what’s been quite a close friendship. Don’t you think?’ I said nothing, showed nothing. What can I say to that? ‘Are you still taking this contract?’ He was holding his breath.

‘I said I would, if you still want me to.’

‘I’m not so sure.’ Another long sigh of resignation. ‘Perhaps it’s best for a clean break. Don’t you think?’

Did he want me to disagree? ‘If that’s what you want.’

‘I can’t make you change your mind about quitting altogether?’ I shook my head slowly. ‘What about the money? Didn’t you want that as a final pension? Or have you still other clients and contracts to see out as well?’

I leant closer to him. ‘I don’t divulge my business interests and never will. It’s best for me and best for my clients, you included. I thought you, of all people, understood and appreciated that.’

With a groan, Milo heaved himself off the bench and stood facing me, a tear streak down one cheek. ‘Take care, Mago. It’s been nice doing business with you.’ Milo was walking away, taking off his hat as he did so.

Alarm bells rang in my head. I acted without a second thought and in two strides had caught up with him, stopping him in his tracks. He was openly crying now and looked terrified at me being so close in his face.

‘What’s going on, Milo?’ My voice anxious, but managing to maintain my accent. Inside my nerves were on edge. I used the pause before his answer to control myself. I was relaxing and felt the tension drain from my body, my mind becoming clearer.

Milo’s attention was now somewhere off into the distance. The guilt on his face now left me with no doubt that this was a set up, and I was the target.

I pulled him round to face me, making sure he was between me and whatever he was anticipating from the south.

'Where's your car, Milo?' My harshness left no doubt I was taking charge. His wet sunken eyes flicked to the west side of the park.

From my original surveys checking how suitable this area was for a meeting place, I remembered the small car park. On our first ever meet here, I'd tailed Milo from his home to the meeting place. It's what I do until I was sure I trusted anyone as a client.

I kept him between me, and whoever was out there to the south. We edged towards the car park.

Milo clearly confirmed his guilt by offering no resistance, asking no questions, or demanding to know what I was doing. He'd set me up and I needed to know by whom - and why?

It was safer to stay under as much leafy tree canopy as possible, but the last stretch was across open ground.

'Keys?' I barked, holding out my hand. He fumbled in his pocket and handed them to me. I pressed the unlock button several times until I saw the flashing lights on a red Mercedes. 'You've changed your car, Milo. Business must be good.' Said more flippant than I felt.

I linked arms with him and hurried towards the car, keeping him angled between me and a tall block of flats that I now assumed would be the shooting platform.

'Are you going to kill me?' he asked breathlessly.

'It's more like you're trying to kill me. Who've you hired?' He shook his head and stared at the gravel as we neared his car.

'Someone's out there with a bead on both of us right now. It might be you, me, or the both of us. Now....who's trying for the hit?' He cried unhindered. I knew this was not the place where he'd answer my questions. I was going to get very little out of him in his emotional state.

We reached the Merc, and now I had another problem. For me to get in I'd be exposed. It only takes half a second to fire a bullet at a target. At the distance from the tower I assumed another second to reach me. Was it possible to get both of us into the car in that amount of time? I thought not.

I should drive, given his mental state, so we edged around to the passenger side. Unfortunately, it was the side facing the tower. I ducked down using him as a cover and yanked open the door. I glanced inside, it was a two door and the front seats quite narrow. I was going to have to dive in and drag him in after me.

Milo was now petrified, unable to move or speak. I dived along the seat, keeping below the dashboard. It was cramped in there, such a small car for such a big man as Milo.

‘Get in,’ I growled as I grabbed his coat and pulled him towards me. He hit his head on the door jamb before ducking inside the car.

A crash sounded close to my ear, as splinters of plastic erupted from the dashboard. I gave one last pull on his coat and thumbed the ignition. I heard the motor start, as I tried to slide down further in the seat.

‘Close the fucking door,’ I shouted. All accent gone, even though I still felt calm and in control. I slammed the gear into drive as the side glass next to me exploded into millions of fragments. I felt a stinging on the right-hand side of my face.

I wrenched the wheel and floored the accelerator. The car lurched out from and scrapped alongside another vehicle with a loud graunch, which disguised the next sounds inside the car from another shot, a phut and a thud. The fasten seat belt alarm pinged loudly.

Swinging the wheel to straighten the car I broadsided onto the narrow road. I was able to just see over the dashboard from my crouched position. I heard the passenger door slam shut as I hit something that closed it for me. Why hadn’t Milo closed the door?

He was too dead.

CHAPTER SEVEN – OLGA

I'd no time for any planning on this one. The bastard Luca had not only put on me last minute, but was probably using it as another excuse to stop me getting home for a while. I despised him with increasing.... gyűlölet ... hatred.

I knew time and place, but no photo of target. But would know him when I see him. No details. No time to soak myself in vodka and tobacco to dream up plan of action. I resorted to plan I tried before and had worked well. In my wardrobe I still had lycra outfit. It would have to do.

I chose block of apartments that was right distance from where I knew target would be. I had no time to plan anything and would have to do it on fly. Not sure if that the right word.

I got to roof as close to time of hit as possible. Luca had insisted target window would be no more than two minutes. He also shouted any failure and my family would suffer.

At 15.30 exactly, I was on roof. Weapon ready and pointing into park. I had no idea where target would be, so I waited until tell-tale I was looking for happened. No range yet, not able to take ranging shot. This was going to be difficult to get right first time.

After five minutes I found what I was searching for. A big fat man walked into park and sat on bench. For a while he talked to other man. I made my range and adjusted drift on my scope.

As I had been told, vital part of this project was to shoot on given signal only – not before. I had to wait and be patient. It was pity, as I had clear shot right now!

I checked no one had come on to roof and that door was still wedged open. It was all clear. I glanced back at two men, one of them had now stood up. I put my eye to sweet spot and took long breath and let it out slowly. I gently touched four bullets to my right, so I knew exactly where they were. I peered down into scope, all else blur in my vision.

At last sign came, the fat man took off red hat. I was now clear to make hit on other man. Was this right? The other man old and scruffy. What had he done to deserve anger of Luca, or one of his clients?

I thought only of my family as I sighted on man and took up slack on trigger. He moved, suddenly with no warning. Like deer. A human acting like deer. It was unusual, unnatural. I held off shot and should not have. It was totally unexpected. I followed his movement, but now I had man with hat in way. I had no clear sight. What was happening?

I drew in another breath, I must be patient. All was not yet lost. Target was still sighted, but not clear. He would be in moment or so.

That moment seemed to stretch for minutes. The two men seemed to dance before my eyes, the target never clear enough for shoot. They moved away and were quickly hidden by trees. I waited. I blinked rapidly to freshen my eyes, then relaxed my left hand and stretched it, then my right.

Pair came into sight again, but target was still hidden. Then I realised that it was plan, red hat was being used as shield. Somehow target knew he was target!

Now I was nervous. Before the target was slow moving, still and exposed. Now this one was on the high alert.

This was going to be difficult. Even deer did not use other animals as cover, but I had to see him as deer. Ready for any movement, at any speed, in any direction. I took long deep breath.

Suddenly both men were in open, heading for car park. Still no clear shot. Target knew what he was doing, knew where I was!

If only I was allowed to shoot both. But that was not what I was told to do.

From my high point I noticed car sidelights flashing. This would be their getaway vehicle, I moved sights on to it. I took risk and fired ranging shot at car next to it. The slug hit rear bumper and sparked off concrete ground. Sighting accurate.

I quickly loaded another shell into breech and cocked weapon. Two bullets loaded, another three to hand. I took another deep breath.

The two moved to car from far side. Then, to my surprise, and relief, they moved around car and were in my line of fire. Maybe he did not know where I was after all? The car door was opening and I let my breath out slowly.

The target was now full hidden by fat man in red hat. Just a shadow moving in car. I only had clear shot at man with hat. The hat ducked down and was getting into car. I moved crosshairs and guessed where target was now, somewhere in driver's seat. He had no room to move in there. I squeezed trigger.

Sudden movement in car, but I was not sure if it was hit or not. I breathed out and fired again. Bits of glass erupted out of far side, but still movement in car. The passenger door was still open, and car moved. I quickly loaded two more shells into breech.

Their escape was slowed when red car hit another car. I reached end of my breath and tried to guess where headrest would be on driver's seat. I fired.

The car swerved violently and hit another car, slamming door shut. I didn't see anything in car as sun was now bright off windscreen. The car raced down street and I wanted to try and put one through roof, but I knew my chance had gone and I was in deep trouble.

'Fuck!' I spat out. It did not sound right, so I shouted, 'Kibaszott!' at sky. I felt anger and growing sense of dread. But I had to put all those emotions away, because I now had to get safe.

I took apart rifle and packed it away. Then, slid off my track suit bottoms and pushed them in to backpack, which I slung onto my back. I put on cycle helmet and sunglasses and headed back into building.

Suddenly remembering, I ran back to shooting platform. I picked up two bullets from parapet and ejected shells from floor and slid them into my backpack. I ran back to fire door. This time I did not have to lock it as it was unlocked when I came up.

No waiting for lift, I ran down twelve floors by stairs. I knew I was fit enough. It would be quicker than lift anyway. I guessed it was three minutes after the last shot as I eased open door that led into foyer. There were few people there, couple talking, one collecting mail from cupboard of mail boxes and woman pushing buggy leaving building.

I tagged along behind the mamma and pushed door open for her. She smiled at me and I turned my head away, so she did not get good look at my face.

Outside I had bike padlocked to rusty railing of building. I picked lock as quickly as when I picked lock when I stole it. You can stand outside any large building in London and sooner or later courier will come dangerous along on their bike. Jam the thing anywhere near front door and hastily lock it with padlock and chain.

Easy to steal it, but you have to be quick. They do not hang about. I had jumped on bike and cycled away, like now. Dressed in streamline lycra with streamline helmet, I was off on road. Fast, mobile, able to ride on pathways and narrow roads faster than people. No one would look the twice at me.

A few turns and twists on the naughty one-only way streets and I was at chosen site. Once again large refuse bins are useful, the bike and helmet went in there. I pulled out my tracksuit bottoms and slipped them on with light T-shirt covering rest of lycra suit. Backpack on, long dark wig and I walked away from scene. Sunglasses covering my face and no CCTV cameras to spot quick change.

I caught bus quickly. Walked a while and caught two more buses. Nearly an hour later I was back at flat. I felt very tired and unhappy.

The phone woke me. I swung off my small bed and stepped onto empty vodka bottle. I slipped down and cracked my head on doorpost. I felt ill.

By time I picked up phone it had stopped ringing. I reached for cigarette and lit it. I dragged smoke deep into my lungs and let it out slowly. I felt no better.

The phone rang again. 'What happened?' Luca was mad and trying to be calm.

'I could not sight him.' sounding like an apology.

'What!'

'He knew I was there. He kept hiding from me. How did he know....?'

'Bullshit. I can tell you're drunk. You fucked up, big time. This is serious shit you're in Olga and you know what that means.' He left long silence for it to sink in. I knew what it meant.

'He knew he was target, Luca! I could not make hit. No lie. How did he know?' I took big lungful of smoke.

'You know the consequence of failure Olga and this is big. Very big. I'm in all sorts of shit for this. My reputation....' The gravelly whine had started.

'How did he know it was hit, Luca? How? Tell me that? Ask yourself the question before blaming me! How?'

There was silence again and I reached for my last unopened bottle.

'You're grounded, Olga, and you know what that means. Within the hour.' The line went dead, and I sat back on bed. I took swig and smoked my cigarette. Unable to avoid what was coming next, I just felt hard, sharp pain of guilt for my family. They would suffer for my mistakes too.

I cried.

I knew exactly what was going to happen in an hour.

CHAPTER EIGHT - THE MAGICIAN

Milo had a large hole in his head. The wound wasn't bleeding, which meant the heart had stopped – so I knew Milo was dead.

The exit wound was towards me and the size of a tennis ball. I don't know how the bullet missed me, but I must be splattered with his blood and brains, as well as broken glass. Behind me a hole in the head rest. Not a bad shot, except it hit the wrong person. He must've been leaning towards me as he was struck. Just dumb bad luck, Milo.

Milo didn't have to die, and there wasn't the need to put a hit on me. I was angry. Now I needed to find out who wanted me dead. I certainly wasn't waiting around until they tried again.

I couldn't see the tower block, so I sat up. I recalled the maps I'd studied those years ago for this area and put together a route directly to that tower. If Milo wouldn't tell me the name, perhaps the trigger would.

Driving as fast as traffic allowed, I was thankful for the powerful car. Mid-afternoon on a weekday was relatively quiet, by London standards. I was acutely aware I was making myself high profile, slinging the car round corners, tyres squealing. I hate drawing attention to myself, but today it had to be done. By the time anyone called the police I'd be gone.

It was less than two minutes on my mental clock before I came up on the rear of the tower block, hoping that the sniper was still there ready to have another go. Then I'd know exactly where he was. On the other hand, I wanted him to run, break cover. I wanted to get my hands on him. Desperately.

I drove the damaged Merc down the side street alongside the tower and parked the car up on a pavement over a yellow line, there were no legal parking places left. A quick check up and down ensured there were no Parking Wardens around at the moment, and few pedestrians noticed my quiet arrival.

Carefully, I bent Milo over, so his head rested on my seat. This way he wouldn't be seen unless someone peered into the Merc. I hurried my final farewell and left the car, hastening around the corner of the building.

Ahead were large, heavy glass double doors, the exit from the block. I figured it'd been just about three minutes since the last shot. Had he time to get away, or not? It's a long way down from the roof, even when you're in a hurry. I'd no option but to wait.

I made a mental list of any weapons I had on me. None. Nothing I might use as one either. I needed to get close and bring this man down quickly and quietly. Not going to be easy.

There might be other doors to the building, but I just had to hope this was the assassin's choice of exit. It would be mine. Other doors might be locked, alarmed, or security monitored. The main doors are always accessible.

Few people were coming and going through the swing doors. A fat man and a small dog on a lead walked in. Two giggling teenagers walked out. I waited, getting anxious. I must've missed him.

A woman pushing a buggy was helped by a slight-framed young woman. The hairs stood up on my neck and arms. She was tall, slim and brunette. Dressed in a flattering blue lycra outfit and was carrying a large and heavy looking backpack - that might hold a disassembled sniper's rifle!

But it was a woman!

Not a sexist statement, there are women assets. But I didn't know any working in London right then. Perhaps that was just the point?

When I plan an operation, I try to think of any possible flaws, or faults that might disrupt the plan. I try to think of every possible scenario and situation. But I'd have never dreamt up this situation I was now faced with. I was totally unprepared.

My mind raced as I watched her unlock an expensive and fast push-bike from railings. Was she the trigger? How sure was I?

The way she scanned around nervously was not natural. I was unlikely to get to her quick enough, fast though I was. She'd be off and cycling as soon as she was spooked. It left me just one option, follow on foot and find out where she was going. Then, maybe, I'd get some answers. I just hoped I'd guessed right and the real trigger wasn't still in the building.

My mind was frantic as I recalled all the streets around this area. As she pushed off, I thought ahead of her and where she might be going. The first few streets were one-way only. She wouldn't draw attention to herself by risking going the wrong way. I figured she'd come up about three hundred metres from where I was, after having made a right turn twice.

I set off at a jog.

I never take off the thin rubber gloves I always wear on a mission, I don't want my fingerprints and DNA on anything that was testable. But I ripped off my wig and peeled off the whiskers and sideburns. I pulled off the light

cardigan I was wearing and pushed them all under the nearest car. Now I appeared a little different, would she recognise me as her target?

Did she get a good look at me before the shoot? Possibly. She had time, she'd have a scope, she'd have photos and information about me. Milo's hat routine must have been the "go" signal for her.

Milo! How could you do this to us?

Controlling my breathing, I stared ahead at the corner where I hoped she should appear. What next?

I needed transport. I scanned around, still quiet, few people about. Should I risk breaking into a car? In a car it'd take too long and wouldn't be able to follow where a bike went. I kept running.

Something caught my eye as I ran past, it was a cycle docking bay. The London mode of transport, rentable bicycles - that might be an answer. I crossed the street and quickly read the instructions. They needed a credit card and I didn't carry one today. This was supposed to be a simple meet with a client. My bad.

A blue streak passed the end of the road. I ran faster, slowing as I reached the corner. I peered round.

She'd disappeared. I felt devastated.

Leaning my back against the wall, I sucked air into my lungs. Suddenly I felt exposed, I searched around quickly trying to see any CCTV cameras. None obvious. A slight relief, I've never been on a job appearing more like my normal self. This was going from bad to worse. I needed to get to safety. I was still too near the Milo kill site, I needed to quickly distance myself from the police search radius.

The underground, a bus? Both reasonable, except the underground has CCTV, as do buses these days. Taxi was out, too personal a contact, some of these guys are very observant. I'd have to walk.

I was still covered in glass, blood and gore. I managed to clean my skin with some tissues and wet wipes I always carry on me, but my clothes were noticeably stained. I pulled my shirt off, turned it inside out and wore it that way.

Forcing a gust of air out from my lungs, then sucking in more as I pushed off the wall I headed home.

Then I spotted her.

She was coming out of an alley, but looked completely different. I analysed why I thought it was her, then I had it. The backpack, it was very distinctive.

She was walking nonchalantly along the road, so I hung back a while, before I followed her. I felt exposed, especially with so little movement of pedestrians, or cars. I'd have to follow on foot and hope she wasn't going to spot me. She'd no need to think she was being followed. If she did, it'd be a foot race at best. I fancied my chances there, that backpack looked heavy.

Although I was originally searching for anything I might use as a weapon, I realised that I did carry a small piece of equipment that was more use to me now than any weapon. It's a small tracking device with my mobile phone used as a monitor. I often use it on clandestine client meetings, if something should happen to make me suspicious about the person I'm dealing with. It's often interesting to know where they go afterwards. A little sleight of hand and reverse pick-pocketing and the bug is on them.

She stopped at a bus stop. I slowed my approach, and heart-rate, so I timed it just right to get on the bus a few passengers behind her. Always a good idea to have an up-to-date Oyster Card, or carry cash in London. I was able to pay for the fare without drawing attention to myself.

Now I was getting nervous, slow breaths, heart-rate twenty-five. Buses had cameras and if any future police investigators managed to track me from the dead man in the car, only a few hundred yards away.....

Fortunately, the bus was quite full, with some passengers standing. I eased through the crowd and chose my moment well. As the bus lurched slightly, I slipped the tracker into a small open pocket in her backpack. I'd positioned myself so that the CCTV camera at the front of the bus wouldn't record my actions, or my face. I looked away as she got off, but knew she'd be watching who got off behind her. I left the bus at the next stop.

This day was rapidly becoming a mess. There was a dead man in a car I'd been driving and covering my tracks was now a priority. But, so was finding out who wanted me permanently retired.

I had to take a chance, I don't usually take *any* chances – After several minutes I waved down a black taxi. I got in fast and tried to move where he didn't have a good view of me in his rear-view mirror. Aware of my stained clothes I tried to hide the worse by pulling my shirt low down over the trousers.

I affected a soft Scottish accent and mumbled, 'I need to follow somebody for a while. Canna I hire you for that?'

Cabbies are a naturally suspicious breed of humans. He was moving his head to get a better look at me. Whatever I said next might sound too suspicious.

I made a weak smile at him. 'The wife. I think she's.....' I hung my head with a break in my voice. 'I just...need tae know.'

'Where do you wanna go, mate?'

I showed my phone to him. 'A tracker. I jus need tae follow this signal. Trouble is....it's got such a wee range, might have tae dodge about a bit. I dinie have a car, or nothin, so I hoped a taxi would be the ansar.'

Taxi drivers hear a lot of sob stories and become quite cynical over the years. This driver was late sixties and had probably heard it all before. The silence showed he was thinking. 'How long did you say?'

Reaching into my pocket I pulled out my nondescript wallet. I'd not anticipated any large expenditure today, but I was always prepared. 'I've three 'undred poons here. Would ya drive me until it runs oot?'

More silence. More thinking. Calculating. I offered the money. He slid a glass panel back and took it, but left his hand resting on the edge of the opening. He was still thinking about it.

I let my voice catch again, 'I think shay's with me brother.'

That did it. 'Where to first then, mate?'

For the next hour and a half we tracked the signal, criss-crossing London. Several times the driver commented on how determined my wife was to avoid being followed. I countered with the number of times the detectives I'd hired had followed her and been found out.

He seemed to buy it. The wad of notes lay on a shelf by his side, as if a reminder that he was on a nice little earner. The meter ticked away with frightening speed. That reminded him too.

It was dark when we finally drove into Sullivan Close in Wandsworth. The development was a block of long, thin flats, with a twin monstrosity a few hundred metres to the east. It had nine floors and extremely run down. It was a cheap part of town, but it's where the signal stopped moving.

I got out of the cab and walked up and down the length of the block. I moved the phone up and down the floors and was certain I'd narrowed the signal to the eight floor and third flat from the south end.

I returned to the cabbie and thanked him for his services and he should leave now, while I confronted the errant wife.

'I can wait, if ya like. There's money left!'

I shook my head and tried to speak through emotion tensed lips. I waved him goodbye and walked towards the main doors. I heard his diesel death-rattle as he pulled away and I waited until he'd turned the corner, before moving away from the doors.

The block seemed to be made from rough concrete, the paint on which was long gone. It was now stained and cracked, the windows looking like they'd fall out in a strong wind. How do landlords get away with this?

A residents' car park ran parallel to the building. The small area around the block was quite verdant. There were some trees, an attempt at shrubbery, a few bench seats and a few people walking about in the gloom of the summer's evening. I knew I shouldn't hang around here for long at night, I'd be too suspicious.

I've no numbers programmed into my phone, I remember them all. If I was ever caught, anyone on that list would instantly be implicated in my life. I manually dialled my friend, Lucie.

'Hello?'

'Lucie? It's James.'

'Hello, sweetie.' instant sex on the phone.

'I need a favour.' I kept scanning around, out of habit.

'Need to relax a little.....?'

'No. Are you free for an hour, or so?'

'I can be. Give me time to get ready. What time will you be here?' Her voice sounding even more breathless.

'Well....that's the favour.'

Lucie took nearly an hour to get there and she parked under some trees. She was walking around searching for me, as I stepped out of the bushes. She jumped, surprised to see me, not recognising me at first glance. She was one of the few people who'd ever seen the real me, free of disguises. But here I was with some facial misdirection still in place.

'What're you doing out HERE, sweetie?' she smiled and threw her arms around my neck and kissed me fiercely on the mouth. 'This something new for us both?'

Her impish grin stirred something inside of me and I had to smile. 'Not this time, babe, I'm still working.'

She feigned mock surprise and pointed to the grubby building, 'Here!'

'Just following someone.'

'I won't ask. You look so different. I nearly didn't recognise you, sweetie!' She held my face in her hands for a good look.

'Yeah, okay. What I need from you, is a lift home, please?'

'You could've caught a cab?'

'No money on me.'

'They take credit cards, you know?' with a mock frown.

'No wallet. I just need a lift. Please?'

Without hesitation she grinned, 'Anything for you, sweetie. Hop in.'

I asked her to drop me off about a mile from my workshop. I didn't want anyone knowing that location, not even Lucie. After all, she didn't even know where I lived. All our....involvement was at her house.

Jogging back to the office gave me the opportunity to think through my next move. I'd run the lycra woman to ground, and hoped she hadn't left by the time I returned to question her.

I'd resisted the strong urge to immediately confront her. I'd be unarmed against a professional assassin. I just didn't think the risk was worth it. I knew her bolt hole. After the tortuous route she took to get there, she must be quite confident no one followed her. She'd feel safe. People always feel safe in their own homes. Even villains. Even assassins. That's when they're most vulnerable.

Back in the workshop I disguised myself to appear a lot older. I didn't want to use a fat suit, as that might get in the way. I hoped to use the minimal of physical restraint, as I'd only be up against a female. However, assassins come with a variety of offensive and defensive skills. I needed to be extra careful.

Utilising a small runabout car, I drove evenly back to Sullivan Close and parked away from the building. Inside was a lobby with two lifts. I chose the stairs and jogged up them. Raising my heart-rate and stimulating my mind.

I eased open the emergency door to the eighth-floor corridor; it was empty. I strolled along to the third flat from the south end. Holding my ear to the peeling paintwork, I heard a faint voice. It sounded female.

The front door appeared solid, difficult to break in quickly. The small peephole made it doubtful she'd open to a stranger. I worked quietly on the single lock with my picks.

I hoped there weren't any bolts on the door. At the sound of the soft click of the lock, I used my shoulder and it opened without an arresting chain. I'd got lucky, or she'd got sloppy.

I knew I was up against a professional, so I carried a Beretta 950 Jetfire. The small 6.35 calibre pistol can be invisible when held. Useful for close-range work, or as a threat.

The element of surprise still on my side. With the gun in my hand, I eased into the flat. I closed the door behind me, controlling the handle so the lock didn't click when shut.

The short hallway was in darkness. Up ahead light, and a woman talking. The language foreign and judging by the pauses; she was on the phone. I stepped nearer.

The glimmer came from a small kitchen. The furniture, once bright and fresh, now dull and grubby. A heavily stained archaic cooker. On the floor, the green cracked lino curled in the wrong places. This must only be a temporary bolt-hole for an asset to use as part of an escape route. She wouldn't choose to live here.

Inside the kitchen, the girl I'd followed earlier. Leaning on the grubby workshop, one hand running agitatedly through her now short blond hair, the other holding a landline phone.

I wore my soft-soled shoes not making a sound, taking the first step towards her. I didn't see her move until too late, but the phone caught me on the bridge of my nose. The pain was intense, forcing me to duck. Instantly the girl attacked me.

My reflexes are excellent as I practice at keeping in shape every day. It was pure reflex but as I was ducking; I continued the move until on my knees, as momentum drove her on top of me.

I'd one chance at a strike, I didn't want to shoot her. I clenched the gun in my fist, making it a hand weapon, swinging straight and hard into her solar plexus.

It must have hurt. An average man would've gone straight down, but this girl staggered back before her legs collapsed. Surprise still in her eyes, she fell flat on the floor, gasping for breath.

Before she recovered, I moved over to her and pulled at her hair raising her head. When you pull someone's hair, their head has to follow. I

continued the movement pushing the head to the ground, pressing her shoulder with my foot. She now lay face on the floor, with one hand trapped under, still holding her winded chest.

Putting a knee on her lower back applied further pressure. From my pocket, I pulled out Mil-Tec plastic cuffs and slipped one loop over her available wrist, and pulled at her other arm to get at the other. She resisted, but I was in the stronger position. Within a moment I had her handcuffed and helpless.

I wiped my face and saw blood streaming from a cut. While keeping an eye on her I ripped off kitchen towel. I ran the cold tap, and made a wet, tight pad and pushed it into the bridge of my nose. I watched as she was regaining her breath.

When she finally spoke she wheezed, 'You're new.'

The accent was strong eastern European, which I didn't place.

'New? In what way?' I chose a soft Southern Irish brogue.

'New to Luca.'

'Ah....Luca. He hired you did he?'

A flicker of suspicion in her eyes. Had I overplayed my hand so early? Luca was a big clue. The name's familiar. I needed more details.

'No, not new. You just haven't seen me before,' still dabbing at my nose.

'But he sent you to do dirty work, right?' Her eyes boring into mine, seeing if I was lying, or not.

'Is that what you really think?' I was stumbling in the dark.

'What's your name?'

'Luca doesn't give me a name.' I tried to smile but felt it might appear false. I'm not a wonderful actor, most of my work is at a distance with no contact with the target. Was this how I saw this girl now? As a target?

'What is my name, then?' suspicion in her voice.

While I thought of what to say, I finished dabbing my forehead and threw the bloodied ball into a pedal bin. I was questioning her, not the other way around.

'Do you think he tells me everything?'

She went silent and her muscles were tensing. She knew what was coming next and was sure it'd be painful and unpleasant.

I needed to gain her trust, a little. 'Perhaps you can fill me in? What's he like, Luca? I rarely get to meet him and ...have a chat, you know.'

'What're you supposed to do to me?'

'Depends on how co-operative you'll be.'

Her body slumped and seemed resigned. 'Look.....I did not make the hit. Told Luca already, target knew he was set up. I just couldn't get shot.'

I poured myself a glass of water and sipped it. 'Yeah. But you shot dead the wrong guy. Have you any idea the problems that's going to cause?'

She shook her head, very near to tears. 'Do what you like to me. But please my family should not suffer. It has nothing to do with them. Please!'

I needed time to think. This was unexpected. Was I sure she was the shooter? Yes, she just admitted it. Did she know the name of her target?

'So, you hit the man in the hat. But the other guy? Did you get a full recognition?'

She shook her head. 'They never gave me details of target. I just knew the man he was with was my target. Krisctus! how many times....'

'Why do YOU think Luca has sent me here?'

'Oh, come on, the usual punishment. You know. Look....I am sorry I attacked you. I did not...I was spooked. It was surprise. You could have knocked. You probably got key from Luca.'

'Usual punishment?' I was quieting my tone, to draw her into my confidence.

'Take all my cigarettes and vodka. Disconnect phone. No money for two weeks and no contact with my family. What more can he do other than send József to beat me up again. That's your job, right? Get it over with. I have a Kibaszott hangover, so the sooner it's over, the sooner I can take more pills. Or are you going to take away those as well?'

She was clearly now resigned to this treatment, but there was still fire and resistance there too.

My mind was racing, this clearly wasn't a professional asset. This woman was under pressure to work as a shooter, but she should know who ordered the hit on me. Or would she?

'The usual, eh? That what you think? Who does he usually send?'

'József. You must have met him.'

Shaking my head. 'I'm new. Not met anyone else yet. Luca, he sends them from his house?'

'How the Kibaszott should I know!'

I shrugged and moved out of the kitchen, 'Just trying to find out what's going on. See what I've let myself in for.'

The bedroom was small, and the bed left unmade, everywhere a mess. A smell of cheap cigarette smoke hung heavy in the air. I opened a window and peered into the night.

From out of the window I had a view along the front of the building. To the right the central main doors. Heading towards them now, two men wearing casual street clothes. One unusually big; his hands hanging, touching his thighs. They strode with confidence.

I called into the kitchen. 'How many guys does he normally send?'

After a moment's pause she answered, 'One, or two. Why?'

'Two men to handle one girl? Not very macho, is it?'

Going back in to the kitchen I discovered her trying to get into a drawer. I moved her away, as there were knives in there.

'Let's get comfortable. This way.' I tutted as I led her into the darkened living area. Sparsely furnished with an old couch, a battered easy chair, a small TV sitting on a low stool and a fold-down table, which served as a dining surface. I eased her into the chair and stood back.

'So, he's sent you this time instead?' her eyes defiant.

'I want you to answer a question.'

'Question?' Her eyes were dazzling, big and beautiful.

'Okay. Who do YOU think ordered the hit you screwed up?'

'I did not...'

'Just answer the question.'

'How would I know?' her head thrust forward.

'Luca?'

'No! He gets paid to organise it all. People like me do the work....why?' squinting, trying to read me.

'So, he doesn't want the target dead?'

'I doubt it.'

'But he knows who does?'

'Probably, yes. You ARE new!' There was a half-smile now.

'Let me get this straight....you're an asset, paid by Luca?'

'This another question? How did I do on the first?'

'Just answer.'

She sat back before saying. 'Yes. Sometimes. Long work. Not much pay.'

'You work for anyone else?'

'Kibaszott, no!'

'You work for Luca only, then?' I was still searching around this flat for any details to confirm her story.

'I have to. No choice.'

'I see.'

'No, you do not.' She hunched forward. 'You do not know what that Kibaszott is like.'

At the noise of a key in the front door, her head came round sharply. She snapped her head back to me; I was staring at her, undisturbed by the arrivals.

'Your friends are here,' I whispered. Her eyes wide with fear. I held up a finger to my lips as I stood up casually and made my way behind the living room door. Heavy footsteps as the two men sauntered along the corridor. They paused by the kitchen, then came towards the living room. Their long shadows thrown into the dark room from the kitchen light.

The first stopped, peering into the room. Unsure, he flicked on the lights and saw the girl with her hands behind her back.

I watched her face, waiting for her to call out a warning. She stared straight at him and remained silent. I was beginning to like this woman.

‘Olga. What are you doing in dark?’ The voice was deep, soft and menacing. Another Eastern European accent, similar to hers. There was some national connection there.

The larger of the two men stood over her. The second visitor crossed the threshold and moved to stand beside his colleague. I had to ease the door slightly to step forward. The Beretta held like a knuckle-duster; I aimed hard and straight to the back of the neck of the bigger man.

The sound was meaty, and the shock rippled up my arm, but I’d no time to watch as he crashed. With my other hand I reached out and grabbed the other man by the neck. At first I missed my target, but a slight adjustment got the nerve I wanted. He stiffened, face grimaced in pain as he buckled and slid to the floor.

I hadn’t noticed the bigger man had fallen forward and nearly crushed the girl. I hauled him off with difficulty. Both men lay still at her feet.

She was staring wildly at me. ‘What have you done?’

‘Saved you from Luca’s punishment.’ My turn to smile.

‘Are you mad? You made it twice as bad, you idiot. Kibaszott idióta!’ Her eyes were flaring at me.

‘How?’ I tried to smile again, nothing would ease the anger now overcoming fear in the girl.

‘I will get even more punishment now. My family....my family will be badly punished. You do not understand.... Kibaszott.’ She banged herself back against the sofa padding.

‘I don’t see.....’

‘You do not, YOU are new and too stupid. Luca has my family captive in Hungary, and me slave here. He is a vindictive Kibaszott. What do you think will happen?’ All fight gone from her now.

‘Sorry.’

‘Sorry!’ I wasn’t thinking straight. ‘I want to know who ordered the hit on your target in the park. Luca will know, right?’ I said calmly but forcefully.

‘Yes, but.....’

‘So, where is he?’ She was becoming confused. She stared at the big man lying next to her chair and shook her head. I was supposed to work for Luca and now asking where he was. ‘Where can I find him?’ My voice was harsher and more urgent.

'I only know his....work place...office.'

'Where is that?'

Another flare of the eyes. 'I do not care. You have attacked his men, he will think it is me! He will send more to hurt me. And you if they find you here'

'You can take me to him. If he tells me what I want to know. He won't blame you.' I tried to sound sincere.

'He will not tell you, it is risky for him. The people he works for are.... Kibaszott.' The flare softening.

'What people?'

'They are worse than him. Worse than you. No place to hide from them. He is so bosszúszomjasvindictive. We are already Kibaszott!'

After a few seconds of quiet thought I said, 'There might be a way.....'

I pulled a gun from the belt of the unconscious fat man on the floor and racked a bullet into the chamber. Her beautiful eyes grew wide again, and she cringed back into the soft chair as I moved towards her.

'But first you must die.'

PART THREE

CHAPTER NINE - LUCA LUCUSTA

I've a huge room in my house used as an office. It's a large old Victorian building. Quite different to the run-down shack I called home in Herceghalom, that place was shit!

Me and my family live on the second and third floors. I have the downstairs for my business, including my private entrance. I'm considering moving my business into other premises. I feel this old room doesn't reflect my position in the current business community.

It looks like a study, with racks of books on shelves, more like a library. I've no idea what the books are about. In fact, some of them are fake, anyway. It looks impressive—that's the point. I've a big-ass desk, faked to look antique, with two large computer screens to look hi-tech. The chair I got from an auction. I don't know what its original use was, but it's suitable to hold a victim during torture.

Subdued lighting gives the country club effect. And when I sit behind my desk, I feel like a Lord of a Manor.

It was getting late, and I was waiting for Zoltán and József to come back from Olga's. I needed to get to bed as I'd a long day behind me and was feeling tired. Another sip of scotch and I returned to the internet. Many of these specialist websites are interesting. The things you can find.....

The side door squeaked. It was at the end of a short corridor from my office and led out to the side of the house where we parked the cars. The outside door opens by an electronic keypad and my office accessed only with a key. I heard the metallic click of the lock of the office door and Zoltán entered. Glancing up from the computer I saw a stranger behind him. I reached towards my desk drawer for my weapon and was then aware of a gun pointing at me. I'm not easily scared, but the expression on Zoltán's face frightened me more than the weapon aimed at me.

The man holding it stood in the subdued light of the hallway. He looked in his early fifties and was pudgy. He had ginger whiskers, large sideburns, his skin pale. He was wearing creased jeans, tennis shoes, and a worn golf shirt. His voice was soft and had an indistinguishable Celtic taint. I'm from Hungary so these regional accents are still a puzzle to me.

'No,' a quiet word of authority and a hint of danger.

I placed both hands flat on the desk. 'Zoltán? You all right?' I asked calmly.

Zoltán now afraid to move. He took a pace forward after being pushed by the stranger. I saw a large knife pressed into Zoltán's back. The stranger shoved him towards one of my two padded guest chairs and pushed his shoulder until he sat. Zoltán's hands were tied behind him. His thin face stared at me as if pleading for the horror to stop.

The stranger threw Zoltán's large bunch of keys, on to my desk.

'What do you want?' I said casually, hoping József was going to burst in and flatten the stranger. As I studied him, I realised this man had too much confidence to be worried by József. In fact, József's absence spoke volumes. I hoped he was still alive.

'Shouldn't you lead with, "who" am I?'

I took a deep breath, 'Who are you and what have you done with József?'

'He's in the boot of the car.' He motioned towards the keys on my desk. 'Just.'

'And Olga?'

'In the boot of another car. No longer worried if she fits or not.'

He then threw a backpack on my table, it made a solid metallic thud. I recognised Olga's rifle kit, she wouldn't give that up for anyone.

I swallowed my sudden fear, 'So...we're back to who are YOU?'

'The man you tried to have killed this afternoon.' The stranger slowly moved towards me.

I was getting more nervous than scared. I've had knives pointed at me before, but this man's attitude...I wasn't sure what to say, or do, for the best.

My nerves were getting the better of me as I realised what he'd said a few moments earlier. "The man I tried to kill this afternoon" He was The Phantom's target!

Now I understood the situation. Revenge time for this man, whoever he was. His voice never above a whisper, I was waiting for sudden rage and violence.

Spreading my arms wide in the universal gesture of surprise and innocence. 'I haven't tried to kill anyone. I don't even know you!' But I realised who he was. The Magician, the target I was supposed to eliminate.

'I was standing next to the man in the bright red hat. An asset couldn't miss me. But.....what's her name, Olga? Olga did.'

‘Look...it’s just business. You know what I mean. I didn’t...didn’t...’

‘I think you did. You may not have pulled the trigger, but you sanctioned Olga to do it. But the point is.....who paid you?’ He was very close.

‘Are you... The Magician?’ A risky question when he was holding the gun and was motivated.

‘Alive and kicking. You must be Luca. Olga told me all about you. Eventually.’

‘Look....let’s just calm down here and be....rational. Isn’t that what you guys are...calm and rational?’ I held my hands out to stop him getting too close.

‘Sometimes. Right now I’m on a high at being alive. No thanks to you.’

‘Okay....look....’ I was struggling. I glanced at Zoltán and saw he was no help to me. ‘As I said...it’s just business. Your business too, actually. You know how this works. I’m just a...middle man. I don’t make the judgement calls. I take the work farm, it out and pay off. A small profit. Just the bad guys get hurt. That’s all.’

‘So, you think I’m a bad guy, do you?’

My mind was racing. ‘Somebody thought you were...are.’

‘So...who’s that somebody?’ although calm and in control, his voice held menace.

I spread my arms once again, ‘I can’t tell you that, can I? You know how this works. Without confidentiality...we’ve no business. Right? Of course, right!’ His eyes changed. I was sure he was wearing contact lenses. They shine a little too bright at times?

Zoltán and I held our breath, waiting to see what this man would do to us.

When he eventually spoke, it was so quiet I barely heard him. ‘So...what you’re saying is... the buck stops with you, right?’

I had no answer, none that would save me. ‘No...no...you know....’

‘Then who else can I talk to that knows why I’m suddenly one of the bad guys?’

‘Look....you told Milo you were...getting out of the business. For some people...that’s like a....trigger. Know what I mean? A warning light. A problem with...confidentiality.’

‘So...just because I’m getting out of the business...suddenly I’m a threat?’ His eyes widened in anger now.

‘Some might think so.’

‘Some? Name them.’

‘You know I can’t.’

His eyes narrowed as they tried to bore into mine. He never moved them, as with the slightest of gestures he pointed the gun at Zoltán and fired.

The sound was a soft phutt. But Zoltán’s noise was much louder. Screaming in agony he tipped forward off the chair. His hands were still bound so he could not have the natural reaction and grab the point of pain. He continued to scream. I was wondering if someone might hear him in the house. The Magician’s eyes were still on me, never wavering.

I got the message. I knew if I didn’t tell, I’d be next, and it would be slow and painful. I saw the agony Zoltán was in, his voice now a shriek, as the reaction set in.

‘I can’t....’ was all I said, as I dropped my head away from those eyes.

I jumped as a piece of my desk exploded in front of my eyes. The small coil of smoke came out from the silenced barrel of the gun and I guessed the next bullet would enter a soft part of me.

I decided I'd no choice. If I didn’t tell, then I’d be dead. If I told, what might he do? He'd no idea of who he’d be going up against and he’d soon be dead, anyway.

Taking the path of least resistance, ‘Okay. I don’t know if you’ve heard the names, but here goes. Two men. Very...influential in the underworld.’ I held my breath and convinced myself I’d no choice. Of course, he might still kill me anyhow.....‘If I tell you. What’re you going to do?’ I asked hastily.

‘With them, or with you?’

‘Me...mainly.’ He shrugged, the eyes back on mine again. Zoltán was whimpering now. ‘Cut him free first, please.’

The Magician thought about it as he moved over to Zoltán. He never took his eyes, or the gun, off me. With his large blade he made a blind swipe at Zoltán.

He might have cut him anywhere, but the bonds fell away and Zoltán reached for his thigh to stem the flow of blood. A sigh of both pain and relief came from his mouth.

‘He needs hospital attention,’ from The Magician. ‘Soon. Sooner you tell me, the sooner you can get him there.’

I took a deep breath. ‘Mario Arzano and Primo Vespa.’

His eyes stared at me to see if I was lying. They never blinked or changed. The news had no effect on him.

‘You’ve heard of them?’ I questioned.

His tone weak, ‘I’ve heard of them.’

‘They’re big men,’ I volunteered. ‘Very big. Well protected. Only a fool would tangle with them.’

He nodded and stood up straight before saying, ‘Only a fool, indeed.’

I studied his reaction, his hesitation. I had a sudden idea, and I had to control an excited stammer to get it out. ‘Look...what if ...I was to offer you some work? Quality work, nothing demanding. Then you wouldn’t be...retired. No need to tangle with those two, you know? Perhaps later you just faded away. How does that sound?’

He moved towards Zoltán and I held my breath. He reached for Zoltán’s waist and loosened his belt. With one strong heave, he ripped the belt loose and applied a tourniquet to the upper part of his thigh. Zoltán gasped in pain as The Magician pulled it tight.

I felt a pause in the man’s conviction. I pressed my point. ‘Well.....for example. You take charge of Olga’s brother, right? Train him. Get him going as my replacement asset. You needn’t do any wet work yourself. More like...a semi-retirement.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous!’ he responded quietly. He bound up the ends of the belt and helped Zoltán back into a chair.

I felt more confident now. The names of Mario and Primo had certainly made him change his mood. Did I feel safe...no, but now I’d something to work with.

‘Not so ridiculous. I need her brother Henrik here and trained up to replace Olga...my Phantome, who you took from me, remember...?’ I knew I was pushing my luck, but I wanted to get all the ideas across to him quickly, take his mind off shooting me. ‘Then...if you want other work, I can get you plenty. Once Mario and Tony know you’re back in business, they needn’t worry about you anymore. In fact, you’ll possibly be working for them again. Indirectly. They’ve always admired your work.’

He was thinking this over, I hurried on. ‘Of course, that relies on them not finding out I told you any of this. Agreed?’

The Magician moved and sat heavily in the other chair. The gun he rested in his lap and his eyes were now on the floor. He looked a tired a dejected man. Old before his time.

‘Ridiculous.’ he said quietly and without conviction.

‘I get it. I understand. All you wanted to do...was retire.’

His eyes snapped up to mine holding the glare again. ‘Where’s this Henrik?’

‘Hungary. Nice little village near Budapest, called Herceghalom. I guess you don’t know it. I’m from there, I’ve family there.’

‘He’ll come here?’

‘Well...I suggest...it’s best if you go there first. You see...the family are...well...need handling. If they find out Olga’s gone before we can get Henrik on board, then we’ll lose an edge, if you know what I mean?’

He shook his head. ‘Why travel to Hungary to teach a kid how to shoot?’

‘First of all.... It’ll show who’s boss. You...and me. Secondly.....if you were away from here a while, perhaps Mario and Primo will have time to adjust to your new status. With my help of course. I’ll tell them the whole thing’s a mistake. We’ll blame Milo for that. He can’t argue against it now, can he?’

I knew I’d gone too far. His head snapped up and the eyes bored into mine again. I hurried on, ‘I mourn his death, accident and all, but this would be a good....parting gift to you. Get Primo off your back.’

I waited, holding my breath. What was he considering?

Zoltán moaned again, I needed to get rid of The Magician now. I hoped I’d bought some time and he wasn’t going to shoot me today. It gave him something to think about, an opportunity to get the potentially lethal Italians off his back. Now I needed to hurry things along, I didn’t want The Magician using his decision time in my office with Zoltán bleeding to death.

I stood. ‘Can I call a medic for Zoltán now?’

He nodded, and I picked up the phone. ‘Actually, it’s a colleague of mine, Raphael, who makes house calls. Gunshot wounds need a lot of explaining in the hospital.’

I dialled the number with a shaking hand. I’d dodged more than just a bullet. What did the future hold for all of us now?

CHAPTER TEN - THE MAGICIAN

I left Luca's office with mixed concerns, pausing outside to let my thoughts settle.

It disturbed me that the names of Mario Arzano and Tony Vespa had surfaced as the antagonists who'd placed the contract on me. These were big fish. Through Milo I've helped them permanently solve a few of their problems.

As for the rest of that meeting.....I realised I didn't know why I was doing this!

I'd gone in with the specific purpose of finding out who wanted me dead. I'd done that, but acquired the added bonus if that's the word, of a new project. More responsibilities and I don't want to take on liability for other people.

I should've got the info, shot the three of them and left without a trace. I was pondering this through when I heard a muffled banging coming from the car in the alley. I opened the boot and a pair of frightened dark eyes were pleading with me.

It had been a struggle to get big József in. But I'd help from the reluctant Zoltán with that. Now I had to get him out. My knife materialised in my hand as if by magic and József's eyes grew wider. I slit the plastic cuffs and helped him scramble out of the boot. He stood, unnerved by what might happen next.

I nodded my head towards the side door. 'I think he'll be glad to see you.'

He grunted and shuffled off to face the uncertain reception that his boss would give him. At least he was in one piece, Zoltán wasn't so lucky.

Putting the backpack into the boot I slammed it shut. I wasn't going to leave valuable specialist kit in Luca's grubby little hands. Sitting on the bonnet of the car I assessed what info I had and what to do with it.

My mind eventually clear, I got back in Luca's car and drove back to Sullivan Close. I'd more strategy to consider on the way.

I approached the flat with caution. I'd been away for nearly two hours and things might've changed since then. I held my breath and opened the front door.

All the lights were on while it was dark when I left. My 950 was in my hand as I eased down the short passage and into the sitting room.

Olga sat there staring at me, a nervous expression on her face. 'Did you kill him? I asked you not to!'

I put the gun away and shook my head. 'I'll leave him to you.' I handed her the backpack. 'Thanks for the loan.'

'Have you changed your mind?' she asked, with tears in her eyes.

'About you? No.' I sat beside her on the sofa.

She'd an empty tumbler in her hands, while the bottle on the kitchen table had less than half remaining. It'd been full when I'd left.

I took it gently from her hands and she lit another cigarette. 'I'd prefer if you didn't smoke when I'm around. Please?'

Her eyes glared, she was going to say something. She stubbed it out amongst a dusty pile of stubs in the ashtray. I poured her another drink and handed it to her. She nodded her thanks and took a sip.

'Neat?'

'Isn't that how you drink it?'

'Yes, but I thought you would...never mind. Thanks.' Her eyes stared at the floor.

I picked up the ashtray and emptied it into the swing bin. I opened the fridge, no food worth eating there. 'You need to eat, Olga.'

'I'm fine. What happened? How much did you hurt him? I wanted to be there....'

'Nothing happened. I...think I convinced him you're dead. You're safe for now.'

She stood and reached out towards me. Her eyes were flowing freely, 'Thank you. I thought you were going to ...kill me. I wouldn't've blamed you. I tried to kill you....'

Before I could stop her, she was hugging me. I hesitated before putting my arms around her. I'm no good at this. Emotions, relationships, are not my thing. She felt frail and bony.

I eased her off me. 'You're welcome. Nobody paid me to shoot you, so I didn't. I'm funny that way.'

She smiled and nodded, took a large sip from her glass and sat again. 'What did he say? Who placed the contract on you? Are my family going to be in trouble?'

I poured myself a tumbler of water and drank while I thought of a good way to tell her. 'Well...as you're "dead", Luca won't bother you again. What we agreed, right? You wanted me to help you get free of him?'

'That is what I wanted, but I don't have any money to pay you...'

'That's not the point. We have a problemhe wants your brother...Henrik, to take your place.'

She leaped out of the chair, spilling her drink. 'Kibaszott!' She kicked the table, 'Kibaszott bastard!' Her hands covered her face and mumbled a stream of words in Hungarian. I waited until they subsided.

'I should have come with you,' she shouted, 'I would have killed him there and then. No more problem!'

I stood up and put my arms around her, hoping it was the right thing to do. I kept my voice calm, 'If you'd killed him, I'd never found out who was after me.'

Her anger changed to sobbing. 'So, you found out?'

'I think so. I don't know if it's true – I must get more info first. It's two local Mafia.'

'Mafia? What is Mafia?'

'Ahhhh...Italian gangsters, but local to London. Nasty people, lots of manpower and influence. But still frightened of their own shadows – it appears.'

'I want to kill him. Kibaszott.' Her voice so quiet I had to move closer to make sure I heard her.

'So....without Luca I'm still a wanted man. We need to stay calm and rationalise what to do.'

'What is ratioulize?'

'Sort things out between us.'

'US? There is an US now?' Her eyes were wide. They were nice when she wasn't crying or angry. I let her go, my back to her, I hate this emotional outburst stuff. Why me? I should've shot her and left. I knew it at the time but call me sentimental. Well....mental, anyway.

I had to think without disturbance; I needed an exit strategy. She was sobbing and talking to herself. I tuned out and entered my personal zone.

All the events of the day slipped quietly through my mind and I sorted everything into logical categories. What's important and what wasn't? What problems each action presented and how I'm going to compensate.

I analysed the uncategorised stream of information remaining and came out the other side with an idea, but unsure Olga would like it. I wasn't even sure I liked it, but it's the necessary, and only option for me to undertake. Shooting Olga now was the least of the options. Although, I momentarily considered it.

I dialled Lucie on my mobile; it went to answerphone. If she's busy, she's working. 'Call me back as soon as you can on this number, please. James.'

'Who you call?'

I smirked at her, 'Your bodyguard.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN – LUCIE

I don't get entangled with my clients.

Ever.

With one exception, James. Even then, "entangled" is the wrong word.

There's several mitigating circumstances here. James saved me from a life that, I'm sure, would've ended in tragedy. I didn't understand it until years later, when I realised that the scumbag Rico was never coming back. James had *said* he wouldn't, and *knew* he wouldn't, because he must have *made sure* he wouldn't. I hope that makes sense. I was befuddled at the time, but think more clearly these days.

But there's something about James.... an assuredness, a confidence, an impending sense of peril. Something ... protectivealmost... primaeval.

I can't say we're lovers. I've many lovers, that's my job. But they walk away from me and I can let them. Forget them. James ... it's not been so easy.

Lover...no. In love with him? Again no. Not my type. Not that I've a type, can't afford to. Just...more...a....strong bond. A relationship I'd never have sought, never imagined – never before wanted.

I see him only a few times a year, on business. But he often phones to see how I am, see if I need anything. On a couple of occasions I've had problems, without an official manager (I hate the word pimp) there can be jobs when you're vulnerable. Obsessive clients or overly physical men enjoying pushing women around.

When I mentioned a few incidences to him, the clients stopped calling. He even took the time to teach me a few self-defence moves that'd help me in close and difficult situations. I've used them twice so far. Again, the clients haven't come back.

In the seven years I've known him, I still don't know what he does for a living. I've made some wild guesses. A spy, secret agent. Criminal. Bank robber. Lots of jobs. Still don't know.

Don't really care, either. I'm just not that inquisitive. Clients tell me all sorts of things during their moments of passion. I never remember any of it. Don't care enough too.

So, to say it astonished me to get two calls in one day from him is not an exaggeration. More of a surprise though, is that he needed MY help both

times! The first was just a taxi service, no prob. The second...that WAS a surprise.

My first impression of the woman he called Olga, was that she was too thin for him. I'm curvaceous in all the right places and he's mentioned several times I have the perfect body. She was too slender to be in my business. But you can never tell. It takes all sorts.

Olga was clearly distressed, or drunk. Was he helping her as he'd helped me? She was so thin!

She sat in the passenger seat as I drove the Mini to my apartment in Fulham – the nicer end. Again, with the help of James and the stake capital, which I'm gradually paying back. He doesn't seem to be in a hurry to be repaid.

She remained silent and surly for most of the journey. I felt her eyes on me several times, so I tried to break the ice. 'Warm enough for you, or too cold? I like it cool in the car.'

'I'm fine.'

'Good.'

'Thanks.' She stared out the window.

'You're welcome, sweetie. Lucie, by the way. James didn't introduce me. Manners, eh?'

'James? Is that his name?' She looked at me now.

'Sure. I think so. That's what he told me, but that's a long time ago. He might have changed it by now.' So, she hadn't known him long enough to get his name. That's his business. We drove a while in silence.

The traffic was light, yet I still obeyed all the traffic laws. I didn't know who I had in the car and if it's important to James..... I wanted no one official investigating us. At least, that's the impression I got when he'd opened the door to her flat. I assume it's her flat.

He didn't say hello, just pushed her towards me, 'Take Olga home with you. Look after her for a while. Don't let her outside at all.'

'How long for?' was my bemused response.

He shrugged, 'As long as it takes. A few days, maybe. Okay? Do that for me. Let me know if you need anything. Here's a mobile number. For 24 hours only.'

He'd given me a scrap of paper and eased Olga out of the door and I'd followed. By the time I glanced back the door had closed.

At a set of lights, I took a long searching stare at this streak of womanhood. 'How'd you come to meet James?'

She studied at me before answering, 'Business.'

'Ahhh.' I nodded knowingly.

'You?'

'Probably the same business.' I responded with a smile.

Her eyes widened, 'You a contractor too?'

I was a little perplexed, 'In some ways, I suppose I am.'

She entered my flat cautiously, pausing before entering each room. This girl was especially nervous. What had she got herself into?

She was carrying a large heavy backpack and a small case. She travelled light, at least. In my flat, there's my sanctuary, a professional room and a spare. I like to think I have some real life away from the realities of my work. I motioned her towards my spare bedroom.

'It's not much, but it's neat and clean. Make yourself at home, sweetie. Tea?'

'Thank you. This is very nice. It's large. Do you have any vodka?'

The girl was stressed, she needed a drink. In fact, so did I now. 'Sure. Ice, and lemon?'

'Yes. Thank you.'

'Right..... I'll let you settle in, sweetie.'

I recognised her accent as eastern European, but not which country. She'd a good command of the language, but not a command of protocols. We can't all be perfect.

James needs to talk to me and give me more information! What am I supposed to do with this girl? What was I to say? I'd have to lay off clients for the next few days. Under normal circumstances it'd be a no, no, but for James....

While pouring the two drinks I was already making the calls, making hers large, hoping it'd last a while. By the time she came out of her bedroom, I was on my second call. She stood watching me while I carried on

the conversation in my happy voice. Handing her the glass I waved her to a seat and held up five fingers. I hope the international signal for five minutes was the same in her country. She nodded at me and sat. I strolled around the flat, trying to make the call short, without upsetting the client.

He was particularly disappointed and wanted vocal compensation. I moved into my Client Room and closed the door. I sat on the edge of the bed and told him what he wanted to hear.

After fifteen minutes I felt it's time to let him go, although he was still disappointed. When I told him there'd be no charge, he perked up. I ended the call, took a deep breath and went back into the sitting room.

I smiled, 'Sorry it took so long. Drink alright?' She nodded, and I noticed she hadn't drunk much of it.

I picked up my glass and took a sip. The vodka bottle had dropped its level, was that her second? Or third? The girl could drink. Hey ho. What does it matter? Any friend of James's.....

Perhaps she'd be in the mood for a chat now.

'When's...James coming?' she asked.

She downed nearly half of the glass while I was saying, 'I don't know. Is he supposed to?'

'He lives here, doesn't he? With you?'

I laughed as I shook my head, 'No, sweetie. Not here. We're just...good friends is all.'

She finished the glass, 'Is it alright if I....' she waved towards the bottle.

I nodded. 'Bring the bottle over, sweetie. Save you a trip, or two.' God, she could drink. Real stress there somewhere.

She sat and poured the vodka. She waved the bottle at me and I shook my head. I took a sip to keep her company. If I'd drunk that much I'd be on the floor by now.

'Where do you come from, Olga?'

'Hungary. Near Budapest. You know it?'

I shook my head. 'Fraid not, sweetie. Don't get abroad. Don't have a passport, even.'

'Neither do I.'

This was getting interesting. 'No passport. How did you get to England?'

'Oh, there's a passport. I just don't have it. Not allowed.'

'Authorities, eh? Bastards!' I raised my glass to the bastards.

'Not authorities, Luca.'

'Luca? What's Luca?'

'My...I don't know what you call him. He makes me work.'

'Boss. He's your boss, then?' Was this just a language barrier thing?

'I hate him. James went to see him tonight.'

I felt a chill run through me as she mentioned James visiting someone on her behalf. I didn't know who this Luca was, but she certainly didn't like him. Was this another Rico incident for James?

'Tell me all about Luca, sweetie.'

Sometime during the night, she fell asleep. The vodka gone, and the gin almost gone. I keep a good stock for clients but now needed to go shopping if she's going to be staying for long.

I eased her to her feet and helped her to bed. She was asleep before her head touched the pillow. She looked at peace at last. In this state, she's quite attractive, in a bony way. I thought she was undernourished, more than slight framed.

While I was brushing the hair from her face, she stirred. I hoped they were happy dreams. She'd said she now felt safe. I'm not sure whether that's because of my influence, or James's. Perhaps both. I left her to dream. As I quietly closed the door I jumped. James was standing right outside. He was silent, his face passive.

'How the fuck did you get in here?' I shouted without realising it.

He gave a brief smile, 'Sorry. Wasn't sure if you'd be asleep. Didn't want to disturb you. Just checking in on you both. I'll go.'

'No!' I put out my hand to touch his arm. 'Stay, sweetie. Just shocked. Have a drink. Something to eat. What time is it?'

'Nearly one. Everything alright?'

‘Sure. Fine. Confused a little. Quite a lot. Some answers would be useful. Essential even. Cup of tea? Sandwich?’ I gabbled.

‘Great. Just what I need. Thanks.’

‘Talk to me while I get them, sweetie.’

He leant against the kitchen counter top and I realised he was back to the normal James. He must have taken off the disguise he’s wearing earlier, and he looked tired. I wanted him to stay the night, but I needed to be tactful.

‘Did she say much?’ he asked quietly.

‘Lots. Nothing that made sense. Hey, not my business. I’m just doing you a favour.’

‘Thanks. I know it must seem a little...weird.....’

‘Look. Tell me what you need to, but I don’t HAVE to know. Okay, sweetie?’ I pulled out four slices of bread and packs from the lower fridge draw. ‘Ham, all right?’ He nodded. ‘Mustard and lettuce. A little tomato?’

‘Great. Thanks.’

The kettle flicked itself off, and I made the tea. I watched his face, he was thinking. ‘Life’s changed for me in the last few hours, Lucie.’

‘You’re not the only one, sweetie.’

‘Yeah...sorry to drop this on you. It won’t be for long. Normality will be resumed soon.’ He crossed his arms, quite relaxed.

‘Milk, sugar?’ He shook his head. ‘You’re easy to please.’ I handed him the steaming mug. ‘Get that down you. Do you good. When was the last time you had something to eat, or drink?’

‘This morning. I think.’

I finished the rest of the sandwiches in silence, letting him gather his thoughts. You can never rush men, not when it’s information you want. They’ll do everything but tell you what you want to know. Creep up on them. Never let them know they’re doing what you want. Never ask a direct question.

‘Who is she?’ I blurted out, instantly regretting my lack of subtlety. Well, it was late. Not for me I suppose, I’m used to these hours. Do some of my best work....

'Someone I met just today.' I held my tongue this time, sliding the plate over to him.

'Sit down. Just eat and drink for now. Whisky?' He shook his head and took the plate, mug and settled on the sofa. He put both on the coffee table and smiled at me.

'We never find time to just talk, do we?' he sighed quietly.

'Never the time. Never the need. You don't have to now, sweetie.'

'Oh, I don't know. Perhaps this is just the right time. But where to start?'

'On the sandwich. The one nearest you. I took great care to spread the mustard evenly. Hope you like it. Our first meal together.'

He chewed and watched me in silence. He swallowed before saying, 'What'd you think I do for a living, Lucie?' He continued to eat the sandwich.

'I'm guessing not a brain surgeon. Not something needing interpersonal skills. Your social manners at times are appalling.' He laughed.

'Good guess. Try again.'

'I'd like to say someone big in finance, but you don't dress well enough for that. No offence, sweetie.' A smile to disarm the unintended insult.

'None taken.'

'Ummmm.....Something physical. You're very fit. I can personally vouch for that. I suspect...military. Something, perhaps, hush hush for the military. Counterterrorism. Close?'

He shook his head and sipped the hot tea. 'Not a company man, I'm afraid. No...interpersonal skills.' He grinned at me and it made me smile.

I settled back and studied him. I watched his eyes and took a chance.

'You were in disguise tonight.'

'Nothing gets past you, does it?'

'Too obvious to mention earlier. So, something...covert. Yes....it all fits now. I know exactly what you are.' I grinned.

'Well?'

'You're a private detective. And she's your client. Just met tonight. She's in trouble with someone called Luca. You've been to sort him out. It all fits.'

‘Good guess.’ He finished the first sandwich and wiped his lips on the napkin.

‘You work undercover and need a disguise. You want to get Olga away and hidden and I’m the mug that’ll do it. So...you must work alone, or someone else would’ve spirited her away for you. How’s that for Sherlockian reasoning, Mr James?’ I laughed out loud and sat forward to slap him on the knee. He nearly spilt his tea, so he put down the mug.

His face grew serious. ‘I can’t tell you how much I didn’t want to involve you. And...how vital it is nobody knows. You may be in danger if they find Olga.’

‘Danger? With you around, sweetie? Come on! Now it makes sense. Rico. Troublesome clients. All adds up, James.’

‘You must take this seriously, Lucie.’ His face severe.

‘That’s always been your trouble, James. You only come to me when you’re stressed. Why can’t you be happy when I see you? Just once?’

‘Maybe, when this is all over. Maybe.’

He chewed on the other sandwich and I waited before saying, ‘Why haven’t you got a wife, or girlfriend? I’m assuming you don’t. Or you would’ve called her instead of me.’

‘Probably...for the same reasons you don’t have a boyfriend or husband. Professional. Too complicated. Wouldn’t work. I can’t come home and tell her what sort of day I’ve had. It’d depress her, drive her away.’

‘It wouldn’t me.’ I looked into his eyes and he stared back at me. I’ve felt this man’s tenderness and knew there was love in him. It takes so long for him to relax in my company and so quickly it would go again. The shell closing round the thing, moments before, he wanted more than anything in the world. Some things I do recall about my clients.

‘As much as I’m not husband material, you’re not exactly wife material.’

I feigned anger, ‘None taken!’ I watched him eat and added, ‘Neither of us suited to home life, eh? Not individually, perhaps.’

His eyes flicked back to mine, and he smiled. ‘That’s a nice thought. Hold on to that.’

‘I always have.’ I breathed out as I leant forward, ‘Don’t you think, you being you, me being me, leaves a great hole in our lives?’

‘Maybe.’

‘How can we fill that void, James?’ I was edging closer to him.

‘On a purely temporary basis – with each other.’

‘Then that’s just going to have to be enough. For both of us.’

‘Another thought to hang on to.’ I was inches away from kissing him.

‘More tea?’ He nodded.

I had to move away. My mind in a flurry, what was I saying? What was I offering? Did I mean any of it? Did I believe any of it? I just didn’t know. I switched the kettle on and quaffed the rest of my warm vodka, the last in the house.

‘Where’re you going next, sweetie? Can I ask?’

He shook his head tiredly. ‘Home, I suppose.’

I smiled, ‘I wouldn’t even know where that was. Why don’t you stay?’ He shook his head. ‘I’ve a spare room if that makes a difference?’ He shrugged. I made the tea and held the silence. The rest was up to him.

I left it as long as possible before I smiled again, ‘So, you’ve had a bad day at the office. Please don’t make it a bad day for me as well. Let’s try to have some fun.’

He looked up at me and smiled. Was that a nod?

He finished the sandwich and waited until the tea cooled. He rested his head back and closed his eyes. Moving behind him I gave his neck a massage, I’m good at that.

‘I’m not an expert in detective work, but.....it seems to me, that you have to spend an awful lot of time purporting to be someone else. Suppressing all emotions, fear, anger and sorrow.’ Tight neck muscles. Work harder on them. ‘Surely, it must eventually become difficult to experience any real joy? I’m basing my experiences on what’s happened tonight and how I’ve seen you arrive every other time we’ve met.’

His neck was lolling in relaxation and his eyes remained closed.

‘Is it...the more effort you put in, the more successful you become? I’m guessing your very successful. Perhaps today was a bad day at the office, am I right? Tomorrow will be better, for sure. Take me, for instance. The more effort I put in, the happier the outcome. Some days are better than others. Some...clients are better than others.’ Moving on to the very muscular shoulders, this man is strong. ‘A job that’s full of ups and downs. You come to me when a job’s finished, right? Whether it goes well, or not. I’m your release. Your reward for the hard work.’

There was a pause before he said quietly, 'What do you do to relax after a hard day's work?'

'Sleep. Mostly. Has to be reward enough.' He sighed. 'Of course, there's always the money too. Right, sweetie?'

He smiled, and I giggled. He laughed out loud and pulled me onto his lap. The laughter stopped, and the old James was back with a bang.

'I don't know how to repay you for all this, Lucie.'

'You already have. Remember Rico? I do. Every day I'm thankful. Thankful he's not here. Thanks to you.'

'I never did....'

'Of course you didn't. Mr Undercover Private Eye. So...before the sun comes up and little Miss Hungary wakes for her morning feed of vodka, which I haven't any....are you staying, or going? Either way, this lady needs her beauty sleep.'

He stayed. And I didn't get much sleep. But neither did I mind.

Tomorrow proved to be another day.

CHAPTER TWELVE – OLGA

I was awake early and sat up in sudden fear panic; I didn't know where I was. I took moment to think and still didn't know where I was. A strange bed and strange room, but it was much nicer room than my own. One door led to main living area, other too small bathroom. Well...still larger than my bathroom in my flat. I used toilet and showered, using time to wake up. Nice soft towels, tiny bottles that smelt nice.

I desperately needed cigarette but remembered that she who brought me here did not like it in house. I respected her wishes. So far, they were my friends.

I sat and remembered events of yesterday. I'd screwed up contract, by now Luca would have beaten hell out of me. Most probably sending József. It would have been warning not to screw up again. Loss of the privileges would follow – not that I had many privileges to begin with. Then sent his Hungarian goons to do the same to my family.

Target found out who I was where I lived and would have killed me....except he did not. I still did not really know why. I told him my story and expected the worse, I always expect the worse. Rarely have I been wrong in that.

So, instead of killing me he went straight to Luca. I know he did not kill Luca; I want to do that. I think he knows and accepts that. I know Luca is arranging to get my brother Henrik to replace me. But most importantly, Luca now thinks I am dead. How did target James do that?

James, the girl had called him, and I needed to talk to him. Who was she? They spent night together; I heard them next room, but are they married? Do not know. She might be bárka – hooker, prostitute. I think she thinks I am one too, by way she talked last night. I sort of like her. She's trying to keep me safe.

I needed drink but thought I should stick to coffee. For a while. I opened door quietly and creep towards kitchen. I had only my underwear on and hoped not to disturb anyone. I found coffee, milk and sugar and boiled kettle.

While I waited I looked around her kitchen. Mostly it was white, even the floor! It was neat and tidy, almost too neat and tidy. Sparse I think is word. Or, is it functional? Still getting grips with language. There was pile of mail on counter and with nervous glance at bedroom doors to make sure they still shut them, I glanced through them. Her name was Lucie Dern. Just few bills and wrapped magazine. Plain cover as they say.

The kettle clicked off, and I poured coffee. I stood at window looking out over river; it was nice sight. There was slight mist over water, but it would warm up later.

I heard door open and James come out. He smiled at me and I smiled back at him. 'Coffee?' He nodded. 'How do you like it?'

'As it comes, thanks.'

I smiled again as I push kettle switch. 'Least I could do.' I stared at him to see his response. He seemed relaxed and sat on chair. He had wrapped around him what looked like woman's dressing gown. I do not have one, so I am not sure. 'You look lot different this morning. You lost plenty of weight last night. Hair...different. And your eyes. You handsome man, suddenly!'

'I had to make some changes. This is the real me, not for public broadcast. Just between you and me. Okay?'

I nodded and winked at him. 'Okay. We need to talk.'

'Do we? What about?' he sounded serious.

'About last night. And today. And perhaps, tomorrow. Lots to cover.'

I made coffee in silence. I brought it over to him and sat in chair opposite and leaned forward. Waiting for him to talk.

'Thanks.' He sat and smiled at me. 'Well?'

'Where do I start?' I decided what I wanted to know. 'Why?'

'Why, what?'

'Why are you doing this for me?' The smile disappeared from his face and he tried to sip his coffee. 'I thought you might just kill me.'

'As inrevenge?' with slight grin.

'Yes. The bosszú, the revenge.'

'Why would I want to do that?'

'You are contract... gyilkos...killer.' I tapped his knee for effect.

'Is that what I am...a gyilkos? Never knew it.'

'You kill for money, right? Gyilkos!'

'Money yes. bosszú, no'. I shook my head in frustration. I was not getting through to him.

He leaned forward, 'You're a ... gyilkos too. You tried to gyilkos me. You, therefore, are a kindred spirit. A comrade, part of a small tribe. Why would I want to hurt you?'

'I do not understand!'

'We're unique in this world, as we're sometimes the only substitute for "personal" justice. Sometimes it falls to someone to "take out the trash". But that doesn't mean we necessary enjoy taking a life. It's just a means to an end, for both us and our clients. We're merely an asset, a tool to be used, not to allow personal conflicts to interfere. Remote, get the job done and go home. Am I right?' He was watching me intensely, waiting an answer.

I shook my head, still confused. 'Maybe, but....'

'But...not you! You don't want to be an asset, don't even do it for the money. You do it because you've no alternative. It's THAT very thing, which makes me want to help you.' He tapped my knee as I had tapped his, for effect. 'To change your plight.'

I nodded my head. Slowly understanding. He took breath to sip still hot coffee. He winced, 'In my experience, every individual I've worked for has handled the matter in a straightforward no-nonsense manner. A target is acquired and eliminated because he's a scumbag of some type.'

'Scumbag?'

'Villain, a nasty piece of work, hooligan....'

'Ahh, hollgan.' I was understanding something.

'But your Luca. He's not professional. It's not acceptable to kidnap and hold to ransom attractive women against their will and threaten their families if they do not perform like a trained dog.'

He said I was attractive. 'I think I see. You took the pity on me?'

'In a manner of speaking, yes. There's a sense of injustice here. Whatever's right or wrong about our business, what Luca is doing to you is not right, at any level.' Another intense stare at me, holding my eyes.

'So, you knight on white horse, big sword, to my rescue?'

'That's not how I see it.'

'Is that how she sees it?' I pointed to bedroom where he shared with Lucie.

'I don't think she sees anything. Let's keep it that way.'

We sat in silence while he tried again to drink his coffee.

‘So, where to now, James?’ I asked.

‘Where to indeed, James?’ The voice came from his bedroom and the woman Lucie stood in doorway in see-through of nightdress. It was very short and thin. I admired her every curve, she was certainly beautiful. For some reason I suddenly felt jealous.

‘Morning, Olga. I hope you slept well?’

I forced smile, ‘Yes, thank you. Most of time.’

‘Good. You found the coffee. Well done, sweetie.’

Then, I suddenly remembered she was helping me and I was being rude to her. ‘Would you like some?’ I asked with smile.

She waved her hand and moved to sofa, ‘Nooo thanks. Far too early for me to think about waking up my body.’ She fell onto sofa as if about to go to sleep. ‘I heard you talking and thought I’d say hello.’ She opened one eye and looked directly at James as she added, ‘I didn’t want to miss anything, sweetie.’

I leant against counter and drained my coffee. I waited for someone to speak.

Still with her eyes closed, Lucie mumbled, ‘This is awkward.’

James stood and tried to finish his coffee, but it was still too hot. ‘I’d better be going.’ He placed mug on counter and moved to go.

‘Answer the lady, James. Where to now?’ Lucie’s voice sounding sleepy.

‘I don’t know. What d’you suggest?’

Lucie let out laugh and eased off sofa in lazy and graceful movement. ‘I don’t know either, but I’m going back to bed for a few hours. Give you time to sort it out. Let me know what you need when I’m awake, sweetie. Have fun, kids. Play nice.’

She swept in to bedroom and quietly closed door. James glanced at me and shrugged.

I smiled and stood. ‘What now?’ I asked lightly.

He picked up his coffee and sat again. He was silent a few moments before saying, ‘I have a proposal, see if you like it?’

James left an hour later, my head now reeling. I had to sit and think about what he said. Needing a cigarette I went out onto balcony and smoked there. I needed drink, but only Brandy left. I sat on chair and placed bottle on table. I was very sophisticated, I used glass to drink it.

I realised air was cold and had been talking to James and Lucie in just underwear! Was that what she meant by awkward? I went back into my bedroom and found a guest dressing gown, warmer to sit outside now.

I was half asleep when I had feeling someone now next to me. Lucie now sitting, smiling at me. She was drinking coffee. I looked at my watch and realised it was nearly midday.

‘A penny for them, sweetie?’

‘Penny for what?’ I asked.

She smiled again. ‘Sorry. An old saying, you’ve probably never heard it. A penny for your thoughts, means....would you like to talk about what’s on your mind?’ I shook my head and sipped Brandy. She sipped her coffee. ‘Lovely day again?’ she smiled, staring at me over mug. I nodded and watched river. ‘James leave?’ she asked, and I nodded. ‘Say where he’s going to?’

‘Home I think. He did not say.’

‘Never does, sweetie. Highly secretive. Likes to be mysterious, don’t you think?’

I felt her watching at me. I stared at her before saying, ‘Can I trust him?’

She grinned, ‘I do. Completely. Why d’you ask?’

‘Nothing.’ I said and stubbed out my cigarette on my lighter case. I would find somewhere to get rid of that later. And the rest of them.

‘He’s dug you out of a hole already, hasn’t he?’ I nodded. ‘I helped a little too?’

I smiled. ‘You have, thank you.’

‘I’m thinking it’s about time you trusted both of us. Don’t you, sweetie?’

She was staring hard at me now and I knew she wanted to talk. I decided. ‘He said he would go to my home and make sure my family would be all right.’

‘That’s very...noble of him. Where’s your home?’

‘Hungary. Near, Budapest.’

She was thinking, what to say and not upset me. She seemed very kind like that. 'Why are your family...not all right, now?'

There was something about Lucie. She was very relaxed and gave impression she'd be the good friend, a good listener. A shoulder to cry on. She was the experienced woman of world. Which I am not.

'I spoke of Luca...?'

'Your boss, yes. What about him, sweetie?'

'He is... gangster. I think is what you call him. A hollgan.' Her mug paused before her lips. 'He has gang in my home town and they frighten... terrorise people into giving them food and money. They make people do things ... they do not want to.'

'Like you? They threaten you too?' She was leaning forward, very concerned.

'Yes. I have to obey, or my family suffer.'

'Wooooow.' She put mug down and leaned further forward. 'What sort of things do you have to....you know...do?'

I glanced at her to make sure she was not making fun of me. She was interested. I knew she would be good listener.

'I am an asset, an assassin. I shoot people for them.' Her eyes and mouth widened together.

It was few seconds before, 'You WHAT?'

'This surprises you?'

'I should say so...an assassin? Jesus Christ!'

'You think it is strange, when James is one too?'

She leaped out of chair and stood over me. 'YOU ARE KIDDING ME!'

'Why would Ikidding you? You know what he does?'

'Not a fucking clue. I thought...detective. Even that was a bit far-fetched. Are you SURE he's an....assassin?'

'Yes. He told me after I tried to kill him.'

Her face was now bright colour and her mouth would not close. When it did, 'WHAT!' was all she said.

Judging by her reaction she did not know about James being contractor. I suddenly felt guilty about letting out what must have been secret he wanted to keep. I could not back the track now.

'You tried to KILL him?'

'Yes. But I screwed up.'

'Thank Christ you did. Why did you try to kill him?'

'Luca told me to.'

Lucie took up my glass of Brandy and swallowed it in one. 'This I don't believe!'

'But it is true. I shot several times and missed him. I killed other man, but James got away. Tracked me and caught me. He should have killed me really, but he did not. Instead, he would try to help me. So, you see...I need to know if I can trust him.'

'Him? Trust him! He should be wondering if he can trust YOU. You tried to KILL HIM!'

'I did not, though. I think he was grateful for that. I am useless.'

Lucie poured another Brandy and sat down with glass. She took long drink before saying, 'You're not on drugs, are you, sweetie? Making this all up? Because I'd know if you were!' A shake of my head. She was looking at bottle of Brandy next to me and slowly she made connection. 'How much of this have you had today?'

I shrugged. 'A few glasses. Why is there no more left?'

She stared at me hard for a few seconds then quickly got up from chair and went back into sitting room. I moved over and picked up my glass, drank what was left and refilled it.

She briskly walked back onto balcony with mobile phone already dialling.

She watched me as call went through. I knew the moment person on the other end of line answered.

'James? It's me. Yeah fine...no, not fine. This...girlfriend of yours has a story to tell.....James, you there?...hello, oh you are. Yes, a story. I can't even bring myself to say it but....she says you're an assassin. You kill people for a living...'

She lost control of her face muscles and collapsed into chair. She listened for a while then phone dropped into her lap. Her other hand was holding her head.

I moved across to her and took phone and pushed glass into her hand. 'James...look I am sorry...no, I did not know. I thought you and she were...well I do not know that, but...I am sorry.'

He was not even angry. He was calm, telling me to say no more to Lucie and to put her back on phone. I handed phone to Lucie, but she waved it away and ran into one of her many bedrooms.

'Hello, James. I do not think she wants to talk to you right now. Okay, I will. See you later.'

The line went dead, and I put phone on table. I lit another cigarette and tried to decide whether I should go and talk to her. James had asked not to. So, I decided to wait.

A while later Lucie came back out. She was calmer and gave me small smile, 'Sorry, sweetie.'

'I'm one who say sorry. My big mouth.'

She moved and hugged me tightly. 'It was a bit of a shock. But...now I've had time to think about it, it all makes sense. How I have misjudged him?'

We sat down, and I stopped urge to top up glass again, Brandy had nearly gone.

She stared out across river and looked sleepy. 'He'd call me a day or two in advance to arrange a visit. He was always stressed. It must be after...what do you people call it..."a hit"?'

I shrugged. 'Many names. Project. Contract. Sanction, whatever.'

'He needed to unwind, get back to normal. I knew he had a stressful job, but never guessed.....'

She leaned on balcony rail and looked on river . 'There was a time, a few years ago now, when I was having trouble with someone called, Rico. No need for details, you can figure it out. It sounds like a similar abusive relationship - like you and Luca. I happened to mention it to James, because I was frightened Rico might turn up at any time and I wanted to forewarn James as a client. I had to warn several clients.' She looked straight at me. 'I never saw Rico again.'

I joined her at rail, 'So, you think James might have.....?' She nodded.

'It looks that way now. I feel bad about causing the death of somebody. It's like....I ordered the Contract myself and James did the job for me. Don't get me wrong, sweetie. There were times I wanted to kill Rico myself. But then, that's easy to say, isn't it?'

I put arm round her shoulder. Not sure what to do, or say, 'We all have hate and violence, given right push. But you have to look at it this way. What James does, I am sure for most part, is get rid of people like Rico.'

She frowned at me, 'But you were about to kill James. A man who we both know is a kind man. With us, anyway.'

'I have to do what I am told. I do not make judgement.'

'And you think he does? I mean... he only kills people who are not nice people?'

'I think is good guess, no?'

She nodded and stared across river. 'What he did for me with Rico, he's now attempting to do for you with Luca.'

I shook my head and rested my hand on her arm, 'No, no, no. He will not kill Luca.' This puzzled her, 'No. I asked him not to.' She nodded as if she understood. 'I want to kill Luca myself, I have earned right.'

Her mouth dropped open again, and I almost laughed. 'It is all bit much for you to take in, right?' She nodded. 'Do not worry, all will be okay. I will take care of Luca. James takes care of Luca's thugs. Then James can forget about English Mafia.'

Her eyes flew wide again, 'The WHAT?'

'I think that is what you call them. The Italy hollgans.'

'Shit in a basket!. Who the fuck are the Italy hollgans?'

'The men that ordered contract on James. They pay Luca, Luca pays me – or not.'

'Jesus Christ!' she cried, her head falling to rest on her hands.

'I have said too much again. Sorry.'

'What can of worms is this...?'

'Worms? What worms?'

'Figure of speech. Jesus! Anything else I should know?'

I shrugged. 'How would I know? I do not know what you know already. How can I know....?'

She waved hand for me to stop. 'I need to talk this through with James. I need to know what I've got myself into here.'

It was few hours later that James came. I know Lucie had called him several times and he must have just put her off. She seemed to be increasingly desperate to see him. I think it she worries about him. And herself. And me, probably.

He arrived, and I felt I was in the way and suggested I would go for walk.

‘No!’ James grunted. ‘You must stay here, no one must see you. Please always stay inside.’

‘Okay.’ I said and went out to balcony and smoked. I closed door, so they talked. Sat and watched wildlife on river and people walking along bank. For city, this was very peaceful. I like it here.

They were nearly an hour. Sometimes I heard her voice raised, but never his. I watched them through the glass and James was seated calmly while she paced or sat near him.

It must be confusing for someone that has straightforward life suddenly part of much darker and frightening side of human activity.

I know that is how I felt from day Luca arrived on our farm. He was all smiles and promises and my family were cautious as they always are with strangers.

Luca left, promising to return with offers of help with farm and money for the repair of our falling down buildings. They did return, but only with an offer for me. To work with them in London. They made it sound attractive and exciting adventure. Lots of money to be earned and it would help family.

They organised passport, which was never given to me. I said very tearful farewell to my family. Luca told them they see me every few weeks and not to worry about anything. I think English word for it is...naïve. In Hungarian they are *tajték*, I do not know how that translates. If only I was little bit more worldly then, but we are simple farming folk. What did we know about wider, wicked world outside our door?

I stubbed out cigarette on saucer I now used as an ashtray. I was angry just at thought of them controlling my family all those miles away. I felt as helpless as I’ve ever been. I needed drink, but there was none left in bottle. I did not want to disturb them to get another, so I sat and waited.

I must have fallen sleep, as glass door opening woke me up. James stood there smiling at me. ‘You okay?’ He was relaxed and calm.

I stood up and moved to him. ‘I am sorry. I just did not know she knew nothing

‘It’s okay. She’d have to know sometime. And now’s as good a time as any.’

I hugged him. At first he was hesitant, then he put his arms around me and squeezed. More recently I am not an easily emotional woman. I felt right then, that he was not an emotional man. I ended hug and smiled at him. ‘How is she?’

He looked back into room, ‘She’s very concerned.’

‘I thought so.’

‘She thinks she hasn’t enough vodka for you. So, she’s just going shopping for more.’ I hoped he was joking and his eyes showed he was.

I laughed out loud, ‘So, she is okay with everything?’

‘I think so. A shock, that’s all. It’s not your fault, Olga. Really it isn’t. You weren’t to know. Sit down. We need to talk.’

I felt moment of concern. He was serious, and I wondered they might have discussed what to do with me. Was he about to tell me I had to leave? A flash of panic, but his eyes had a softness that calmed me.

Was I now trusting this total stranger that came into my life few hours ago? Was I to trust him with my life? I realised I had no choice. I was totally in his hands now and hoped I had not swapped one Luca for another.

‘What?’ I said with my breath held in a bait.

‘Global view first, shall we? I’m retiring, so I tell my Contractor, Milo, the man you shot, and he tells all his clients – including Mario Arzano and Primo Vespa – I told you about them after I saw Luca, remember?’ I nodded. ‘These two are dangerous to both of us, understand?’

I wanted to say something, but he held up his hand and carried on talking. ‘It seems they contracted Luca to get me eliminated, and you got the job. Thankfully, botched it....’

‘Botched?’

‘Did me a favour.’

‘Ohhh, okay.’ He gently took hold of my hand. Few men had ever done that.

‘Now, through Luca they’re going to be told I’m not retiring and you’re dead. Luca will take the place of Milo with me as his main asset. So...Luca wants me to work for him and train up your brother to replace you...’

I pulled my hand away. 'Kibaszott! And you will do this?'

He smiled as he shook his head, 'No of course not. But it gives us a good opportunity to use Luca's plans to help us out.'

'How?'

'As I see it, we need to break Luca's hold over you. That's the threat to your family, right?' I nodded. 'So, he wants me to train Henrik...so I will. I'll get Luca to provide the resources to get me over there, find the weaponry and ammo for me to train Henrik and bring him back. When he's ready to take over your job. Only I won't be bringing Henrik here.'

I was shaking my head. I did not like this idea. 'Luca no fool. He will not trust you.'

'Of course, he won't, that's why this will work. His henchmen....'

'What is henchmen?'

'Goons, thugs, gang, you know?' I nodded.

'Hollgan. Yes, I know.'

He clearly didn't want me interrupting. 'His hollgans will be watching me all the time. That's where I want them, right next to me. Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer.'

'I do not understand.'

'You can't hit a target you can't see.'

'This I accept. You...going to kill them?'

He nodded. 'No other way.'

'But Luca, what will he do?' He held my hand again.

'That's where you come in.' I held my breath.

'You get to kill him.'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN - THE MAGICIAN

I lay on my bed considering everything.

What had I missed? Where are the danger points, the choke points? What's can go wrong – apart from everything that is? This was the first time I'd gone into a project without full reconnaissance, complete info, and an exit strategy.

I'd nothing better to do as I'd retired, at least I thought so. But should I risk my freedom and life of retirement luxury for a woman I'd only known for 24 hours? Sentimental I'm not, but her plight struck a chord in me. A sense of injustice by people who took justice into their own hands. There must be irony in there somewhere.

I relied on Luca for just one thing, to betray me. When and where yet unknown. If I convinced him everything was to his profit, I felt assured the hammer wouldn't fall from him for a while. Allowing me to execute a clean solution for all my recent troubles.

Mario Arzano and Primo Vespa were a separate complication, Luca might be helpful there. Once again he'd have to be convinced if the two Italians let me live, they'd all benefit. A concession to work for them all, should help. I'd no intention of following that through, of course. I needed them off my back until I got everything resolved. As I lay close to sleep it seemed the only feasible exit strategy.

I assured myself I am retired, definitely, but needed to keep that quiet. I didn't feel retired as I was planning the largest project I'd ever undertaken. Am I an idiot, or what?

Lucie's not a problem. She's a practical girl, cynicism fuelled her working week, but this business with Olga and I had thrown her completely. I didn't know why. I would have to understand her better. She'd be okay.

I'd a long talk with Lucie and satisfied her there'd be no more nasty surprises. At least I hoped not - if everything went to plan. I need to arrange for the eventuality that if it did go pear-shaped; she needs protecting from the repercussions. I needed to think about that.

Olga's an unknown. I'm sure she's cool under pressure when doing her job, but that carried with it a detachment of emotion. She's capable of not over-analysing her targets, or questioning why they had to be eliminated.

I'd never made a move until I knew the target's a viable case for elimination. All she cares about was the safety of her family. Luca has a lot

to answer for. She's desperate to be the one to pull the trigger on him, but that presents another problem.

Timings on the two separate stages of action were critical. If I eliminated the goons too early, Luca would go underground and still be potentially dangerous. I'd be a large target on many asset's agenda.

If Luca was hit too early, his goons might take revenge on Olga's family, with me in the middle. A recipe for failure. The two events had to be synchronised. That meant that she'd have to undertake the hit on Luca by herself. I'd help her plan, but the action had to be her own work. Was she capable, with emotion now involved?

Much detail needed to be examined, but my over-tired mind slipped away in a haze of sleep.

A day later I was on the flight to Budapest.

Luca was unhappy with the conditions I imposed. But as I explained carefully to him over the phone, he's responsible for me being out of work, by sending a poor asset who'd killed my client. I was out of pocket and he owed me. This Hungarian thing was a menial task for someone of my potential and I clarified - that after this I demanded well paid wet work, something for which The Magician was famed. Something to keep me from retiring.

We'd met in a Sainsbury's car park the evening before my flight. I wore the same disguise as I'd used when first meeting him after the Milo incident. He looked edgy and had every right to be. I wanted him alone, and I took great pains to make sure none of his thugs had followed him there.

It agitated him why I was so late, but checking out the neighbourhood took longer than I expected. I won't use this car park again for meetings, or any venue - if I'm allowed to retire!

He'd the attitude of a boss talking to a subordinate. He told me what I'd do and a timescale. I listened and responded a few times. When he'd reached a natural pause, I grasped his arm and ambled along a row of cars, 'Walk with me, here.'

This was perhaps the last time I would see the slime ball and needed to make sure he knew with whom he was dealing. I wanted no problems in the next week, no backstabbing and no misunderstanding of the consequences if he crossed me.

I told him of my travel requirements and the rifle I wanted his men to source for me. I needed lots of ammunition; this Henrik might not be a natural marksman.

It'd take as long as it takes, and I'd need transportation for him and me to get back into the UK. I proposed a non-descript car and a fake passport for Henrik, all being arranged while I was in Budapest. We'd drive to England staying in cheap motels arousing no scrutiny, arriving in on the Dover ferry. Luca's staff to arrange all that.

He blustered as I continued, 'The problem we have, Luca, is you're not seeing the possibilities here. Once we get Henrik up to speed, I'll take him with me on operations, making him more professional. He'd even take over from me, when I do decide to retire. Say...ten years, or so. He'll be cheap labour – more profit for you. Like that Olga woman, but definitely more profitable. She was useless, but you know that, don't you?' He shrugged, thinking over what I'd said. 'Have you spoken to Mario and Primo yet?'

His eyes shifted around him, the sign of a lie about to be told. 'Yes. They're all good with everything, you're off the hook. In fact, they've a few projects for when you get back.'

I hugged his arm closer, 'I'm glad to hear that. That was worrying me to distraction. Now that's cleared up, I can get out to Hungary. They know I'm coming, your men out there?'

He nodded and smiled. 'I told them the legendary Magician was coming out, and they were excited.'

'I bet.' They've never heard of me, probably don't know where England is on the map. 'I'll need their help to get things sorted. Are the family going to be a problem?'

'Nah. For years we've had them on a tight leash, but it's best they don't know Olga's gone. They might get a bit uptight about that.'

'I'm sure they would.'

'Where is she, by the way? The body, I mean?' He was mouthing the question.

'I never give away my secrets. A magician never reveals his tricks. Somewhere only I can find her if, I ever need to.' I held the stare to emphasise the point and smiled. 'Anything else?' I asked.

He shook his head, so I stopped walking and released his arm. 'I'll see you when I get back. I'll be in touch.'

He couldn't make up his mind whether to try to shake my hand, or wave me goodbye. Before he decided a soft bang sounded and smoke poured from the pocket of his jacket. He flapped his hands trying to put out the perceived fire and hurriedly took off the jacket and threw it on the ground. The mist was billowing everywhere.

When he searched around, I'd gone.

I travelled in Business Class on a Lufthansa direct flight to Budapest. I've never liked working abroad, it limits the scope for flexibility and limits my ability to escape cleanly, and I don't speak any other language, I'm just not that clever, so I limit my time aboard to holidays. Haven't had one for years.

But when I'm working, I'm always in disguise. I use the old faithful's such as spectacles, shoe lifts and a wig. If spotted, the wig is not suspicious. People wear wigs for many reasons these days, but a fat suit, or padded cheeks are a bit of a giveaway.

I only use one of three travelling identities when going abroad. Not much of a disguise for travelling, but you always have to consider these glitches if you're ever held at customs. Random stop and searches are increasing because of terrorist threats.

Appear as ordinary as possible, so people's eyes will slide off you as you pass. Take the route of least suspicious behaviour when travelling abroad.

The sets – which include fake passports, driving licence, library card, travel permits and all that kind of material - match my visual appearance and so the chances of getting caught are slim. I'd prefer them to be zero, but that's just me. Err on the side of caution, or in my case, over-caution.

The seat was comfortable for the four-hour flight. I ate a light meal and drank only water. I slept, or pretended sleep for most of the way, no one bothers to talk to a sleeping traveller. Nor remember them very well.

When we landed, our cabin disembarked first, and I soon found the baggage claim and waited. My single black, anonymous bag came up and went through customs without any problem.

I took a cab to my hotel, the Corinthia on the Erzsébet Körút. The room was appropriately furnished and comfortable, with a nice view of the tall buildings that formed the wide street. As I looked out of my window, the traffic was busy and the electric trams trundled down the centre of the road with a clatter that was very distinctive.

I stood and absorbed the atmosphere of the city before unpacking my few things and lay on the bed to think awhile.

With the aid of my best friend Google I'd researched the shops I needed, all within walking distance of this hotel. That's why I'd chosen the Corinthia.

It was early afternoon and soon I'd be doing my specialist shopping. Then, a good night's sleep, perhaps my last for a while. Tomorrow, at ten, Luca's men should be here to pick me up and take me to Herceghalom. That's when the fun would start.

I thought of Olga and Lucie sharing that flat in these tense times and wondered how they were managing. They'd enough advice from me to help them through the next few days, they'd survive.

Both capable women, but both out of their depth at the moment. I wished I was there with them to help, but I couldn't be in two places at the same time.

Not even The Magician is able to do that.

The hotel had class and overall the food excellent. It should be, it was a five star and gave Luca a heart attack when he heard the rates. I ate a hearty breakfast, then sat in the lounge and read the Telegraph, delivered to my room earlier. I was packed and ready to go at nine-thirty. I'm always early.

My disguise now consisted of a fat suit, wig, cheek extensions, the same as I'd used twice for Luca. Just in case he'd described me to his goons.

A very accommodating theatrical supply store in Budapest took over two hours to put together my specific requirements. It cost 200,000 Forints, around £600. Although everything's priced in Euros, there's still the urge in Hungary to only take their national money, the Forint. I suppose you can't blame them. The history of the Euro doesn't inspire confidence anywhere in Europe. This was coming out of my pocket, not Luca's. I didn't want him to know what I'd prepared.

At ten-thirty a young man walked into the hotel lobby. He glanced at me twice before realising I was the person he was supposed to meet. Luca's description of me good enough for the goon to recognise me. He had a stern expression as he glared at me.

He had the presence of an impoverished farmer. Baggy corduroy trousers, which I hesitate to call brown, or green. The chequered shirt made of a heavy material with worn collars and cuffs. His face unshaven, with a drooping and unkempt moustache. The eyes dark, and the sullen expression capped off by a down-turned mouth.

He was slight framed, but getting a beer-belly, which stretched the waistline of his trousers. This was clinched with a broad, brown leather belt, cracked in places due to age and wear. He appeared a scruff.

He stood over me and I remained silent, waiting for him to make the first move. I needed to show these people who will be boss for a while.

‘Luca?’ he said in a thick accent.

Smiling, I shook my head. ‘No, sorry.’ I continued to read the newspaper.

‘No! You Luca. English paper. You from Luca.’ He pointed dramatically at the newspaper.

Another smile, ‘Ahhh. You mean AM I from Luca? Yes. You’re late.’ I held his eyes and watched the thought processes creep across his face.

‘Come now.’ was all he achieved and walked away.

I remained seated and waited.

He nearly reached the revolving doors before he realised I wasn’t behind him. Then he stopped with a puzzled expression on his face and waved me over to him, I waved him over. The stand-off lasted maybe thirty seconds. Unwillingly he came back towards me. He stopped ten feet away and waved again.

‘You come now. We late.’

I folded the newspaper and placed it on top of my case beside my seat. ‘No. YOU’RE late. My bag.’ I pointed to the case and remained seated. He took several seconds to understand what I meant. Several more to decide if he’d lift it. When he did, he snatched it and hurried away. I picked up the newspaper that had slipped off onto the floor. I followed deliberately slowly.

He went through the revolving doors and I strolled into the street. Alert, my eyes were everywhere. The area was bustling with people and traffic. Too much activity for me to isolate danger. There was an ancient and battered Volvo V70 estate car parked at the curb.

Corduroy boy had opened the rear door and thrown in my bag. He left the door open for me while he got into the passenger door. I wasn’t getting a decent view of the driver yet, but after a final scan of the street I eased into the car.

It smelled of goats and hay. I wound down the window, and it stuck a few inches from the top. The car lurched forward, and it threw me backwards and I toppled sideways onto my case.

The driver hauled the wheel round and sped up into the busy traffic. He weaved his way unnecessarily through the city streets until he found the road that lead out to the west.

We were on the M7, heading towards Budaörs. He soon found the M1 passing Biatorbágy in the Pest Country. What an apt name for these local bandits.

I couldn't see the driver's eyes because the rear-view mirror was hanging at an angle, meaning he wasn't able to see the road behind him either. He was bald, by design or not, I couldn't tell. A thin stubbly beard below a moustache that was pale ginger. A round head and piggy eyes. He sometimes twisted around to catch a sight of me.

As he fought through the gears, they occasionally grated. Whether that was his driving, or the car was long overdue for a service, or the scrap heap.

They made the whole journey in silence. Okay by me as I was studying the route for my return. I'd memorised the roads from Google Earth earlier and knew where we should be going. I didn't want to find myself taken to a quiet location to be eliminated, satisfying both the Italians and perhaps Luca. So far the driver was following the expected route, if a little recklessly.

He drove maniacally and less than an hour later we pulled into an old farmstead in Herceghalom. We turned off a road, pitted with potholes onto a track that was dry ruts, which grounded the Volvo on every bump. Still, he didn't slow down too much. The dusty path led to an area that had a few buildings and outhouses. Surrounding the homestead were fields, which had been recently ploughed.

In the distance, woodlands and hills to the far south. To the north traffic moving on a road that followed a ridge. That'd be the M1, my exit at some point. Not far to reach a fast road and head to the airport.

The car stopped in a cloud of dust. I got out and grabbed my case and shut the door. Both the Hungarians were inside the two-storey main house. It was built of wood, probably by the family, not a carpenter amongst them. It looked old, I hoped it wouldn't collapse around me.

Corduroy boy had opened the door and strode in as if he owned the place. Baldy followed without a rearward glance. I carried my case, too distracted to fight a lost cause and joined them in the main farmhouse.

Inside, a large living area constructed of rough wood. Where parts had been well used, now were worn to a polish, showing glowing rich colours. The roof just slats of wood resting on huge beams, hacked from trees into a rough square section. While the floor was wooden and worn smooth, with a few threadbare rugs to soften the rough effect. A fireplace dominated the

room, constructed of rough stones and a blackened wooden beam forming a mantelpiece.

The windows handmade, and the glass tainted and unclean. Most of the furniture old and hand-me-downs and rescued recycling. There were two large sofas, a few soft and hard chairs. A rough dining table took up one wall.

A flight of narrow stairs led up to a narrow balcony that ran around the whole room. Several doors lead off and I assumed these were the bedrooms. Downstairs had two doors leading off opposite the large main door, which I closed behind me.

Corduroy boy was sitting on the sofa with his feet on the table and Baldy had gone into what looked like a kitchen. There was no one else to be seen.

I glanced around and nodded. 'Like what you've done with the place.'

Again, the confusion on Corduroy's face. He pointed upstairs to a room, two doors away from the top of the stairs. 'Bedroom.'

With a nod, I pointed to my case. 'Carry.'

He took a few moments to understand. then looked away. I shrugged and picked up my case and headed towards the stairway. I noticed the smirk on his face as I passed the rear of the sofa he was monopolising.

It shocked him when I released my case with a thud and wrapped my arm around his throat from behind and tightened. He gasped, gagging for air. I held the tension and just waited. His arms flapped, and he tapped my arm urgently to release him. I leant back so his hands wouldn't reach my face and gave him a few more seconds before letting go. He coughed and choked as he tried to get his breath back.

By the time he was able to stand up and think about confronting me, I was waiting beside him with the case in my hand. I put it at his feet and said, 'Carry.' I pointed up the stairs, 'Bedroom.'

Again, that misunderstanding stare. This man was rarely confronted in his own habitat, he didn't know how to react. His boss was Luca, and Luca had sent me. I needed to establish the pecking order early.

'Now!' I hissed with menace. I wasn't sure how much English he understood, or able to speak. So, I pointed dramatically towards the bedroom again.

His thought processes were slow, but he obeyed this time. He'd get his revenge later, if the occasion arose. With a surly glare he took the case and stomped up the stairs.

I noticed him taking a mobile phone from his deep trouser pockets. He hurried into the bedroom and shut the door behind him. It was going to be interesting to see his reaction after he'd spoken to Luca.

I moved into the kitchen where Baldy was drinking from a bottle of beer. I nodded to him and he presented his broad back and got another from the fridge. For a moment I thought he was going to give it to me, but he stared at me as he brushed past into the living area.

The kitchen was surprisingly large. All the cabinets made from the same rough wood but now worn smooth with use. All working surfaces fashioned from a dull coloured polished stone and looked clean and tidy. No washing machines or dishwashers here. There'd be an outhouse for that. A flagstone floor was heavily cracked, and a single bulb hung from the ceiling. I assumed that was the best lighting in the whole place. A slow sweep showed little else.

Although the house appeared well kept it had a smell of decay in there. Something was wasting away. Not organic, just people's lives.

A door led out to a side yard, and I stepped out into the fresh air. Outside the neatly paved area had a lean-to roof to keep off the weather. Here a rusty hand-turned washing machine rotted alongside a metal sink. Old plumbing and old taps told the story of poverty and making-do.

There was a tall cupboard two metres away from the canopy, which I assumed was the original toilet. Hanging on one side was a tin bath. Another original washing facility shared by the whole family.

The view overlooked the fields and woods that ramped up to the hills in the distance. It was a nice view, but no place to live.

This was once Olga's home.

I wandered around the front of the house and peered into the Volvo. Glancing at the front door to see it still shut, I opened the driver's door and sat in the driver's seat.

The seat had lost its padding, and I was wallowing without support. There were no seatbelts, and they'd left the key in the ignition. Another glance at the front door.

I opened the glove compartment and rummaged through the debris. Bits of old paper, sweets heated by the sun to a melted mass. Nothing of import. I pulled down the sun visors and took a last check around before closing the door quietly. Hitching my body suit into its rightful place I checked my beard and wig before strolling back towards the house.

My mobile rang. It was one of many and I assigned this one to this Luca project. Only he should call on it, but Lucie and Olga knew they should call me in an emergency.

'Luca, nice of you to call' I remembered to use the accent I'd used before with him. I hadn't bothered to change my voice for the local boys. I suspect they wouldn't notice, anyway.

'I've had a call from András, he's not happy with you. What're you doing there? You're supposed to focus on Henrik. What's happening?'

'A misunderstanding, Luca. They want to treat me like shit and I won't let them. Any more of that behaviour and I leave, straight away. They're either helping me, or not. What's it to be, Luca?' I was casually kicking at the dirt with my now dusty shoes.

There was silence at the other end. Finally, 'They're simple country folk, my friend. You must...be patient...'

'I don't think we've time to be patient. I need to get this over with and get back as soon as possible to the real world. What a dump this place is!'

'It's the country. Everything moves slower in Hungary. In the countryside, doubly slow. Patience is a must, Mr Magician.'

I straightened up determined, aware they might be watching me. 'Well, ...you've had my warning. You know my terms. They're not negotiable into Hungarian agricultural compromises. Get that across to them and quickly, or I'll not stay.' I ended his call.

Walking into the house I ignored Baldy, who was talking to an animated András. As I entered, there was silence, and they glared at me. I acknowledged them and moved to where Baldy was sitting. He'd just finished the first beer, and the opened second bottle was on the table in front of him. I smiled as I picked it up and took a long pull. I don't enjoy beer, I was satisfied to see the anger on his face. He stood up hastily, but András restrained him with a warning glare. András's mobile rang breaking the tension.

I left them to it and drifted up to my bedroom. I heard the confused conversation below in a language I didn't understand. But I recognised the tone of András voice as it shifted from anger to agreement. I closed the door and put my case on the bed from the corner where András had thrown it.

I took out the few items of clothes I'd brought with me. They were the size to accommodate the fat suit. I'd need several changes of clothes while I was here and needed to stay in the disguise the whole time. That might be a problem. This was a more undercover situation than a straight sanction. The sooner this project was over, the better.

I had more items in my scruffy case I'd bought in Budapest, so I locked the case and put it in the small wooden wardrobe. They'd have to rip it open to search it and I'd know they'd done it. I was confident they wouldn't do that, at least unless Luca told them too.

The view was relaxing from the window. The rolling fields, the hills in the distance, the undulating ground covered by the forest and woodlands. I guessed that's where all the hunting took place. There Olga learned to shoot, same too for Henrik.

I glanced around the room. I tried to decide if it was a guest room, or perhaps Olga's? Bare and functional, it had the same ceiling, wall, floors and window as the other rooms. It contained a small double bed, a minimal dresser and a chair. Nothing else. If this WAS Olga's old room, the family did not expect her to come back.

That made me melancholy, but I assumed empty because it was now a guest room and I'm the expected guest. But where were the family? Where was Henrik? How much did he know of the plan to make him into a contractor like his sister? I'd have to wait for those answers.

Be patient, as Luca suggested. It was a start.

Laying on the bed I felt its softness surround me. I prefer a harder bed, but this was what I'd get for the duration. It was prudent to stay out of the Chuckle Brothers' way until they got their own act together and wait for someone to arrive who were of more interest. It was around five I heard voices in the living room, somebody new had arrived.

I got off the bed and checked my appearance in the corroded mirror screwed to the wall; I appeared okay. Taking a deep breath, I knew it was time to meet the family. Opening the door which creaked loudly, I walked out to the landing and stood staring into the living room.

Below were four people, staring up at me in silence. András and Baldy were standing in the centre of the room, they'd been doing the talking. Standing near the fireplace a man who looked in his sixties and seated on a chair a woman who was similar in age.

The old man was lean and had a slight stoop. He held a walking stick and wore worn clothes that might have once been a suit. He was unshaved but had no real beard or moustache. His hair was receding and going grey.

The woman had piercing grey eyes that bored into me. She wore an ankle length black woollen skirt and heavy blouse in more black material.

She wore a black shawl around her shoulders, which she pulled together the moment she saw me. She too was slim, and her face tired and drawn as did the old man.

The woman had to be Olga's mother, Dorottya. She was a key player in what had to happen next.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN – DOROTTYA

András said a man coming from Luca. To be welcomed and obeyed as if he were Luca himself. My heart was ice once more. Another nail in our coffin. I prayed to Madonna and hoped this man had nothing to do with Olga. What did he want with us? András and György did not want this man here.

The room went silent as we heard his bedroom door open. The man that stood on the balcony was a surprise. He is fatter and more...older than I expected for one of Luca's English holligans.

He stared at everyone in room with a calculated stare I found disturbing. Slowly he walked down stairs and I notice faces of András and György. Hate and distrust there.

The man stood at bottom of steps and smiled at us. He had uneven teeth stained, black at sides, his beard scruffy and hair unwashed. He was like a csavargó...tramp; I think in American. What was this man doing here?

'I don't speak Hungarian, but I understand you all speak a little English, yes?' His voice soft and gentle, and I understand each word he said because he not mumbles and spoke slow for me to take in.

I know a little English, Olga and I used to practice when she was here. She learned from book, I learned from her. Our dream to send her away to America, get good life away from daily hardship farming in Pest Country.

'Welcome to Herceghalom and our humble home. I'm Dorottya, this is László.' I pointed to my husband who was ill at ease. He nodded to the stranger then move to sit down.

He did so stiffly, as stranger spoke, 'Nice to meet you. Please call me, Smith.'

András and György spoke little American. It was good, that we were having conversation, without them knowing anything. I thought I try to get off on good footing rather than be negative.

'Someone has offered you something to drink or eat?' I looked hard at András.

Smith waved a hand and smiled. He looked at György, 'No thanks. He gave me a beer.'

I smiled and thought what to say next. 'Your room comfortable?'

'Very nice, yes. Thank you.'

'Please sit.' I pointed to second of more comfortable of chairs, László took the best.

He nodded his thanks and sat down. An awkward silence. László just stared at Smith, with no emotion in his face. I was unsure if he was angry, sad, or mad. I felt I had to break into the ice.

'So...Luca sent you, yes?'

He nodded, 'Luca sent me, yes.'

'How can we...help you?' I asked, dreading answer.

'I'd like to have a word with Henrik. Is he here?'

My heart went cold. Why Henrik? 'No. He's out in fields. He'll be in soon. What do you want....what is it he...?'

He waved a hand to halt me. 'Don't worry, Madam Dorottya, just business. I've got a proposal to put to him, which I'm sure he'll be willing to agree to.' This did not reassure me.

I sat on a chair and stared at floor, I did not know what else to do or say. This man Smith was running show now.

András and György were standing and shuffling their feet, they never took eyes off Smith. Our visitor seemed to make up mind, and he stood up, 'Well, a little stroll, I think. Please excuse me.'

I nodded, Luca's men watching at each other thinking what was being said. Smith walked towards front door and András motioned György to follow him.

As he opened door Smith stood as if he had a thought. 'Perhaps Madam Dorottya, you might like to take a walk with me?' His eyes held mine, and I thought it an order, not suggestion. What was I to do? I nodded and stood. He held door open for me and György pushed past me and went out first.

Did I catch a glance of anger in Smith's eye with that rudeness? He did not change smile on his face as he waved me to leave next.

The tension better once out in fresh air. It was cooler now and sun was setting over forest, making its usual beautiful sunset. Smith gazed in silence for many moments.

György stood to one side and waited, he was watching Smith and chewing what I think was gum. You never knew with György, he was unstable, he took drugs. He tried to hide it from others, but I am sure they knew and hid it from Luca.

György was vital to them, he was their muscle. No one else would get into a fight or put pressure on weaker people. György did not hesitate.

When Luca first came to farm, György was through door first. We were friendly and welcoming, but when we realised these were nothing but bandits, we tried to make them leave.

György laid László out cold with one blow. László was younger then and a vital man. He is just a shadow of a man now. I see way he looks at György and see hate and fear behind those eyes.

Both my sons Henrik and younger boy, Tamas, tried to stop him. They too ended up on floor. I can still see the blood stains near fireplace now.

Smith glared at György, 'I would like a quiet word with Madam Dorottya.'

He took my arm, and we stepped down onto dirt track we call a main road, György followed. Smith paused and glared at György and put his hand up in a stop sign. György shook his head and spoke rapidly.

'What did he say, madam?'

I shrugged, 'He called you a lot of names and said you can go and ...do something not nice to yourself.'

Smith nodded and took out mobile phone. He left me alone as he walked out of earshot and spoke quietly and calmly into the phone. He nodded and sometimes shook his head. After a while he came over to György and handed him phone. György had his usual puzzled face as he took the phone. György said his name and his eyes showed he knew who was at other end of line.

I tried to watch both faces at same time. Smith calm and relaxed, never taking his eyes off György. György's face growing darker and every time he tried to say something, the speaker on other end would shout at him.

With unhappy face György handed phone back to Smith, who again took my arm, and we walked around house. György let us move a little distance away before he followed. We were now out of earshot and Smith lowered his voice.

'I understand, madam, that you're a remarkable and trustworthy woman?'

It shocked me. 'What?'

He stared straight ahead, ignoring slow walking György behind. 'Olga said you were the one I should talk to first.'

'Olga? My Olga? What.....'

He pursed his lips to silence me. I would not be silenced, but he was talking before I got my thoughts together. 'I've a message from Olga and she asks you to trust me fully. I know....at this moment it's difficult, but I need to talk to you and I don't think Baldy behind will give us much time.'

I did not know what to think. He used such fancy words, what is a Baldy? Remarkable and trustworthy? I wasn't getting all of them. Was he really in touch with Olga? So many questions I wanted to ask.

'Olga is safe, but maybe not for long. Can you understand what I'm saying? If Baldy there can hear I'm hoping long English words might be a problem. Do you understand?'

I did not. Olga in more danger?

'Okay, I'm here because of Olga, but these holligans think I'm here from Luca. We must not let them know differently. Understand?'

Now I am confused. I knew what he said but didn't believe it. All I said was, 'Olga? My Olga....'

'She's fine. Better than ever. I'll let you talk to her as soon as we can get privacy, I'm working on that. Just nod your head and look around, like you're not interested in what I'm saying. Slowly and gently.'

I tried my best, but my mind was in a forgószél ... whirlwind.

'You must act normally. Don't let... András, or György, suspect things have changed for you. Be distant towards me, but not abusive. That might tempt them to correct your behaviour. Understand?'

I nodded as I looked over field. The sun had almost gone now, and it was getting dark. We were halfway around house, György was still twenty metres behind and not hearing what we said. This Smith was óvatos cautious.

'Yes. Who are you?' I whispered.

He let go my arm and walking a little way from me. I thought it wasthe play acting. To pretend the private talk over. I heard his voice, soft, he spoke clearly and slowly.

'I'm a friend of your daughter. I'm here to help you. My actions over the next few days may not appear like that. You must behave and react as normal. I will explain further when we can have a longer private chat. Okay?'

I muttered a breathless, 'Yes.' I wanted to thank him, but should I trust this man? Was this another of tricky Luca's mind games with us? I must only wait to see.

We walked in silence until we were at the front door again. György had slowly caught us up, so we spoke little. Just meaningless talk while I tried to make sense of new situation.

Was this my prayers being answered at last? Is this real? I must not react, he said so; I understood why. Can I tell my family? I thought not. Not yet. They would give away, they were not actors. They had not spent years holding in pain and torment, pushed into depth of my heart. My face one of hope and calmness, but inside I was a mass of fear and felfordulás turmoil. I never show them that. I had to be strong for all of them. For Olga, wherever she is. Safe, as he had said? I prayed to Madonna she was.

‘Mamma?’

His voice surprised me. It was nearly dark now and from shadows walked my two boys. They are handsome boys, both looking like their father. Both now nearly two metres, dark, almost gypsy good looks. Black curly hair and dark eyes, high Slavic cheekbones. They get that from me. As their faces became clear in the dusk light, they were watching Smith with a puzzled face.

Henrik trying to hide the disdain. ‘Is this the man?’ Perhaps Smith wouldn’t recognise the emotion behind voice, but I did. He is son, there is nothing I do not know about him.

I smiled and tried to be relaxed. In English, I said, ‘Henrik, this is Mr Smith. He is our guest for a while. Mr Smith, Henrik and Tamas, my sons.’

Smith did not change face and shook hands with boys. They more warily than him.

‘Let’s go inside. It’s dark. Time for dinner.’ Smith said.

György moved through door, letting it swing back on Mr Smith. The boys took no notice as they knew György’s ways, but Smith hesitated as he stopped door with his hand.

For one hopeful moment, I dared to feel sorry for György.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN – HENRIK

No sleep that night, I was in confusion, shock what the man Smith had said. Mamma's reaction, a feeling of nightmare terror. Papa...well I'm not sure these days he knows anything. At least I do not think he wants to anymore. If he's waiting for the horror to end so he can wake up, he is in for the long wait.

This was a change in fortune. Would I see Olga again? I would like that. But doing what she did for Luca..... that I hate.

Smith was brief in telling what expected of me but detailed in what was expected from the rest of family. Snake András repeated we had to obey Smith who was from Luca. Smith just nodded as if they were asking for the glass of water. Once again obedience and sacrifice expected from Kobay family.

I lay awake thinking what these changes mean to mamma. Pa, well....now mostly out of it, but mamma.... Dawn came, and I got up. Today would see changes.

We ate breakfast in almost silence as our meagre dinner night before. György grabbing all nicer pieces of bacon and ends off newly baked loaf. He was such an ignorant oaf; he did not even realise what he does was so anti-social. One day.....

Smith tried to speak several times, but no one wanted to talk. Papa sat glum, sipping tea and eating little. He was looking thin and frail these days. I know it worried mamma. There was little food for any of us. I think he knew it and ate least that would save him. I hoped that somewhere in the tired brain he knew what was going on and still had hope.

I noticed mamma staring at Smith as if she expects him to do or say something. There was the tension about her I did not get. I would try to talk to her later. I needed to satisfy her I'd do as asked, not make any trouble. For Olga's sake.

Before we were all finished, András stood up and said it was time to go. Both Tamas and I stood up, but Smith continued to eat, with no concern at what happened around him. Mamma told him in English what András said.

He nodded and said, 'I know, I'm not ready yet.'

My English is not as good as mamma's and Olga's, but I can follow simple words. Mamma repeated to András what Smith had said and his eyes enlarged in anger. A flash of fear crossed mamma's face.

András moved to Smith and banged his fist on the table, making crockery and cutlery jump. Smith took the delicate sip of his tea and glared up into András's eyes.

Without taking his eyes off András he said, 'Madam Dorottya. Please tell the oaf, György, to tell this other oaf, András, that I'm not ready. When I am, we'll go. Not a moment before. The rest of you can sit and finish your breakfast too. There's not much here and it'll be a long day. Eat while you can.'

Mamma's eyes went wide, and she shaky spoke the message to György. Both holligans seemed like they were going to explode, then Smith spoke again. 'Tell György to get more food for this evening's meal and for the next few days. If I don't get my belly filled, heads will roll.'

Mamma spoke again; her eyes were less fearful. I wondered why? This was battle Smith would lose and György would end up with blood on his hands. György moved forward in the menacing way and András stepped back to let bully do his work.

Smith sat still forking meal into his mouth, but slowly took the mobile phone from his pocket and laid it on table, György's face changed. I have never seen the man puzzled. Never seen him hesitate, or back down. But the sight of phone gave him halt. Smith did not even pause, but slowly finished his food and then his tea.

Smith wiped his mouth with the paper napkin, only person at table that had one. He stood up, smiled at mamma and said to György, 'Now, I'm ready.'

Mamma interpreted and the anger on György's face was real. I expected an eruption, but none came. György stood his ground and waited for Smith to make next move.

'Can you speak English, Henrik?'

'A little.' I stammered.

'Good. We need not bother Madam to go with us as an interpreter, in the dreary work we must tackle. Please ask our angry guards here if they have everything ready that Luca and I wanted?' I repeated him as much as I understood, at least I hoped I did. I think I knew main part.

András nodded and moved to door. Smith followed and waved me to follow him. I did with György following behind, huffing. Sometime today he would want to take his anger out on somebody, I hoped it was not me. I wish I knew trick with mobile phone.

I do not know what went on today. I did not know how I tell it to mamma, other than to say each event and see if she made sense out of it.

It was with more than heavy heart I tramped towards my beloved woods with stranger and offish György and András. My memories of this place were all nice, at least before hollgans came. My father taught his children how to hunt and fish up here, we were lords of our own manor.

If we were not working farm, we were hunting food for table. Kobay's are good shots, but I suppose, now that Olga's gone – I am best. Luca must think that too. He sent the stranger and now this a new era of me being trained as ...I do not know what to call it... orgyilkos ...assassin, is too emotive a word. Killer bérlésKiller for hire, is too barbaric. Hollgan is nearer, but that would put me in a class of György – I cannot allow that.

The rifle András was carrying was an old army Mosin Nagant, Model 1948, Infantry Rifle Gyalogsági Puska. Made in Budapest. My father had one similar when he fought in army. I do not know where András got it from, but hoped not from father's secret collection.

My father was an armourer in army and he made gun from scraps or fix any weapon someone broke. We have good workshop in one of outhouses, but father's collection of weapons hidden well. The hollgans have not found them yet. We hope they never will.

András carried the piece under his arm, pointing at ground. I assume it not loaded and that he would give ammunition. The hollgans never let us have weapons to use while we were alone. They had our hunting guns locked in safe in house and they held key.

When we hunted, they were there too. I suppose they were fearful we would rebel against their rule and shoot them. The thought had crossed our minds, several times. But we always thought of Olga's safety, making us behave as told. It was their master plan.

György trailed behind, as he always does, chewing on something with glazed expression in his eyes. You can never tell what that thug is thinking, but violence is never far away from thoughts.

The slight rise led us into woods and soon trees surrounded us, and noises of forest grew louder. It was cooler in the trees. As we moved slowly forward, little pools of silence followed us as animals and insects stilled in our presence. We moved forward to clearing that was two hundred metres into trees.

We entered the clearing and light brightened. Although sun not high yet, day was sunny and fresh. Any other time I am happy to be here, but today, my heart felt heavy.

György quickly sat with his back against tree and put something else in his mouth to chew. His flat cap slipped over his eyes as if he would sleep. But I knew he was still staring at us like the hawk, waiting to pounce on its prey.

András handed me the gun as if it were the loaf of bread. His face one large grin, saying now we get you to do something useful for us at last. I let my eyes fix on his, there was a flicker of fear. I hoped it was fear. One day I wanted that man at the end of my rifle and wanted to see the real fear in those eyes.

For next half-hour, Smith just taught me on how to hold rifle, breath control and how to “visualise” target. How to predict target’s next move and how to track without blinking and losing pace. How to be beteg....patient. The first chance of shot is not always the best time it should be taken.

I found his advice helpful and right - if hunting deer. But to shoot human, I was not sure I can do that yet. If ever at all.

We took break and sipped water. György was almost asleep by tree and András crouched beside him eating sandwich he had made mamma make for him earlier. No food for anyone else.

Smith motioned me to other edge of clearing, so we were facing hooligans. András become aware as we were walking out of hearing from him. He rose to his feet and Smith stopped.

Smith took from his pocket six rounds of ammo and gave them to me. I loaded rifle and ready to give show of my skill. It startled me when I heard very quiet voice speak and realised it was Smith whispering to me. ‘Without taking aim, and as if by accident, can you put a shot above their heads? Do not look at me, or answer. Just do it easily as if it went off by accident. Then look nervous and surprised afterwards. Now!’

While trying not to look, I raised barrel in air and squeezed trigger. The bang loud and echoed through woods. Leaves rustled, and bits fell onto heads of two men at other edge of clearing. András ducked and György tried to stand up quickly and nearly fell. I heard them cursing and András glared at me.

Smith took hold of barrel and carefully showed me once again new stance he chose to take up for practice shooting. The two hollgans realised things were back in control and they stepped much further back to avoid similar risk of being shot.

Smith held gun as if he still tried to teach me his methods. He used hand gestures and pointed. But he was talking quietly as he handled the rifle. ‘Okay, now they’re out of hearing I need information from you.’ I looked at him and opened my mouth to speak, but he carried on. ‘Do not look at

me. Turn your head away from them and answer briefly and quietly the questions. Understand?' I nodded. 'Good.'

He pushed rifle to my shoulder, 'Aim and shoot. At anything. Take your time.' I did as he said. 'How many holligans are there altogether?' Why did he want to know? 'How many?'

'Err. Four.'

'Only four?'

'That I have seen.' Why the questions?

'Where are the other two?'

'There are only two at time, they take it in turns.'

'When are the other two due to change shifts? Fire.' He kept a sideways glance at the two at the edge of the clearing. I fired, and he mimed desperation at poor shoot. He went through motions of showing me how to hold rifle again and breathe as he spoke. 'When?'

'Every week they change. Saturday they will change again.'

'Tomorrow?'

'Yes.'

'Do they always live in the main house?' Another shaking my arm holding the rifle.

'Yes. They have taken two of best bedrooms.'

'Fire again.' I did. 'Where do they all come from, local village?'

'I do not know. They turn up and others go away.'

András was rising. He was careful by nature and did not trust Mr Smith. He moved closer, to hear what we said.

Smith pushed gun into my shoulder, 'I need a half-an-hour alone with your mother, this evening. Just follow my lead, however strange it might look, okay?'

I think I understood what he said, 'All right, I will try.'

'Just keep them away for half-an-hour, any way you can. Fire again. Get it somewhere near the holligans.'

'They know I can shoot. I am good hunter. This missing by long way....'

‘Just do it. Apologies for what happens next.’

I pulled barrel round and let one off. András ducked and took the step back, suspicion on his face. Smith wrenched rifle out of my hand and shoved me violently onto the ground.

‘You’re useless.’ Anger seemed to well up in him, he raised gun as if to hit me. ‘I can’t teach this moron.’ He shouted as he tramped away from clearing, heading back to house. András at once followed him while György stood waiting for me to head back to house too.

I hurried to catch up Smith. I did not want to be alone with angry György.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN – DOROTTYA

I spent most of afternoon making dinner for everyone. I did not have much, but I did my best. Potatoes and greens, some deer meat from last week, when they hunted. All I had left until tomorrow when they bring weekly groceries. We were out of wine and had only few beers left, thanks to György.

It had been the strange day. All had gone out early to teach Henrik how to be a murderer, like Olga. That made me cry, but I did not show it in front of family.

They were all back early with Smith angry. He sat in living room making phone calls and even András stayed away from him. Henrik and Tamas hurried to their rooms and György hung around kitchen watching me, with that evil half smile on face. That is when beers went.

Later Smith must have cooled down and slept on sofa. András came into kitchen and he and György were talking of troubles in woods. Both speaking quietly in case wake Smith.

They let me know it was Henrik's fault, and he was useless. They thought he had been purposely so and to be told seriousness of this Smith's visit. I tried to ignore them and kept peeling potatoes.

Sometime later we all heard a shout from family room. András looked at György who just shrugged and tipped beer bottle into his lips again. András left kitchen and next shouted for György. György carried beer and sauntered into room. I followed wiping hands on my apron.

Smith was still on sofa but pale. He was whispering hoarsely and András not understanding him. András said, 'What is he saying?'

I bent closer, 'Pills. He wants his pills. Upstairs in the bedroom. White bottle.'

György sat on chair disinterested. András took a while to figure out the man was in trouble and not move. Slowly he walked to stairs and shouted, 'Tamas. Look in Smith's bedroom. Some pills in a white bottle. Hurry!'

I heard floor creak and Tamas come out of his room. With a brief glance over bannister, he hurried into Smith's room and into small bathroom. It was long time before coming out again. 'I cannot find them!'

András cursed and ran upstairs to search for himself. György sat and watched, still sipping last of beer.

It was two minutes before András appeared over banister shouting, 'Tell him we can't find them.'

After I told him Smith said, 'Have they looked everywhere? I must have them.'

I repeated words, and it went back and forwards, yes, everywhere, sure, yes.

Smith waved his hand at them in a dismissive manner. 'I just remembered, I don't think I took them since I left England. Maybe I forgot them.'

'What is he saying?' asked András. I told him.

'I must get some more. Is there a doctor nearby?' Smith glaring at András.

I shook my head, 'Nearest get prescription medication in Budapest.'

'I must have them. Someone must go. Send Tamas. Please.' I translated again and András had to think. He came downstairs with Tamas walking behind him. Henrik was on balcony now, listening to what was taking place. The room had got tense. 'Must have them.' Smith groaned and lay back with his eyes closed.

I said to András, 'This man is ill. He needs to get medication. You go.' András looked confused.

Smith opened his eyes, 'Tamas. Get them for me.' There was a handful of money in his fingers and he was holding it to Tamas, who took it slowly and just looked at it. It was most money he had seen in years. None of us had seen any cash in years.

His voice weak, 'Tamas. Get the pills. They're Clopidogrel Oral. Can you remember that?'

Tamas shook his head and then looked at me.

I said, 'He doesn't drive Mr Smith. We have no car.'

Smith's eyes focused on András and he said with anger in his voice, 'Then András can take him. Hurry.'

András was deciding what to do. Smith tried to sit up and gave way again.

'It is a long way into Budapest, Mr Smith.' I hinted.

His eyes came back to me, ‘György can drive. He drives like a maniac. He’ll do it quicker. Why are they waiting?’ I told András what Smith said. András remained silent. Smith had mobile in his hand as he said to András, ‘Would you like my last phone call ever to be to Luca telling him how you let me die?’

I translated, and that spurred András on. He nodded to György who reluctantly put beer down. Tamas took a jacket and György took car keys from side table. With last glance at András, György headed for door.

‘Clopidogrel Oral.’ shouted Smith, as Tamas followed György. A few moments later sound of car starting and tyres on the rough path. The room was silent.

Smith relaxed as he heard them leave. I moved over to him and he smiled at me. ‘What a mess, eh?’

‘What can I do?’ I asked, now even more bewildered by this man.

‘I just need rest, peace and quiet. If you can get me up to bed. That’s all that can be done for now.’ I helped him up and scowled at András to also help. Reluctantly he came and took one of Smith’s arms. Henrik came downstairs and took other and three of them struggled upstairs.

They got him into bedroom and lay him on bed. He let out a long sigh, ‘Thank you.’ András understood that much English. He nodded and stood in doorway.

‘Just peace and quiet, tell him, Madam. Henrik, keep András company, won’t you?’

I pushed András and Henrik out and ignored the suspicion in András’s eyes. ‘Sit in living room, nothing going to happen here. What you think, I jump out window? Go. Do not disturb. I will keep him calm and try not to let him die. You want that to happen, no?’

András backed out reluctantly. I added, ‘Get on your mobile phones, tell György hurry. Go, go.’ I shut door hard.

I tried to make Smith as comfortable as possible, as we heard András’s footsteps go downstairs. So, it was with some surprise, when Smith sat up easily.

He must have seen surprise on my face as he smiled. ‘Don’t worry. Not ill at all. Subterfuge. The art of pulling off a trick is diversion. I need to talk to you.’

This took breath out of me. I sat on bed to recover.

‘Hopefully, we won’t be interrupted for a couple of hours, if Henrik can keep András downstairs. I hope he got my message on that.’

I now realised it was a strange thing for Smith to ask my son, to keep the hollgan company. Was Henrik part of this “Subterfuge”?

‘You look unwell?’ I said trying to recover my shock.

He smiled, ‘Make-up and acting, that’s all. Don’t worry, everything will be fine. Now I’ve some questions, if you’re up to it?’

I nodded, I reached for his hand and grasp it tight, ‘But first, my Olga? Is she all right?’ I held my breath for reply.

‘She’s fine. Drinks and smokes too much, but she’s fine. You’ll see her soon. As soon as we get rid of these unwelcome house guests, she’ll be home.’ He smiled, he had a nice smile.

I felt a wave of relief, which was followed by worry. Do I trust this man? Was this a Luca plot? I thought again, Luca was not smart enough to play games. And for what purpose? I had to believe in this man.

I nodded, and he questioned, ‘There are four of Luca’s men guarding you, ever all at the same time?’ His face was serious again.

I nodded. ‘Yes. They work a ...English word...shift. Shift. They take it in turns. Two one week, other two the next. Always two here.’

‘And tomorrow the next two come?’ I nodded. ‘And when they come here, tell me exactly what happens.’

‘They have a ...meeting in living room, to catch up on week, someone phone Luca to report, I am not sure. I am in kitchen all time.’

‘How long do they talk?’ His questions came rapidly, I had to think.

‘About...two hours. I give them food. They have brought wine and beer and drink it all themselves. Sometimes they get very drunk.’

‘Where’s everyone else at this time?’

The hard stare on his face was worrying me. ‘They do not like to be disturbed, so everyone out of house once food is served. I go back to kitchen. The boys working farm. My husband banished to his workshop.’

‘Just the four, in the room downstairs for about two hours, eating and getting drunk?’ I nodded. ‘What weapons do they carry?’

I shrugged. ‘I do not know. My husband is the armourer. He might know, but he is not much use to you right now. Not much use to anyone. They

used to carry rifles all time when they first came. But after all these years they do not fear we will do something.... stupid. Not with Olga....’

He reached out and held my hand. ‘Olga IS safe. I promise. Just answer these questions and you can talk to her.’ My heart missed a beat. Will he do that? ‘Okay, why are they here?’

I shrugged. ‘It was so long ago. Luca came with a few of them. They tried to move in. We resisted, but they just took Olga away. No more fight.’

‘It’s all about Olga?’ He asked quietly.

‘Yes. But....in the last few years, they use farm as part of their ...operations? Is that the word?’ He nodded. ‘They store things here, hide many things. I do not know, we are not allowed to be anywhere they don’t want us. If caught by police, well...we will take the blame.’

‘It’s a good business.’ He smiled. I looked at him sharply. ‘For them! I mean. So, what do they let you do?’

‘Work farm. We put in as much hard work as ever. But harvest and crops they take and sell for themselves. Once a year they give us seed to sow and start again.’ I was feeling the anger in my own story.

‘So, how do you live?’

‘Day to day. They bring in groceries once a week, but never enough. I have to feed them too, do their wash, and wait on them. We have no money, no phone, no car, we are like slaves.’

I must have sounded bitter and angry because he reached out and held both my hands, knowing on his pale face.

‘That’s about to change. Tomorrow. We will get back your farm. Let’s see if we can make it profitable again. And get some comfortable furniture, please?’

Was he making the vows he could not keep? Tomorrow would tell.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN – OLGA

It made me happy to get call from mamma. She sounded relieved and was talking non-stop about James and the boys, although she called him Smith. Mamma was guilty she must seem tramp to sophisticated man like him, thinking her hair a mess, clothes ragged, always an apron on. It is funny what is important to some people. She was still my worried mamma but had something to hope for at last.

She told me news about everyone and how things were depressing them with holligans increasingly dominating their lives.

I didn't want to wait to get my revenge on Luca, but that was a next worry for me. Mamma said all would be finished following morning. I was now worried if I was ready, although I had done most of what James had told me. I just wished I waited until he got here to help, but it had to all be done together.

If Luca knew something was happening at farm, he disappears, and we might never find him. I wanted him to see me one more time, up close and very personal.

I had spent some time thinking if I could kill someone if I was not being forced. All Luca's jobs...I had no choice. But if it came to pulling trigger for my own wish – can I?

So, tomorrow was day I got my wish. Something I had been hoping for eight years. Was all ready? I pulled out my notes and checked for tenth time like James had told me to.

Lucie had been wonderful, being my legs and eyes in this project. I looked at it as project, clean and clinical hit, as if I was being told by Luca. There was certain irony in that. Using Luca's ways to dispose of people, to get him disposed. Between us, we had checked his every move and those of his holligans, József and Zoltán. I do not know how, or where, I will kill him. Tomorrow? There was no time left.

I need to plan as James told me; I did not have time to do things well. I hoped to find a way on day, but I did not have an out strategy. Which James told me I needed. I did not even have an in strategy.

Well, he was not here. For years I've been doing this on my own. I can do this. Luca was man, an ordinary mortal being with one big problem, he did not know I was coming to get him – from grave.

Lucie had been growing more worried about me and my obsession with Luca. We have grown close in these few days. We understand each other and with James as common ground; we are now friends.

She has helped me a lot because I must not go outside. I think risk is small for anyone I know should see me. But if they did, the world would fall in on me. And Lucie, and James.

The night before, I went a little way to repaying debt I had to Lucie.

I do not know business she works in. No experience at all of...well, men and what they need. She tried to explain it to me, but I have two brothers and father and I see nothing in them like people she calls her "clients".

I think the older of my brothers, Henrik, had the girlfriend while ago. But since Luca took over farm, no one has been to visit us, and we have not left farm. So, I am sure she would not have waited all this time for my dumb brother Henrik.

Tamas...he is too shy to talk to girl. Father...he has mamma, who needs anyone else? Me? Never wanted to kiss a boy. There are few in local village had an interest in me. One I like...a little. My father said once, 'You should have been boy.' Not know what he meant by that. But, now I am grown woman and do work of man.

When Lucie said she had client coming around at ten, would I make myself "scarce", I did not know what that meant. She explained that she wanted me out of way. The clients should not see I was there. Something about him being new client and did not want him scared. Why would I scare anyone?

When doorbell rang I went into my room as Lucie came out of hers. She dressed in thinnest material I have ever seen. It looked like cape, but would not keep rain off, or keep her warm.

Underneath were smallest set of underwear I have ever seen. She might as well not be wearing them. I have never seen bright red underclothes before. She has perfect feminine figure and clothes fit very good on her, but I would not wear them.

She winked at me as I closed my bedroom door. I lay on bed, ready to do nothing. I heard soft voices in other room, then they went quieter. They must have gone into her special room.

I have never understood the English when they say, "He slept with her", when they mean had sex. Sleep is last thing they do, but that is what Lucie does. She sleeps with men. As I have never done it once, it is hard to know what it is like to do it every day. Sometimes more, I believe.

I heard less noise and my mind drifted towards Hungarian book I was reading. It was Sorstalansag, by Imre Kertesz. I think it means “Fateless” in English, but I still do not know what it is about yet. I have just started it again, so it is taking me a while to get back into it. My teaching is very poor. From poor farming village, schooling has to take second place to ploughs and harvest. This book is supposed to be classic, from 1929. My father gave it when I was very young. I am never further than page ninety-nine.

Sometime later I found out more noise in house. I thought it was laughter, she does that sometimes. I heard it other night when she was not sleeping with James. But note changed. I sat up and listened. It was strange sound, and I crept to door to listen.

Still not hearing anything, I opened door and peered into living room. I heard noise slightly clearer now, and it was a grunting. Her special door was shut. Should I risk walking over? I did not want to scare him if he saw me.

Then I heard something a little clearer. Now sounded like, “Help.” And voice like Lucie.

She explained that sometimes she and her clients liked to “role play”, she called it. Something about acting out game as if you were someone else. I think like some TV programmes I have seen. Do not follow at all. But was this “help” part of that? The cry came again, this time sounded more serious.

I then hear slapping sound, like hand on naughty boy’s bottom. Like Henrik had from father many times. This time cry was more in pain, I paused. Would I be doing wrong if I opened door to see if Lucie was all right? Or would doing nothing, be wrong too?

Moving nearer bedroom door seemed right thing to do. What was muffled before was now clearer. The man was grunting, like pigs’ snuffle. We have pig call Da, which made that noise. It used to, György shot it and sold it in market year ago.

Then came Lucie’s voice. This time scream, ‘Heeeelp!’

I was almost shaking as I slowly pushed down the old metal handle and opened door just a little. I saw inside. I was shocked. Lucie was face down on her bed, still wearing those silly clothings. A very large overweight man was sitting on her shoulders, trying to hit her bottom with his belt. He had handcuffed her ankles, but she was trying to kick back at man to stop him.

Man was naked and facing me, but so involved, he did not see me. What should I do? My eyes are drawn towards his upper legs. I had never seen a man naked before, not even my brothers. As a family, we were not like that.

It was then that Lucie tried to roll over, to shake man off her. If she were playing, would she be doing that? I did not think so. I opened door wide and spoke without thinking. 'Hi!'

Fat man paused and looked shocked at me. Lucie knew he had stopped and got her head out of soft bedclothes. 'Olga. Thank God. Help.'

It hit me the full force that my friend was in trouble, I stepped nearer. I was wearing my tight jeans and baggy top Lucie had lent me and I must look more like young man with my cropped blond hair than woman.

Standing with my hands on hips I stared into his eyes. 'I have killed bigger men than you, do you want to try that rough stuff on me?' Not sure if he realised what I said was threat. He thought it as challenge and struggled to get off bed. He was reaching towards me before I thought of what to do next. What I did was pure reflex.

I brought my foot up between his legs as mother had told me when I was young. 'Do not do it to your brothers, only men who want to bother you.'

It was the right place, because breath went out in whoosh and his hands held onto his crotch. He dropped to his knees with long sigh of pain. I must have kicked so hard, it bruised my shin on his pelvic bone.

Lucie was up on her knees, her eyes wide at what I'd done. She managed grin, and I went over to help her from bed. Releasing herself from handcuffs around her ankles she moved towards fancy cabinet beside her bed.

She pulled out object and waved it in man's face. 'Know what this is? It's Mace and I've used it before. They say the pain goes away quickly, but the people I've used it on say it doesn't. If you're not dressed and out of here in three, you'll know which is true. Get.'

Lucie stepped back, holding the can in front of her like a gun. I moved behind her. The man struggled back into his clothes. By the time he let go of his crotch, he was almost dressed. He was gasping and looking angrily at both of us.

'Don't you EVER try that on anybody again, David. I've all your details safely stored, if I hear of anyone having a problem with you, I'll send a friend round that'll take away any further desires you may have.' She was bending over him, threatening. 'Understood?'

He was angry, but not stupid. He nodded and picked up his remaining clothes, now in hurry to get out. Lucie slammed front door behind him and let out sigh.

'Thanks. Thank God you were here.'

'I was not sure....?'

She hugged me, and I felt contours of her body through flimsy clothing she was almost wearing. 'You did just the right thing. Thanks. Drink?'

'Well.... I've not had one today, so why not?'

She had a puzzled face. 'I've been out all day, doing your chores for you, you couldn't have paid me back in any better way. But you haven't had a drink!'

'James said I drink and smoke too much, so I thought I would stop. But it is very hard.'

She laughed and hugged me again. 'We need to talk about men. What's good, what's bad. What's right, what's wrong. Oh God, do you need to know about men!'

'Okay.' I agreed, not knowing word she said.

'I wish James was here to hear you say about the vodka and ciggies, sweetie.'

'So do I.'

And we both meant it. Both thinking what trouble would he be in right now?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN - THE MAGICIAN

I stayed in bed for the rest of the evening and until the morning.

During the evening György and Tamas returned, and they'd brought tablets that weren't Clopidogrel Oral. They were ignorant of medication and so I said they were correct. I faked taking one and told them later I felt better. I made a great point of thanking them. Tamas took the compliment with a smile, György with a puzzled scowl. I don't think anyone had ever thanked him before. It was a ploy; I needed to continue to sell the idea I'm ill, and the consequences would affect them as much as anyone.

With the thanks given and trust a little restored, I got the two boys to spell their mother in caring after me. Until the normal bedtime, around ten, being country folks.

András didn't protest too much if there was only one family member at a time shut away with me. As I explained several times to them, we're all working for Luca.

As we had the odd hour alone, I brought both the boys up to date. I emphasised the absolute need for secrecy and for them to behave as if I wasn't here. András would be quick to spot if something was unusual. György quick to do something about it.

By eleven the house became still and silent. all gone to bed. At last, I relaxed and ran through my game plan without interruption. Risky plan, but what else should I expect? I'm in a foreign land, with strangers. At least four violent men, which I had to take out, most likely without help. Should I rely on any of the family to shoot and kill someone? I didn't think so. Although a deep-seated hate for the holligans was there, would that transfer to the right cool-headed action? Again, I thought not.

No doubt now that total annihilation of the gang of holligans was necessary. One phone call and Luca would disappear. Olga would have to watch her back for the rest of her life, whether in England, or Hungary. The family would also be in perpetual danger. It had to be all four, all at once. Full hit.

This meant they should be in the open, all four at the same time. The only time that was likely to happen would be when András and György were leaving.

In our favour three aspects. Hopefully, the holligans would be a little drunk, not so quick to react. Second, there were many outhouses scattered around the main farmhouse to offer cover for the shooting. Last, they wouldn't expect it, at least I hoped they wouldn't.

I chose where to have the three shooting platforms and which boy would take each one. I'd told both sons I was to fire the first shot. If we didn't get a clean kill immediately, we were open to a running gun battle where the result might go either way.

Both the lads were supposedly good shots with a rifle, with a store of those concealed in the workshop. Their first task was to arm themselves with the correct weapons and plenty of ammunition. I'd choose a more close-range weapon, depending on what handguns they had.

My plan was for me to eliminate whoever was nearest the front door to stop them running inside, should something go wrong. On my first shot, Tamas to take the man on his right, while Henrik takes out the man to his left. By then I'd have the lone survivor in my sights and ready to take the shot.

Simple in principle, but much could go wrong. I needed mamma out of the kitchen and through the back door by the time the four men left the living room. I wanted to avoid stray bullets fired inside the house. One way to help prevent that was to position the two boys to form a crossfire position in front of the main house.

The obstructions were the cars. It depended on how near to the front door they'd park them, the holligans might use them as shields. I'd have to position myself with a line of fire between the cars and the front door. That was my target range, to stop anyone from getting back into the house, or getting into the cars. There was a small shed, once an outhouse, which should hide me. It was in the right spot.

That was the plan, clean simple and effective. All attack, no retreat. There wasn't any retreat, there was no exit strategy.

I rolled over and entered my sleep mode. My alpha waves lowered with my breathing. Gradually my body relaxed until it was fully rested, and I was asleep.

The sound of the house awakening roused me. I used the small, basic washroom off my bedroom, showered and even had a shave. This was difficult having to remove the false beard and sideburns, shave, then put them back on again.

It vexed me to wear the fat suit day and night; I had to sleep in it, in case they disturbed me during the night for any reason. I knew it was over cautious, but you never know....

Madam Dorottya said the holligans arrived around eleven. But the boys were due out in the fields long before then, while László vegetated on the

settee staring into space until told to get out. She'd do little until the thugs brought in the groceries, then she'd make lunch.

We had a subdued breakfast, with only András and György conversing with each other. They must be pleased to have a break from the mausoleum they'd created. And from me.

Once they'd finished the breakfast of rough bread, old cheese, and a few wrinkled tomatoes, the two gangsters pushed away from the table without a word. They went to their rooms to pack their bags. The living room became quiet.

Dorottya was getting more nervous. No one was in ear-shot, so I moved to her and whispered. 'Everything's okay. We're all ready, it'll be over soon. Stay calm, do what you always do, but get outside before they leave the house. Thanks for everything, Dorottya, you're a star.'

I'm not sure she understood any of that, but I hoped the tone of my voice was settling her. She had the least fraught task, but for the moment it was fraught enough. The cooking should help take her mind off it.

I doubted my approach now. This was so different from my normal working schedule. I always work alone, in complete control over everything I did, not a move until assured of success and able to get cleanly away.

For the umpteenth time, I ran through the plan, picturing anything that might go wrong and what to do to correct it. I assumed it would be only me when the gunfire started. These boys shot animals, not violent men. For the first time in their lives, they might have their quarry shooting back at them.

László sat watching me with a blank expression on his face. I'd no idea what he was thinking, or what I'd do with him when the time came. I'd have to rely on the boys taking care of him.

András and György joined us a while later then sat and stared at me. They made their last defiant pose at the invader they didn't want in the house. I ignored them and read a paperback I'd brought with me.

They dumped their bags and rested their two rifles next to the front door jamb, confident to be so far away from them.

András wore blue shirt and grubby trousers made of corduroy that once was mustard. György wore baggy tracksuit trousers and a red shirt that looked as if he'd used it to clean the horse. I needed to remember their colours.

There was the sound of a car and the crunch of wheels on the rugged track. I checked my old wind-up watch and it was ten-fifty, they were early. I continued to read my book.

András motioned the old man to shift outside, and he left with no change of expression, but with no real hurry. He shuffled out of the front door and András followed him to greet his colleagues.

György was still glowering at me. I was sure he wanted to take a parting shot, but knowing the repercussions of Luca's wrath stopped him. He must be frustrated at that.

I heard talking for a while and finally, András strode in and sat heavily in a chair, behind him came two men, both carrying ancient firearms. An old shotgun, up and over barrels, the other a relic from the old west, a Winchester 75.

First through the door was a giant. Over two metres tall and with a full beard that made him appear more like a man mountain than a mountain man. He was bald apart from the beard that was streaked with grey. He was broad with a strong presence and must have been in his late forties. This, I understood, to be Károly, from the descriptions Madam had given me. He wore ill-fitting jeans and a rough brown check shirt. Scowling at me as he strolled to the large dining table, and sat facing me, never taking his eyes off his chosen target. I nodded a greeting, which he ignored.

The man behind him was the exact opposite, short, wiry and hair that made it difficult to decide where the scalp ended, and the beard and sideburns began. Staring out from this curly bush was a pair of piercing piggy eyes. This had to be István, wearing dirty jeans and a vest shirt that was originally white.

I nodded, again no response. He sat next to Károly and stared at me too. They'd get bored with this eventually - if they lived long enough.

György nodded across to the two men and they inclined their heads at him in a perfunctory salute. There followed a long silence. I appeared to be reading, I turned a page.

'György.' András said waving towards the door.

György heaved out of the chair and ambled outside with a scowl at András. A few minutes later he entered carrying a large wooden box of fruit, vegetables, packets, and tins of groceries. I thought I saw wine bottles in there too. This was their weekly food supply. Not enough between four grown men, a woman, and a weak old man. He walked into the kitchen and I heard a brief discussion and György came back out with a beer and sat in his chair to resume glowering at me.

András spoke a few words to the newcomers, and they answered clipped sentences. One laughed, the other grinned. I guessed it was about me. Laugh while you can, boys.

Ten minutes crawled by until mamma came in and broke the tension. She carried a tray of beer and two jugs of wine. She put it on the table and the two men reached in and helped themselves to beer. I noticed András didn't, he was the sober one. I need to watch him closely.

Mamma spoke with András and both glanced at the old crooked wall clock. He nodded, and she returned to her kitchen. András stood up and spoke in a mock authoritative voice. 'Go. You. Now. I say when you come back.' He pointed dramatically at me, showing off his command of the situation. No stranger allowed to challenge his authority, Luca or not.

My first reaction was to show who was the real boss, but today I wanted their routine to stay the same. I put my book away after folding the corner of the page I was reading. Ambling to the table I took a beer, seeing their eyes, as anger neared the surface. The two new men looked to András for guidance as I sauntered out the room.

Shutting the door, I stood just outside, knowing they were watching me through the dirty glass. Taking a few steps away, I hoped they'd now resume their intimate relationship. I heard a laugh from inside and I smiled to myself. Let the games begin.

I set the beer bottle on the veranda, right outside the front door. They'd planted the Volvo ten metres from the house and the visitor's old and battered pickup truck behind it. The model unrecognisable because it was so caked in mud it'd changed the shape of the vehicle. Casually I stepped around it and opened the driver's door, the keys were inside so I twisted the ignition. The fuel level about three-quarters full and the mileage ran at 200,302. I removed the keys and put them in my pocket. The Volvo had only a quarter of a tank and 175,603 miles on the clock. I took those keys too.

Now I had an edge. If I didn't have an exit strategy, neither did they. I had two getaway vehicles with enough petrol to get me to Budapest; they had none.

Back at the house I heard raised voices and amusement, too busy to watch me any longer. Supreme in the confidence they'd everyone under control, outnumbering me four to one.

I sauntered over to the outbuilding in the south-east direction Henrik had called a workshop. The building was old - everything was old. Built by the family grandparents, still a solid structure once used to house livestock, now a storage facility and workshop for the farm. Wood-framed inside with coarse wood, just like the house, outside thin slats nailed to battens. If it was good enough for the grandparents....

A single bulb lit one end, revealing workbenches around three sides. In the corner, László hunched over a bench, his back towards me as he fiddled with something.

I was about to call out to him, when I felt movement, Henrik rising from his hiding place. He appeared nervous, watching me to see if there's a problem.

'Henrik. Nice to see you. Anyone else here?'

Henrik tried to smile and failed, he pointed into the corner. From behind the barrels, Tamas stood up slowly. He waved as if meeting me on a beach in Majorca. I nodded to him and moved to the bench beside where László worked. László concentrated on assembling a rifle, laid out in front of him all the cleaning tools to reassemble the weapon.

'His favourite rifle.' Tamas said proudly.

'What have we got to look at?' I queried.

They'd stored the family weapons behind a false wall, now removed. There was an array of rifles and pistols, dating back a hundred years. They'd spoiled me for choice.

'Do they all work?' I asked, in awe.

Henrik grinned and slapped the old man on the shoulder, 'Every one. Father keeps them working very well.'

For the first time since I'd arrived László looked directly at me. He stood unsteadily and held out his hand for me to shake.

He spoke a few words, and I nodded inanely.

Henrik interpreted, 'He says: My wife has told me about you. Welcome to Herceghalom.'

I nodded and smiled, 'They've made me very welcome, László.'

The ageing gunsmith muttered some words.

Henrik grimaced, 'He said: Time to return the compliments.' László flicked his eyes in the general direction of the main house, showing more awareness of the impending situation than I first thought. I hope he wasn't expecting a part in the coming fight.

I patted him on the shoulder, 'We'll see what we can do. What with this superb collection and your boys, who knows?'

Henrik spoke in Hungarian again. László nodded and went back to his rifle.

‘Is he aware of what’s happening?’ I said.

Tamas grinned. ‘Mamma told him. He was happy with the news.’

‘We can’t let him anywhere near those men. They’ll kill him, he’s too slow.’

Henrik bobbed his head, ‘Don’t worry. He’ll stay in here, he knows he can’t help.’

As I flew commercial, I couldn’t bring any of my equipment with me. László had an impressive arsenal even if most of it dated from before the Second World War.

I nodded and smiled at the arsenal. ‘Now. Who wants what?’

As we’d no idea what time the men might leave the farmhouse, I’d asked mamma to go out through the kitchen back door and to wave something at us when they left. I’d a good view of the side of the house and able to see when she came out. Once I got the signal, we’d all be on standby, but I was ready long before that.

My concern being that one goon might come outside to see where I’d gone, find the keys missing from the car. Then we’d be in difficulties, three men and mamma in inside, one man to alert them. I’d have to silence him quickly and quietly.

That reasoning made me choose a 1911 automatic, which included a suppressor made by László. I’ve never seen a 1911 silencer. The man’s a genius.

It took a .45 cartridge as standard and made a big bang when not suppressed. The magazine held seven rounds, and I’d another mag in my pocket. It’s the weapon gangster movies made popular in the fifties, I hoped it’d be popular with me today.

In my belt I had another weapon, an old Browning 9mm automatic. This one unsilenced, by the time I got to use it, any surprise would’ve gone.

My watch showed twelve forty-five. I checked around again at the shooting positions. I crouched behind the small shed to the east. Just forward enough of the front wall to give me an arc of fire to cover anyone from the front door to the cars.

To my left and south east the workshop, the north end of which had a double barn door and Henrik had that station. His arc, from the cars to the west side of the house. He kept standing in full sight and I had to keep waving him back under cover.

To the west side of the farm Tamas, inside the cattle shed that had two open sides, behind a bale of hay and kept well hidden. His arc of fire, from the cars to the east side of the house.

Between them they had the whole of the front covered in a cross fire. Both boys were wearing the same coloured shirt, black, so I'm able to quickly identify them if things got rough, or confused. Thereby reducing the chances of accidentally shooting either of them in the heat of the battle.

I applied my breathing exercises and felt my pulse slowing. I stood quiet, letting the gun become part of my hand. I blinked frequently to refresh my eyes and felt time slow down. It wouldn't be long now.

Minutes after that, a movement at the rear of the house. Mamma frantically waved with a dish towel at me. I waved back and made the motion of palm flat, for her to stay there. She ran back into the kitchen. Despite all I said.....

I looked at Tamas and Henrik, touching my forehead, the signal to get ready. They repeated the signal to show they understood. I hoped the holligans would show soon because this was a tense time before a kill and I didn't know how the boys might react. An itchy trigger finger at this stage might ruin everything. These gangsters would be dangerous in an open gunfight, especially if they used the house as cover and mamma as hostage.

I counted my breaths in and out, slower and slower, every muscle in my body relaxed and my mind cleared. I'd have to take any decision quickly and efficiently, I mustn't place any faith in others.

Four armed men might seem to be too many, but my experience is paramount. These guys had met no one like me before. Old and overweight I may appear, but I'm ready to move swiftly, smoothly, and deadly.

It seemed an age before the front door opened. No one came out. One second, two seconds, three seconds, movement.

Thin, bushy haired István came out. He tripped over the bottle of beer warning alarm I'd left in front of the door. Cursing in Hungarian, he kicked the bottle off the veranda. Saying something to the next man coming out he nearly fell over, he was drunk.

I saved him for my fourth shot. He moved to one of the two posts supporting the porch roof and glanced around as he held on for support.

Károly and György came out next and laughed at István. They moved towards him as he slid down the post, he must have got splinters from that. Three, there were only three. One more, come on. Movement.

András stepped into the sunlight. Now my first target.

A shot rang out, echoing across the landscape. László, standing outside the workshop with a smoking rifle in his hand.

At the sound of the gunshot András had stepped quickly back inside the house. Mamma now in danger.

István was slumped on the post, blood gushing from a large hole in his head.

Another shot and Károly flew backwards from the impact. His heavy chest a mass of blood and red spray. He hit the front of the building and bounced forward to crash on the verandah. He lay sprawled face down. A big man in life, made a big noise when he died.

Tamas now standing away from the bales and his gun still aimed and smoking. Before I registered anything else, Henrik's gun fired and György sank to his knees. Blood spurting from his right thigh, he cried out in pain and grabbed the wound with both hands.

Henrik's second shot rang out and his left thigh erupted in blood. Henrik was hurrying towards the house. I was going to tell him to stop when he raised the rifle again and fired. This time the bullet entered György's left hand. Another shot on the move and the right hand sprayed blood. György screaming in pain and Henrik standing just a few metres away from him.

Henrik's face a mass of rage. He deliberately took aim and György knew his end had come. Already on the move I wanted to shout out a warning, but it was Henrik's revenge. I remained silent as the last shot echoed across the Kobay's farmland.

The bullet ploughed between György's eyes and the back of his head was distributed over the veranda planking.

As the echoes died away, I was heading for the kitchen, hoping to see mamma sitting just outside waiting the end to come soon. She wasn't there.

Prising open the door with my pistol, I rapidly unscrewed the silencer and dropped it on the ground; the time for stealth had gone. Speed, firepower and accuracy were more important now.

I ducked my head round the door and quickly out again. If András was waiting for a shot, I'd give him little to aim for. The kitchen was empty.

Holding the gun tight to my chest and not thrust out as you see in the movies. Stick your arm out and someone will shoot it off, or grab it and disarm you. A quick head bob around the door into the living room. To find that was empty too.

Where were mamma and András? They had to be through there somewhere. Upstairs? I flicked a glance around, my gun now held out in the aim position, ready to fire.

I'd recalled András wore a blue shirt with mustard coloured jeans. Mamma was in black, as usual. If I saw blue, I would shoot, if clear.

There were two windows on the front wall, as well as the glass in the front door. There was movement outside one of them. The front door was open, and I saw the body of György stretched out on the veranda. Henrik was standing over him. After another quick glance upstairs, I edged towards the front door. As the view through the door opened up I finally glimpsed a blue shirt.

I stepped back, to avoid being seen, and steadied myself for the shot. András didn't know I was there, but he saw the boys. I'd heard no shots. I eased forward until I could see clearly. András had his back to me and was walking slowly towards the car. In his hand he held a pistol which was pressed against the neck of mamma. He held her in an arm lock and pulled close to his chest.

The two boys now backing away, unable to fire without hitting their mamma. László had dropped his rifle and had horror stamped on his face as his wife was once more captive of the evil holligans.

I didn't have a shot. Both my weapons were now too powerful. If I hit András it'd go through him and hit mamma.

András didn't know I was behind him and so I still had a chance. I needed him to turn around, but anything sudden, and he might pull the trigger. I'd no doubt that madam Dorottya would sacrifice herself for the safety of her daughter and family, but right now there was no guarantee of that ending well.

András released mamma's arm and wrenched the Volvo door open. He was lucky, the driver's side was towards him. He pushed mamma into the car, forcing her to move along to the passenger side. He hastily got into the driver's seat.

His movements were frantic as he discovered the keys gone. He was moving around quickly, his concentration now vanished. It was my time.

Finger on trigger I hurried out of the house, keeping low. Hoping he wouldn't see me until the last second. The gun firmly aimed at his head,

which was jerking around, still scanning. Suddenly he stopped, my chance of a shot. There was still a risk mamma might get hit. The bullet easily ricocheting of any metal surface in the car. I had to have a clear shot. I was expecting a gun to be aimed at me and I was squeezing the trigger as I quickly edged forward.

András's head fell forward onto his chest. I wrenched the door open to put the gun as close to his head, and still have it pointed out through the windscreen for the bullet's safe trajectory.

András was lifeless.

I stared at mamma and there was pure hate on her face as she said venomously, 'That's for my Olga.'

I pressed my gun against his neck, in case he was faking. I grabbed him by the hair and pulled him out of the car. His body rolled off the seat and onto the ground. Sticking out of his chest was a large cooking knife.

Mamma's hands were covered in blood.

PART FOUR

CHAPTER NINETEEN – OLGA

I'd spent whole morning going over what little ideas I had for Luca. If everything went to plan, early this afternoon my family will be free of Luca's evil grip.

The big trouble was....I did not have any plan.

I listened to everything James had told me. I knew entry-code for side door to Luca's house. He might lock the inner door, I might have to shoot lock off, or kick it in. Though I am not strong enough for that.

Once inside, I have firepower and surprise, he thought I was dead. He still had two henchmen, I think is right English word, henchmen. I have to take care of those holligans.

Pulling the trigger on Luca, or his henchmen, not a problem. Not at all. I had no way of knowing when he was in his house but knew rooms he used. I knew he spent all of his time there. But I needed to know he would be there when I went in.

It was the gamble and I know James would not like that, but I had no choice. It was why I said nothing when his call came through in afternoon. I was in café near Luca's house, ready for action, ready for moment I had been waiting for. There was a catch in my voice as I answered phone ring.

'It's over, done. All clear.' It was such relief to hear James's voice with news. I did not know whether to cry or sing out loud. 'Here's, mamma.' he said quickly.

I allowed myself to cry, so did mamma. Neither of us said anything the other understood for several minutes. When she got herself together, she told me what happened. Mamma shocked me to hear her say she had stabbed the horrible András. She was so excited she cried again.

James took phone back, 'Time to go. Time is vital. Everything worked out?' I nodded. Not seeing the nod he took silence as yes. 'Getting in and getting out?' Another nod from me. 'Nothing left to say.... but be careful and good luck.'

'Thank you, James, for everything.'

'I didn't do a thing. I wouldn't like to go up against your family. Take care.' The line went dead, and it hit me, my turn to play my part.

Coffee finished, I put backpack on my back. It was short walk around corner and soon in side alley of Luca's house. His big funny coloured car there was good positive sign. No other people around.

I walked to side door and entered code. A soft click sounded, and I pushed door open. It was dark in passageway and I remained still, listening. No sounds, I moved forward.

The door ahead closed, but an ordinary internal door, nothing fancy with pin tumbler lock. I pressed my ear to door and heard no sound. Wait, a muffled voice. I tried to listen. By rhythm of voice and pauses, I thought someone talk on phone.

I pulled James's handgun from pocket in backpack and eased off safety. Five bullets, where one would finish job. I put my hand on doorknob and twisted. It moved, and I gave door slight push. It opened, so I went in crouching to lower chance of body shot.

Luca was at his huge desk and was on landline, no one else there. He had pulled the curtains shut and soft lighting came from wall lights and large ornate lamp on desk. Luca recognised me, and his mouth dropped open. His eyes were getting wider as his breath seemed to halt in his throat. He slowly replaced phone. I moved to desk and covered him with gun.

'Hands on desk where I can see them, bastard!' He opened his mouth to speak but couldn't. 'Think I am ghost? You will soon know I am not. Where is your hollgans?' He shook his head, not understanding situation. 'Where are they?'

'Er...out. Back later. How the hell!...'

'Tables turned, now. I have the big stick.'

He was getting back his senses, his animal cunning was taking over. When cornered, Luca would always be the dangerous man.

'Think of your family, Olga. You don't want anything to....' First time I heard fear in that voice of gravel.

'Nothing will happen to them again, Luca. Your hollgans have gone.' His face puzzled. 'Dead. Killed by my family.' I was fighting to contain my emotion.

'That can't be....' His hands went to his head in gesture that says, "I don't believe it."

'All dead. Now your turn.'

Emotions were racing through me. I wanted to torture this man for eight years, as he had tortured my family, but I did not have time. He had friends, people who might turn up at any minute. James said to get in, shoot and get out. All quickly and smoothly. But now I had root of all my nightmares under my gun, I did not want this feeling to end, I wanted to gloat. I wanted to call my mother and let her hear last seconds of his life ended with silenced bullet.

I leant over desk and glared into his eyes. 'For all crimes, you have suffered on my family, for all times you sent your "boys" round to punish me. For all broken promises of trip home. For...well just about everything.' I rested my hands on the desk to support me as I leaned right close to his face.

'The time has come, Luca.' He flinched away from me and I wanted to push my face nearer, but I was already over stretching with my hands on his desk.

I did not see what happened.

I think... as he was moving his face away from me he swept one arm and knocked my supporting right arm away from me. Falling forwards the gun slipped out of my hand and clattered onto the floor. I think....with his other hand he reached under his desk and next thing I know there was bright flash and loud noise. An awful pain in my right arm made me scream. I brought injured arm across my chest and clutched pained area with my left hand.

His eyes were different now, feral, measuring, evil-looking. This was old Luca I knew and feared.

The phone rang. He picked it up and before anyone said anything, 'I'll call you back. I'm attending to business.' He put the phone down quickly.

Luca stood up now, his gun pointed at my head. Moving around table he picked up my weapon, glanced at it and slipped it into his trouser pocket. I felt blood oozing through my fingers.

He was thinking. I was trying to control pain and fear that had risen in me, I had been stupid, too emotional. James had warned me, but this was a vital moment for me. More so than I realised.

'So, you're alive and my men all dead, you say. Now that really changes the situation. The Magician says you're dead and you're not, that makes him a liar. He's out there with my men and they're all dead, that makes him their killer. He'll be coming back here. For me do you think? No, no, no. YOU'RE here for me.' He peered at my arm, 'We need to get that looked at.'

He pushed me roughly, bending me over desk. The pain shot up my arm. He ripped backpack off my back and searched my pockets. Putting my mobile phone on desk, adding my cigarettes and lighter, he seemed satisfied that was all I had. Luca threw backpack into corner out of reach. The heavy gun bag made a loud metallic thump on the floor.

‘Sit. You’re losing a little blood.’ He picked up phone and dialled a speed number. After moment someone answered it. He never took his eyes off me, gun not waver from my head. ‘Raphael? Need your services. Chop, chop.’ He hung up. ‘He’ll see to your wound, looks like it went straight through. You’ll be okay, but I’ll have to dig the slug out of the wall and repair the damage. My wife hates it when stuff like that happens.’ He laughed.

His confidence was increasing. He was still thinking, calculating. He picked up my phone and went through contact numbers on it. ‘Which one is The Magician?’

‘Who?’ not convincingly.

‘Don’t play dumb, or I’ll put a hole in your other arm. Your friend who’s in Hungary, The Magician!’

‘I did not know he was called that.’

‘Well, you do now.’ He thrust phone at me, ‘Call him.’

There was no other option than to do as he said. Should I get quick warning off to James, but what would I say? Would Luca shoot me again? I dialled number, but he snatched phone from me before anyone had answered. I watched his face.

‘Is this The Magician?’ His face distorted into what passed as smile but was more like evil grimace. ‘Your employer here. Luca.....Still there? Cat got your tongue?’ He winked at me and covered microphone. ‘He’s speechless!’

He was enjoying himself now and sat down. The gun never moved from my eyes. ‘I’ve your little dead friend here. No...not yet. But she will be if you don’t do as I say. Hey...hey. All I want is for you to finish doing what you said you would. I want you to come back here, bring Henrik and we’ll all sit down and see what happens. Okay?’

There was a pause, and I heard an indistinct talking. ‘You’ve got no bargaining rights at all Magic Man. The plans are in place. Plans, YOU wanted. You were to bring Henrik back here to help. You undertake contracts for me! There’s a car for you there to drive back. Fake identity for Henrik with Károly. Should take you four days, at most, to get here. Don’t get stopped at the borders. If you’re late....Olga will not be pleased.’ I hated the smile on his face.

Another pause before Luca got more serious. 'Okay. I understand. I'll have her here and in good shape. Why? Why you want that? Okay. Backpack for Henrik. I see, he's familiar with the weapon in it. I see. All right.'

He hung up and laughed.

'He will not do it.' I snarled, more defiant than I really felt.

'Yes, he will. As long as he thinks there's a chance he can best me, he'll do as I say. Meanwhile, we need to get you fixed up and a nice place for you to stay. This is turning out to be a great day.'

CHAPTER TWENTY - THE MAGICIAN

I felt crushed, defeated, and terribly ashamed.

I'd promised the Kobay family they'd be free and Olga finally safe. And now....it was worse than ever, how was I going to tell them? Mamma was watching my face and knew something was wrong.

I had them all sitting down and told them what had happened. There was shock and some dismay on their faces and mamma just cried. 'Listen. Listen, please. This is not the end, we can work with this. I've an idea, several ideas. But I have to get back to England to put them to use and I'll need Henrik to help me.'

Further tears from mamma.

László stood up uncertainly, 'You promised....'

Nodding, I said, 'I did, I'm sorry. We have to take another stab at it, but in England.'

'What happened to Olga?' Mamma burbled between waves of tears.

I shook my head and held her hands. 'I don't know. All I know is that she's alive, and he'll not harm her, that I can promise.'

László said, 'You promised....'

'There's no point in harming her. It's me and Henrik he wants to work for him, without Olga that won't happen. Without Olga in good healthy shape, he knows I'll come for him. You're not aware, but I have a formidable reputation. He knows I will kill him.'

Mamma was shaking her head and Henrik was on the point of tears. Tamas had an arm around his shoulder.

'Olga and Henrik will be safe from Luca. I wouldn't put them at risk. Never! Our chance will come again, and soon. I can promise that. Please do not distress yourselves. All WILL be well. And soon.' More convincing than I felt.

I'm sure my words didn't have the effect I needed them to have, but it was the best I could do. It was time to move on, and quickly. I needed to get back momentum now, 'Tamas, find Károly's bag. Inside should be a package of Henrik's identity papers. Get them for me, will you? Henrik, pack. Minimal stuff but wear your smartest clothes. I'll get you new ones when we get there.'

Both the boys moved to their tasks as I dialed a number and waited. There needed be a series of calls before the next part of my plan.

An hour later we were on the road, leaving the family to bury the bodies of their mentors. After spitting on them first.

Although Luca had thought we'd be returning by car, I'd other plans. I'd booked two tickets on a plane, I needed to get back to London with time to prepare. We used the old Volvo to drive back to the airport, and left it in a car park. No one would steal it.

The false identities caused no problem, but Henrik had a few looks of amusement at the clothes he was wearing. Rural Eastern European farmer's ideas of Sunday best were not the norm for the rest of Europe.

At the airport, I got him a better jacket, but the checked bright yellow trousers had to last the whole journey. The flat cap, so loved by all generations, had to go. It upset him to leave it in the waste bin. I was in the same disguise I'd used to come out, using the same identity papers.

We're all so jaded with life we take even the most extraordinary things for granted. Not even noticing humanity's rapid progress in the civilised world we help create. It was a delight to see the young man overawed by modern travel; he'd never been further than twenty kilometres from where he was born.

We travelled light and were ahead of the queues through immigration at Heathrow. I had to go through the British Passport Control where he had to go through the non-nationals.

It was the tensest part of the journey. They asked him several questions, but we'd rehearsed the questions and answers, while we waited for our flight in the airport lounge. If in doubt, pretend you don't understand. He grinned at me as we met the other side of immigration, the encounter hadn't fazed him.

We took a taxi, getting out a short way from my workshop. We walked the rest of the way, my natural reaction to check if someone followed us. I was certain we were unobserved, so I entered my building checking for tell-tales for entry. A hair across the lintel – still there. A wafer-thin strip of invisible plastic across the key holes – unbroken. A saucer of water, just inside the door, that spilled if the door opened too quickly. I pushed the door open slowly - saucer still full. The place had been undisturbed since I left.

We were in London three days ahead of Luca expecting us. I took my time and got Henrik settled in. He was wide-eyed at all the equipment I had in the workshop, he was touching things and asking questions.

He took the second bedroom in my flat and I told him to be careful if he went out and to always check if someone followed him before entering again. I walked the streets with him and showed him several places where he was to go to if there's a problem. Places I'd know where to find him.

I bought him a mobile phone and spent time teaching him how to use it. They say kids pick up technology fast, but Henrik didn't even know the word technology. For him, even electricity was a new invention.

I'd programmed Lucie's and my mobile numbers in case he ever needed them. I was taking a chance on this lad, he was leaving me wide open to discovery on so many fronts, but I had no choice. He was now in my safe-keeping and that's what I'd do.

I introduced him to Lucie, and he now knew where to go in an acute emergency. A bolt hole, a friendly face to help in times of trouble. I covered every aspect for Henrik's safety while I wasn't with him. This took a while, but now the time had come for me to enter the next phase of my plan.

I called Luca from the side of a busy dual carriageway in North London and explained we were just north of Paris. I expected the noise to be convincing enough to show we were still on our way back.

We'd expect to be with him by two-thirty the following day. He laughed. The power was exciting him. I prodded that ecstasy in him, excited people when emotional, often make mistakes. 'I need to see Olga there. In one piece, Luca. Damaged goods won't be good enough!'

'Yes, yes.'

'The rifle too, remember?' My voice at a lower register to show menace.

'Yes, yes, I have it here.'

'See you tomorrow after two.' I rang off before he gloated some more.

It was just after five in the afternoon when I eased into the side alley of Luca's house. I didn't know what mistakes Olga made, but I needed to be careful, so I didn't make one too.

The disguise I was wearing I'd used only once before and found it effective. I was wearing a Kevlar vest under my heavy cotton shirt, track suit bottoms that had several hidden pockets, soft-soled shoes, suitable for running, or climbing - hoping for neither. A bald head piece and dark contact lenses, internal cheek pads and a few glue-on cheek pads made me older and over-weight.

They'd parked the black car in the narrow alleyway and I moved round it to check it was empty. I tried the door, but it'd been locked. I entered the code into the street door and hoped he hadn't changed it. He hadn't. When you've got dumb minders, they can't handle changes, I was thankful for that.

The hallway had lights on and there were no cameras, so Luca wouldn't know I was there. Yet. As I walked along the hall, I placed small charges on the walls either side. These were Bluetooth connected to my watch and detonated with one touch on its buttons.

I gently tried the door handle, it was locked, Luca was not taking chances when there were people like me around. I studied the two sets of hinges and tried to estimate the thickness of the door. It was solid. I wasn't sure if I was strong enough to boot it in with a first attempt?

Studying the lock I took out my set of lock picks and listened with my ear against the smooth paintwork. I heard voices, I hoped they'd cover my actions as I twisted the picks. This came down to how subtly I unlocked the door.

It took a few seconds, and I eased the S&W 9 mm from my hip holster and eased back the hammer. Taking a good grip on the handle I twisted, pushing the door forward. I burst into the room and held my gun pointed straight at Luca's head.

Luca was in his big armchair, while Olga was seated in a guest chair. She called out, 'James!' I took in the rest of the room, the emaciated József was sitting next to Olga with a gun pointed at her hip.

They'd been waiting for me.

I kept the gun on Luca, 'You okay Olga?' I used a slight Geordie accent.

She nodded and pulled up one long sleeve to show a bandage. I felt a surge of anger and directed it at Luca.

He held his hands up, 'I had to shoot her. I could've killed her but didn't. It was her, or me. Now calm down, we've a lot to sort out here. I like what you've done with the disguise, James?'

'Put the gun down, József.' I growled angrily.

'József will not do that, but you will lower yours. Now.' I didn't move. 'So, we'll work with a stalemate then.' Luca picked up a cup of coffee and took a sip. This was to show he was in command and I didn't frighten him at all. 'I will say right at the start, I've ten men ready to go into the Kobay farm. What took place before is nothing to the torment her family will now suffer.'

Olga's face tightened. This was now Luca's main control he had over her. We'd come full circle.

'So, unless I make a call every thirty minutes, the Kobay's will fertilise their own crops. Am I clear?' I nodded. I glanced at Olga and wanted to give her some reassurance, she appeared defeated. Luca had already laid out his plans for us and she couldn't see a way out. Neither could I, yet.

Luca was enjoying himself, now the moment of his triumph had arrived. 'So, just in case anyone gets over excited with gun play. Let's put out guns down, shall we?'

I knew there might be a time when all my elements of surprise be neutralised. It was always a big risk to come out with Olga alive and leave behind the smoking ruins of Luca's empire. I needed Luca to believe his plans were working, and I'd no answer to them.

Lowering my gun I glared at József to do the same. After a nod from Luca, József let his gun rest on his lap, ready for instant use.

'Now...let's all be friends.' Luca beamed. 'Where's Henrik?'

'I left him outside. I didn't know what reception he'd get.'

'Bring him in.'

'No. Not yet. While I have him, you don't.' again menacing phrasing in my tone.

'I have Olga. It's the same thing. No?'

Shaking my head. 'No. What do you want, Luca?'

He took time to think. He realised that playing out his power game was wearing thin with me, he came to the point.

'As you know...YOU asked ME to soothe the Italians over your retirement fiasco. I've done that. They want you to undertake a contract. It's a big one. Fucking big one.' He leaned forward with a smile forming. 'So big, even I could retire on my percentage. So ... it's got me thinking. One project. One effort from you and we all go home. Forgive and forget.'

'How?' I said with minimal emotion in my voice.

'You take the contract. When it's done, I'll release Olga and you can....do whatever you want. Just remember ...the Italians don't like people to retire. So we both will...disappear. I won't need Henrik, you, or the pretty lady here.' The smile was full now, yet insincere.

'How can we trust you?'

‘You can’t. Except....I’ll let Zoltán be your hostage. Guarantee my good faith in you.’

I knew Zoltán meant nothing to him. I assumed he wouldn’t let any of us live before he disappeared, if that’s what he was truly planning. Was any of this true? For now, I wanted to buy time.

‘You’ve just changed your mind, then?’

Luca nodded. ‘As soon as Mario and Primo told me the fee. This is big, Magic Man. Biggest you’ve ever done. Had you taken this on yourself, you would’ve HAD TO retire afterwards. If you know what I mean.’

Luca put his feet on the desk and smiled. ‘I have no one else capable of pulling this size project off, except you. But, you will need help. That’s why I insisted on you bringing Henrik here.’

Olga appeared indifferent. Her eyes were unfocused, and I was sure now she’d been drugged. ‘What’s the matter with Olga?’

Luca suddenly confused at the change of subject. His big carrot was being ignored. ‘Nothing, she’s fine.’

‘She’s been drugged.’ I hissed. József moved the pistol back to her hip, as I got closer he moved it to her head.

‘Careful.’ Luca purred. From the way he said it I knew he had a gun pointed at me.

‘I just want to see.’ I moved deliberately slowly towards her. They were uncertain now, but wouldn’t shoot me. If the contract was real, they’d need everyone in the room alive. If it wasn’t, I’d find out when a bullet put out my lights.

I pulled Olga to her feet, keeping both my hands wide, where the two men could see there was no trickery intended. Pushing her hair out of her eyes, I studied her face, gently pulling down both lower eyelids and peering closely.

‘Tongue.’ I requested, and she poked it out. I put two fingers in her mouth and pressed towards both cheeks. I held her hands and studied the skin tone. ‘What did you use?’

Luca still held the gun, but in a casual manner as he said, ‘Nothing too strong, last another hour, or two. We have a nice safe place for her to rest until you’ve completed the contract.’

‘When’s the contract scheduled for?’

‘Five days’ time. Not long. Need to get going.’ He pulled an envelope from the top drawer and threw it on the table.

It was time for an exit.

With a glance at my watch I discretely pressed a button. From one of the track suit pockets I palmed two devices and held them ready.

I moved to the table and leant on it. ‘This is it, Luca, no more tricks, it all ends with this one contract. Agreed?’ He nodded, and I picked up the envelope and pushed it into my waist band.

I said to Olga, ‘It’ll be fine. See you soon.’

I nodded at Luca, while counting the seconds in my head. ‘I’ll be in touch.’

With a burst of noise, smoke filled the room, coming from the device I’d stuck under the desk top when I leaned forward to talk to Luca.

I placed a small breathing device in my mouth and gripped it with my teeth. It’s commonly used for short bursts underwater, but it’s essential I breathed easily as I made my disappearing act from the room. The smoke didn’t bother the eyes, but I heard their coughing and spluttering behind me.

On my way out, I removed the two motion sensors I’d stuck on the wall. Thankfully not needed, but I knew that Zoltán may still be around somewhere. I opened the outside door with caution, the alley was empty, Luca wouldn’t want to hinder me now.

I believed there was a contract, he had me from the moment I entered his room. If I took this sanction, and it was successful, there was every chance I’d get Olga, Henrik and myself safely out of this impasse.

Despite Luca believing he’d plan otherwise.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE – OLGA

I was happy to see James yesterday; he looked different from before. Now I know what he does and what he has to do...it is not surprising he needs disguise. But a shock to see him even though Luca said he would be coming.

Luca was his usual nasty self, but I felt he would not upset James. I think he got the better of Luca, Luca will not like that.

I am still unclear what is going on now; I know I am hostage and James got to do a hit, but where does Henrik fit in now? At least James is looking after him, I feel slightly happier about that.

Luca said five days, two have already gone, another three in this dump. I do not know where I am, but it is some seedy flat that Luca probably owns. Uses it for his more sordid business deals, I guess. It is self-contained and a lot better than one he had me living in for six years. But this is proper prison, at least I could leave other one.

It has one-bedroom, a small kitchen, the tiny bathroom and two windows overlooking a block of flats. The paint is peeling and some light bulbs needed replacing. I have told Zoltán, but he has done nothing.

He holds grudge against James for shooting him; he limps badly. He says it will not get any better. I keep reminding him shot should be through head; he dislikes me now even more.

I spend day watching TV. It has thirty channels, but none I would choose to watch. I have become involved in house restoration programmes, I can relate to that. I think how much work needs to be done on our farm - if I can ever get back there. At least my English is improving as I watch.

I do have hope. While I disliked James probing in my mouth with his fingers, he left me a little surprise. He placed small electronic gadget there. I assume it is tracker of some sort and he left it with me for safe keeping. It is funny; he used tracker to find me first time, now will use it to find me again.

There is only one hiding place that would not be searched unless under very extreme measures. So, that is where it lives now.

Three days to go.

It is now fifth day and I'm not sure what will happen. If project goes well, will I be free? Will James come and get me? Where is Henrik? Can we trust Luca to keep his word? Definitely not to that one!

I have paced room since early hours. The sun come up and hope I will not still be in this room when it goes down; I hope I can watch from somewhere else.

Often I have switched TV on and off and cannot settle. My nerves are now stretched to the breaking point. If Zoltán comes through that door with his sickly grin, I think I will take things into my own hands.

All cutlery is plastic, I found nothing to use as weapon. I would have to use my wits, speed and determination to overcome hollgan. My shoe was the hardest thing in the room I might use as weapon. But I had decided, today was last day I stayed here.

There is noise outside and someone at door. It is opening.

I stand, ready to strike.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO - THE MAGICIAN

The visit to Luca's had not been a total success.

Initially, I was a little surprised they expected me early. If you drive across Europe, arrival times may be variable. Luca knows my reputation as The Magician, appearing and disappearing at will. He was ready for that. He was brighter than I gave him credit.

I was hoping to catch him unawares and optimistically get Olga back, taking him out of the equation. But Luca's a slippery eel, and Olga's the prime concern - and her family on the farm. How much of what he said did I believe? The dozen men ready to invade the farm? I had to assume that might be correct.

As soon as I entered the alley, I jogged to my van. Locked inside I made a call to mamma. Bringing her up to date I told her I'd just seen Olga, and she was fine. There'd be no problems, and within a few days, we'd have a finish to the whole thing. I hoped I was right this time and not making more promises I couldn't fulfil.

I'm a lone operator, taking single contracts, with total autonomy when and where I work. Now I'm rescuing maidens, travelling abroad to wipe out local gangs, trying to keep families together - and many other things. While having to plan another contract.

I told mamma of the possibility of more holligans and she didn't sound too surprised. She felt she was ready for them now, but only Tamas able to handle a gun. I suggested they took a holiday for a week. At least they'd be safe. She grunted at that. She was more concerned about coming home to the farm burnt down than any retribution Lucas sent her. I understood her point.

I said be careful and be vigilant. I suggested putting something on the road to burst the tyres of any vehicles that drove to the farm, removing them when the ordeal had passed. They might get a warning and at least put the holligans on their feet. She said she'd consider it. I wished her well and said goodbye.

I wasn't convinced about this small army of Luca's. The family had lived with the four gang members for over seven years, they'd never heard of more. Unless Luca hired thugs to do the dirty work, there wouldn't be a repeat live-in of holligans, but it was better to be cautious than reckless.

I felt guilty about initially treating Henrik as if he wasn't there in the van, but I was calculating hard and fast. He wanted to know about his sister; I took time to tell him briefly about the situation.

Pressing a small button on the tracker locator, it lit up my mobile phone screen with a steady unmoving pulse. I explained to Henrik that when they moved her, we'd follow. If I knew where she was, I'd figure out how to get her out.

While we waited I explained in greater detail the problem we had with Olga. I think he understood, but the poor lad was very disappointed, he sat and thought about it, examining his reaction for a while.

I studied the info Luca had given me in the package and whistled in surprise. He was right, this was going to be big news, I had to decide how to go ahead from here. Take the contract, take the risk Luca might let Olga and Henrik go? Risk Luca disappearing forever? Olga wouldn't thank me for that, but the alternative? Maybe years more slavery for her, her brother and even me?

Any chance of me taking Luca out was now unthinkable. The farm might still be massacred in the event of his death. Olga might die, probably at the hands of Zoltán and József, slowly and painfully.

If I tried to rescue Olga, there was still the farm scenario. Can I take out Luca, Zoltán and József at the same time? Probably, if they were ever all together. That still left the farm. I may send Herrick home, but would that be enough? Probably not. No guarantees.

It came down to me making the contract. That would then rely on Luca honouring his promise. Nothing seemed the right move, it was a dilemma. I had to think.

I decided on a plan of action. It was probably one nobody would like.

For the next two days, I focused solely on the Italian Project.

Before I put a bullet in a body, I always need to know why. If I've squeezed the trigger it's because the victim had done something wrong, of this I have to be certain.

I've only taken sanctions on deserving people. Never women and children. At times I thought I acted like a God, giving and taking lives at will. It's the psychological aspect every contractor has to deal with in his, or her, own way.

In this evolving and increasingly dangerous world, people commit atrocities that the current law enforcement services cannot, or will not pursue. Sometimes, the law enforcement does its part, but the legal system is so antiquated and over-stretched, any real justice is not served. In some of those cases, specific people must step outside the law and take

matters into their own hands. What the law won't handle, sometimes the private sector has to take responsibility.

This applies to any country. However, in some countries homicide is a recognised career path, but I've no interest in taking projects abroad. Why take contracts in another country? Stick to your own area where you're most familiar. Why travel abroad where you may run afoul of local customs, unknown laws? You can stand out like a sore thumb, then have to get out quietly and quickly. Also, there's the problem of getting the equipment you need from unreliable sources.

Everything must be planned around staying out of prison. If you can't be identified or caught at the scene, they cannot charge you. You cannot be imprisoned, if they cannot charge you. It's vital you're not seen, or if you are, not traced and recognised later.

What you see in the movies is not true. People cannot dive through plate-glass windows without a scratch, endless chases in cars, skilled Kung Fu experts fighting each other endlessly. The human body cannot withstand that. Real assassination work requires guile and planning. Lots and lots of boring planning and nerve in execution. It's not only about getting the target, at any costs.

I always plan for two or more ways to achieve a sanction. Each with a clear exit strategy. At ALL COSTS, do not get caught, live to fight another day. Second and third attempt at a hit is better than a first-time hit and being caught.

Only carry a weapon if it's to be used on the target, once the police catch you, there's no way out. That's why many assassins just drop the weapon used in the killing. If it's not on you when caught, it isn't proof that you used it. If you're caught with it on your person, then it's highly likely the jury agrees it was you that used it to kill the victim.

But this project was far more complicated than most, much more than getting caught involved here. There were other people's lives – apart from my own.

I have a process that I adhere too when planning a project. I spend hours at the warehouse getting everything in order and my facts and information accurate.

The warehouse is my true home. There's a mini gym in the corner, where I try to exercise at least four hours a day, varying the areas of my body I need to strengthen.

The building is as sound-proofed as I can make it. I wanted to put a pistol range in, but the sound would still penetrate the old corrugated walls,

whether or not insulated. Although the area is desolate, and few people come near it, it's still a risk I need not take.

I have a few machines I used to make my specialised equipment. A small lathe, milling machine and a guillotine. A wide range of tools used for mechanical projects, to cabinet making.

Cars I buy for cash from adverts in the local papers, not local to here. The seller doesn't care who's buying and never asks for identification. I swap out the number plates and when I'm done with them, there are several scrap yards where I can dump them overnight. They don't ask where the cars come from, they simply convert them into scrap cash.

When I'm planning an op like this I like to run, steadily and for an hour, or more. It tunes the mind into focus. A steady rhythm allows the mind to free itself. I set the cool air fans running and work up a sweat.

I had information about Mario and Primo. Now I needed to sort through it, filter and redefine what was useful.

As I wrote my plan of action on my whiteboard, the sequence of events wrote themselves. I first had to find out why the elimination of two targets by Mario Arzano and Primo Vespa was necessary. But first, I needed to know more about Arzano and Vespa.

I'd normally get in touch with a few old contacts who are "Italians", but this time it's impossible, they may be connected in some way. Blood is thicker than water, it's said. It'd be disastrous to tell one family about another when the two families might be associated. Far too risky and dangerous.

The Mafia is a criminal syndicate that emerged in the mid-19th century in Sicily. Much has been written about it, some of it is true, some overly dramatised. The truth is - none of us knows the extent, or details, of the real Mafia. The media will have us believe many ideas that are not correct.

There is no official Mafia in London or England. I read a quote which stated, "They are not killing in London yet, just investing." Although London was the first city documented as the world's gang capital, closely followed by New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. London has a history of organised crime. The name Kray still strikes terror in some older residents, even today.

I'm aware of some Italian family members in London, but do not know them all. I'd be in personal danger if I did. I've dealt with some of them for years and noticed the growth of the Italian community in organised crime in London.

When speaking with some people I know on the fringes of the organised crime network, I gleaned some background. Mario and Primo were cousins.

Mario from his father's brother, Primo from his Mother's sister. Similar blood ran in the veins of both. Both cultured through the burgeoning Italian clan settled in Hackney.

They were brought into the family organisation through Mario's father, Salvatore. He was the titular head of the Arzano family, after the untimely and suspicious death of Aldo Arzano, who was Salvatore's uncle.

Salvatore was the old school. If it ain't broke, don't fix it. Mind your own business and don't get involved with others. It became the family motto.

Five years ago, Salvatore had a heart attack. So read his Death Certificate, but there's a suspicion in the way Mario quickly stepped up to take his father's place. A little too hasty, some thought it, but not by cousin Primo. For a long time, he had to play second fiddle as his surname was not Arzano. Now with Mario in charge, their lifelong friendship proved a mutual benefit to each other.

Having both worked their way up through the family structure, the cousins became fully aware of every tentacle that comprised the family business. An easy shoe-in for Mario, who'd been running the business, during his father's short illness.

The time for grieving had passed, too quickly for some family, not quick enough for Mario. Mario was new school, reform the order of the day. It soon became clear that things were changing in a big way, the family would go legit.

During that first year, the profits dropped. They heard dark mutterings behind Mario's back. In stepped Primo. They approached family members and staff in a friendly, yet persuasive way to shape up, or ship out. This was the new regime. You're with it, or against it.

Four of the senior members decided they were against it. They considered creating a family on their own. A few thought they might offer their own debt collection services to another family in the east of London. Another had a ring of prostitutes that was becoming very profitable and thought he might go it alone.

Within three months they'd all met with a mishap, bullets had accidentally entered their foreheads. Same weapon, same assassin, same message from the Arzano family, and to any others who thought of recruiting from them. The weapon used was in the deepest part of the Thames near Putney.

I know, I dropped it there.

Within a few years, the gambling and prostitution had almost become transparent in the Arzano business portfolio. They considered drugs too

profitable to be dropped altogether, but they were also a high profile for the law enforcement agencies. Mario restructured that part of the business, using a second and third tier of handling, that further divorced him from the sharp end. Sure, his personal profits were less, but so were the chances of a long gaol sentence.

Mario stuck to his beliefs and Primo supported him with a small team of enforcers. Violence used to be the first choice of action, now relegated to the last. The team were very persuasive when needing to be. Blackmail was a common tool, along with the very occasional threat and the very rare kidnapping.

Association with other criminal elements was frowned upon. Several small teams had approached Mario with schemes offering rich rewards. Jewellery heists, banks and a few Armoured Car robberies. Mario avoided these. These people may claim to be professional, but if the police caught them, so too might members of the Arzano family be goaled. Ultimately that would lead to him and Primo.

With a little digging, I got the official tax returns of the Arzano family business. There were several corporations and shell companies and it'd take a long while to sieve through it all. But I'd enough to show me the legitimate areas that involved the Arzanos.

When I reviewed my investigation into the two targets the Arzanos wanted to eliminate, I became aware of why they were a threat to Mario. I'd take a few days more to complete my investigations, sort out a plan and execute it. Time was not on my side, but Henrik was.

As I pounded the treadmill, my heart rate slowly increased, along with it my mind coalesced. Pieces came together and made sense. Ideas formed, were analysed, and some discarded. It was two hours later that I finally stopped running and rested.

My thoughts were clear, and I knew what I had to do.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE - MARIO ARZANO

I like my house. Big, impressive and suits the businessman image I need to help me achieve. Looking over Victoria Park in Hackney, I happily live there with my wife and two daughters. It's not to everyone's taste, but I like it. I actually love it.

Hackney – unless you've lived here - is a name that often draws derision. I've seen Primo beat a man near to death because he laughed at Hackney. Primo lives two streets over in a much smaller house, as it should be. But then his income is influenced by many factors. Most should be under his control but are not, he's also single and doesn't need the extra space.

My offices are nearby, in the Mile End Road. Another name that conjures up Jack the Ripper, Cockney rhyming slang and flogging dodgy fruit off barrows. That's as much a racist slur as saying I'm part Italian and therefore must be part of the Mafia.

Yes, our old country was Sicily. Well, Verona, but in the sixties and seventies, we were all classed as Sicilian Mafioso. But times change, I'm second generation English. I have an English passport and my kids have English passports. Our address is London, always has been. We're no longer Sicilians, were Londoners, and should be proud of it.

In the past, individuals associated with the Mafia were seen as crooks, thugs, extortionists, pimps, and murderers. They were ONLY seen as that. A class of people totally violent. Using their only natural talents to cause mayhem and corruption, all for the bottom lines – money and power.

As far as I'm concerned, I'm not Mafia. Never have been, never will be. I have a family and a business, it's a family business, employing family members where I can, outsiders when I must. Trying to keep it simple and making it legit.

Sometimes, I've had to resort to the more traditional values of a Sicilian business. I've had to use pressure and a little persuasion, but that's just part of any business. It's all a matter of degree.

For instance, how can bribery be a crime? It's always a win, win situation. The person who takes the bribe is happy, the person who pays the bribe is happy. Win, win.

What's a threat? It's just a means to an end. Nobody gets hurt by a threat. If they ignore it, things can happen. But a threat in its purest state is not a crime.

Times change and so must business. How you do business today is much different from how it was done in my father's time. Even more different from my grandfather's day. True Sicilians dislike change. But as I've said, I'm not Sicilian, I'm a Londoner, twenty-first century Londoner.

There may be six or seven families in London today that can trace their roots back to Mafia connections in Italy. Each of them trying to earn a living out of their particular London "patch". Where they overlap, there will always be conflict. Sometimes, they have to resort to the older, more established, methods to resolve their differences, but these practices now becoming increasingly unlikely.

To support a good business, and a good lifestyle, you need as little conflict in your life as possible. Preferably, no conflict at all. That I adopted as my family motto and the code I now try to live by. Cousin Primo? Maybe not so much, he likes the conflict. It's in his nature. In the past when some conflict needs resolving by other than peaceful means, Primo was useful. But as far as I'm concerned, the further I'm distanced from conflict resolution, the better. Never get caught being involved. Where there's no evidence, there's no conviction.

To succeed, you need to expand. There are only so many relatives you can bring into the business. Sure, there're dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of young men choosing to get into a family business. Whatever glamorised version of that they have in their minds, I do not know. But young men trying to work their way up in any organisation, have to undertake the menial, and the dirty jobs. Long hours, times of doing nothing but waiting. And probably getting little payment or credit for it.

Sometimes, with the excitement and impatience of youth, they try to jump the queue, get ahead of themselves. They push the boundaries and take on tasks they're not competent to perform. This frustration often turns to petty crime. Because of inexperience they often get caught and end up with small sentences, or ASBOs. The last thing I want my family associated with is youths the police can track.

So, in these modern times, with youth brought up on violent computer games, Internet porn and comprehensive parental financing, we won't get many that are capable of running the family business in a professional manner. The good, sane and stable ones are few.

Twenty or thirty years ago, I might've been describing myself. I'm certainly talking about Primo twenty or thirty years ago, last year even. But I wised up years ago. If you can make a success out of a legitimate business why risk your freedom running an illegal one? When the risks of getting caught are imprisonment, all your assets taken away, your family impoverished and embarrassed - Why would you risk that, when you can

put as much effort into developing a legal operation that can provide a comfortable and worry-free income?

It all comes down to the way you approach your life. How much control you have over it, the decisions you make, the people you associate with and your own abilities to run a business.

I married my wife, Rosa, not because she was attractive, not because she had a good figure, not because she was intelligent, not because she has a charming personality. I married her because she has none of these.

I've seen strong, powerful and influential men laid low by a pretty face. Women can only dominate you if they withhold something you want. If you chose a wife that has nothing you want, you stay wearing the trousers. Any specific itches in those trousers can be scratched in private and in a discrete manner.

Rosa is a house-maker and mother; she provides a stable family home. She won't have her head turned by some horny stallion because she's irresistible to youthful raging hormones. She's happy to be apart from all that and gets well rewarded for it. Rosa, and our daughters, will always be financially comfortable. That's all any of us want.

Rosa's given me two daughters, I'm particularly happy about that. I would've liked two sons, to take over the business, continue the name, and so on. But would they run it the same way as me? Would their far-reaching vision be as good as mine? Who knows? Daughters - I wouldn't let them near this business, a recipe for disaster. We'd be making fashion clothing within a year.

I'm sorry not to have a son to take over, as I'm certainly not going to choose Primo as my successor. Primo can keep the money lending and drug side to himself. I've long lost interest in them, and made it clear I've distanced myself from the old traditional family income streams. Primo loves those areas, and one day I'd like to see him take off on his own with them.

I predict that without my authority over him, it's not too long before he's in prison. It's his road, and no one will sway him from it. I just need a few more months before I can dissolve our partnership completely. Let him get on with his journey to self-destruction, as long as I'm well separated from him.

Over the years I've carefully monitored how things have changed in England and discovered some niche markets emerge and new opportunities to develop my business. Currently I'm getting more involved with real estate. In fact, now I'm fully concentrating on this market, as it will soon provide me with a decent legal business foundation.

Real estate is my golden grail. It's taken me several years to get to this point, when a few more deals going through will make me totally independent. I need a substantial cash reserve to buy land and property to sell at a legal profit. This is the only way for me to progress.

However, to get here I've had to swallow my pride a little, and resort to tactics I thought I'd put behind me. I realise how difficult it is to be successful while being totally legal. As we all know from the stories over the past few years, the larger the corporation, the more corrupt they've been in business practices. I can understand that and relate to it. But I had to start somewhere.

I chose a London location and selected houses in a limited price range. No less than £1 million and no more than £2.5 million, in estimated sale value. With a little investigation and observation, I'd find out when the house would be empty, the family going on holiday, or business trip. School holidays were the best, away for the weekend, and so on. Burglars are particularly skilled at seeing these things. They'll sell that info cheaply too.

Once the house was empty, I'd send in my experts to disengage any alarms and safety systems, and then send in a team of professional squatters. They're high profile and look like they intend to stay for a long time.

The family returns and tries to take legal action, but the squatters are very polite and friendly, allowing the family to take away any of their possessions they wished. But making it clear they wouldn't leave and the law was, stupidly, on their side. Eventually, the squatters might be evicted, but not after a very troublesome and costly period.

Getting the timing right was important. I'd approach the owners, not me, but a very smart-suited gentleman I'd hired for the deal. He'd offer them a price to sell the house with the squatters still in it.

There was always a haggling period and sometimes they refused to sell. But on the occasions they did, it was for up to £200,000 below list price. Just to get rid of the irritation and be able to move on with their lives. These people had money they wouldn't really miss.

Once the house was mine, I told the squatters to leave and paid them off. The rate depended on how clean they'd left the house and how long they'd occupied it. A quick paint job, often by the squatters themselves, and on the market for around £200,000 profit.

Nothing illegal there, all within the framework of the law. I sometimes felt sorry for the sob stories the owners gave, but they were well-off enough to recover. A life's lesson learnt, you might say.

Although profitable, it wasn't happening quickly enough for me. Each individual project taking up to a year. The market was also subject to house price fluctuation. To keep them all balanced and moving forward was time consuming and when the owners didn't sell, I actually lost a fair amount of money. Also, the new regulations that came in, made it illegal for squatting. Party poopers! I needed something more immediate, with a bigger pay off.

At about the time I was despairing at the level of return on the squatter scheme, I was talking to a local council member in a club one evening. He was well over his limit and his speech slurred, but he made sense. I felt my mind whirring at what he said and made enquires to see how I'd use this information.

It took a while, and a lot of greased palms, but I finally saw an opportunity and acted on it. It needed a high cash output, this was the risky area. I considered it carefully and finally persuaded Primo to help with the funding for one test project.

He reluctantly agreed to fund as much money as he could raise, in return for the one thing he wanted most, his total control of specific areas of the Arzano business. As I was hoping to do that anyway, it was an easy step for me to take. We raised the cash and started Phase One of the scheme.

We're now in Phase Two of our current project and I've hit a wall. I didn't plan for this; it tied a lot of money up, going nowhere. As Primo says, there's only one solution left to us. It would be his way, or failure. For once he's right. I regret to admit it, but sometimes the old way is the only way.

We've used Luca Lacusta in the past, through a series of cut-outs. He's efficient and expensive, and the risk is always high. Risks I hated to take, but sometimes the only way forward.

This was to be my very last sanction, I made that promise to myself. Once through this barrier, we were on the home stretch to legal profits. I feel very noble in my chosen direction. I just wish Primo agreed with me. But as I've said, I'd be better off without him now.

As it was my last diversion into the old school of getting things done, I insisted on the best. A man who calls himself The Magician was in top form. Although he decided to retire, Luca has talked him out of it and he's taken the sanction for us.

I've put great faith in this Magician to remove the last obstacles from all my dreams becoming reality.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR – HENRIK

I was dreading leaving family and my home life. My English is not bad, but I felt not good enough to get by in England. But the more I hear the language, the better I am coming at the understanding.

I thought the man who called himself Smith would look after me all the time. He found me somewhere to live, provided plenty of food and safe situation. But he was gone most of the time. I became very unott....bored.

He was not talkative. I ask questions, he would answer. Briefly and with some humour, but he did not want talk. The trip to England was mostly like that. As soon as we got there, he was off for rest of day and into night.

One time he came home late, and I was up reading. I became frightened as a stranger opened his home front door and walked in. I took several moments to realise it was Mr Smith. He looked younger and fitter than before. I asked him about it.

‘I use disguises.’

I asked what disguises was, and he said, ‘I need to look different for different occasions.’ I still did not understand, so asked more questions. That is when I realised he had level where he would talk, beyond that he became distant and the little angry.

He disappointed me. This was man who was my hero, helped save my family from hollgans, tried to save my sister from slavery and now here I was in the strange land to do....what?

The first morning in his home he smiled as he came in to the luxury area. ‘Everything all right?’

I thought the words in my head, quicker than I used to and answered, ‘All right, thank you.’

He sat down, and I sat opposite him. He dressed as when I first met him, baggy trousers, old jacket, some sort of vest over tired chequered shirt. Receding hair, overgrown side whiskers and very unshaven. His eyes were dull and grey. He wasoverweight. But he looked....real.

He sat down, and I sat opposite him. ‘My sister? What news?’

He shook his head and my heart dropped. ‘We won’t learn anything until I see Luca later today. He’s not expecting me, so I want you to come with me.’

I nodded. ‘Shall I bring gun?’ I asked, alert.

He smiled and shook his head. 'No need for that. Unlikely we'll get anything done today. Luca will not let me walk in and walk out with your sister. He's too canny for that. He'll have something up his sleeve. We have to assume our chance to save Olga will come later. I want you as back up though. I want to go in alone, but I want somebody outside ready to call for help.'

'I will do what I can, Smith...sorry you said to call you James, I will remember that, James.'

He rested a hand on my shoulder; I think to show he was sincere. 'I don't want you to do anything unless something goes wrong. I'll leave you with a set of instructions that you're to follow to the letter, understand?'

'What letter?' I said not understanding last part.

'I will leave simple written instructions, that I want you to understand fully, before we do anything else. Okay?'

I nodded, 'All right. Can do that.'

Time moved slowly.

It amazed me what this man did in a day. He said it was normal, but to me, it was anything but normal. His exercise alone took four hours. He uses many machines and equipment. Standing on large soft balls for long periods of time. I tried it and fell off within seconds. It helps his balance; he said.

He would run for hours on machine. Why not run outside I asked?

'In this area, it would look suspicious. I don't want attention.'

He does something he calls "Meditation". He sits still and does not move for hours. I cannot see point in that. He also eats carefully. He lets me eat what I like, but he is strict with himself.

I have seen him read two books at a time. I have not even read one. Ever.

He spends lot of time on computer. Now that is strange thing. Things come to life on this screen, you ask it questions and answers are just...there.

I see him working on problems in language that is unbelievable. He types quickly, and rows of letters appear and do not seem to do anything until he presses one key...and images appear and things...move. It is magic. He is Magician.

He told me few things about his business. This was rare moment when he became talkative. I do not fully understand, but you can create an

“identity” for yourself. You can have false address, photograph and even something called bank account. Once you have that, he says you need a thing called “credit rating”. This, he says, he can create for himself by doing “Hacking”. All beyond me. But then you get credit card and can spend money. In shops, at place called Online and on phone. I asked if he would get me one.

He thought this was funny. How was I going to pay the money back at the end of the month? I did not know what was so funny about that. I do not have any money.

He said his cars were all “falsely registered”, and there was no trace back to him. Our family do not have any cars. Oh, yes. We have one left behind by holligans. But we can’t drive.

He is most careful man I have ever known, but quite figyelemre méltó. Remarkable!

He has several small houses, “flats” he calls them, in London. He uses them as something called “mail drops”. Post is sent there, and he makes his rounds sometimes. Each house has back entrance, so hard for “surveillance”. These he uses as safe houses with keys, well-hidden outside.

He has shown me one that will be my “bolt hole” if necessary. He says he has several more. If someone discovers his workshop, he can quickly move into one of these. They all have small armoury and equipment. Supplies for month or more, he said. All new words to me. All new world.

I was sitting in his small white van in a London street. It was quiet, and he had gone for the while. I read again list I had, to make sure I understood written English and what I had to do.

The first rule was for me to leave van and return to his apartment – if he did not return within one hour. That much he had made clear, several times, and I fully understood how to do that. Take bus to Southall underground station and walk from there. Make sure they did not follow me before going into flat and calling Lucie on phone. I do all that, I have learned.

I had met Lucie briefly, just once. She was beautiful and liked me, I thought. She was so friendly and touched my hand. I would like to see her again, James said I would. I would like to see Olga more. That was what my trip to England was all about.

Inside van was full of racks, with lots of electrical equipment and some power tools. I have never seen so many tools. On our farm, we had little to work with. Just my father’s old equipment that was years old and seldom worked, until he fixed it.

The van was hard and stuffy, and I was getting anxious. I kept looking at watch James had given me.

I jumped as he ripped side door open and James hurried in, shutting door quickly after him.

For a long while his concentration excluded me. I was anxious for news of Olga. His concern was to make phone calls and get his plans in order.

He called mamma, and I heard just his side of the conversation. It did not sound good. The more he spoke, the more I became worried. This was not going well.

When he finally slowed down enough to notice me I said eagerly, 'Did you see Olga?' He nodded. 'She, all right?' I asked.

He took moment to get his breath back, 'She's fine.'

I looked down at backpack he had brought with him. 'Olga's?' I breathed. He nodded.

'When will she be back?' I asked, unsure from the talk he had just had with mamma.

He was thinking how to tell me bad news. 'A few days, Henrik. We have to do...a few chores for Luca first. Then she'll be back. I promise.'

I nearly reminded him he had said that before and here we were and Olga still in danger. I thought it best not to. He was trying his best. All I do is offer support and try to help in any way I can. So, I just nodded.

He reached across and patted my hand. 'I'll show you where she is.'

From shelf he took small object that with press of button shone some light, it had a tiny glowing picture. It was like a map, of some sort. I had seen nothing like this before.

A few lines crossed each other, and he pointed to centre where there was blue dot. 'That's where we are.' He pointed to red flashing dot. 'That's where she is. When they move her, we will follow, and we'll know where they're hiding her.'

'Then get her back?' I said.

He shook his head slowly, 'Not right away. We have to do something else first. Then we get her back.'

'Why wait?' I must have been puzzled because he reached out and laid his hand on my arm again.

'We must be careful with Olga. No mistakes. No hurried rescue attempts. I know it's hard for you to understand, Henrik. There must be an order to these things. You trust me don't you?' I nodded. 'Good. Then please, we must do this my way.'

'So, what do we do now?' I asked, feeling empty from my excitement at possibly seeing my sister again.

'We wait.' He said with smile.

We waited nearly two hours before red dot moved across glowing map. 'Here we go.' James said as he climbed into driver's seat and I sat beside him. He started engine and van moved forward. He handed me map, 'Tell me when they turn. Just left, or right will do.'

And that is what we did.

I do not know where we were when we stopped, James stepped out of van and took in the whole street. He had another object that glowed with him. It was larger and also had map on it.

'Sat nav.' He said. I shrugged. 'It tells us exactly where we are.' He added as if that made any sense to me.

'I am glad somebody knows where we are.' I said with false lightness in my voice.

He grinned at me, 'Well, I do now.'

He pointed the smaller object around and seemed to decide the direction to go in. We were walking in street that had small houses on both sides. How can people live this close to each other? In front of each house was small area that I knew would not grow any vegetables at all. Where was their livestock?

It was dark now and only light came from tall lamps placed every thirty metres down one side of street. We walked until we came to where object flashed quicker.

James pointed to front door. 'Number fifty-five. Remember that.'

I repeated Ötvenöt several times to myself.

'Remember this area. Boscombe Road. Remember everything you can. When we come to get Olga, this is where we'll find her.'

I felt thrilled at hearing words, 'When we come to get Olga'.

He put object in his pocket and walked back up street. I wanted to ask, why not get her now if we know she is in there?

There were cars and vans parked everywhere on this street. James peered into all of them and particularly one large black car.

He reached under front wheel and stood up. 'Tracking device. At least we'll know where their car is.' I didn't understand. He would have to explain later because now he was walking quickly back up street. Past his own van and to end of row of houses.

'Usually, there's a back entrance to these terraced houses.' He called out as I hurried to catch up with him. 'Fifty-five is twelve houses from this end. Remember that. Twelve from THIS end.' He hurried down a narrow alleyway.

This came out into narrow paved road. 'This road should lead to garages for this row of houses.'

He counted to twelve and pointed to dark rear of house. Ötvenöt.

There was an old wooden fence separating house from this alleyway. There were about twelve metres, from fence to back of house. Which was dark, apart from lit window on upper floor. Was that where Olga was, right now? So near, yet so far away.

James pulled an object from his pocket and fiddled with it for a while. He noticed me over his shoulder. 'A digital camera. I'm trying to take photos without flash. No need to warn them we're here, eh?'

I nodded.

He reached over fence and pressed button several times, he peered closely at object in his hand. It had tiny glowing images, one after other and he seemed satisfied, as he nodded, 'Done.'

'Done what?'

'Done for the night. I'll treat you to a McDonalds on the way home.'

The next day we were hurrying all over the place. We visited a school. Two different locations where we just looked at houses from outside.

We even drove out into place called Surrey. We went into restaurant but did not eat there, it was very expensive. There was a card that listed the food.

£7 for salad! 2400 Forints! I was afraid to breathe the air in case they charged me for that.

James said he had to visit toilets and for me to come with him. We went into the “Loo”, as he called it, and just looked around. So different to the wooden version at home. He did not go, or anything. He seemed satisfied and walked out, back to car.

Several times we sat in car or van, and just watched houses. I was always unsure to ask what we were doing. The general answer seemed to be, ‘The less you know, the safer we all are.’ Whatever that meant.

On the ...third, I think it was, on third day we went back to restaurant. This time we were in the very fancy sports car. I do not know where it came from, not his workshop. It had no roof, and we drove quickly into the Surrey countryside.

I liked the ride. I said I wanted to get one of these.

‘You must learn to drive first, Henrik.’ I nodded. ‘And plenty of money.’

James appeared different again, now smooth and clean, had sporty moustache and bright green eyes. He looked tall and lean, rich and appeared to have loads of energy. Some dark blue blazer and light blue slacks made his white shirt dazzle in sunshine. I liked this version of James better.

We parked in restaurant car park and just sat there. James glanced at his expensive watch couple of times and seemed to be waiting for something to happen. He stared at me with serious set to his face. ‘I will go in there, on my own. Use the watch I gave you, and after exactly fifteen minutes I want you to go into the restaurant. Take this with you...’ he pulled backpack from the back seat and placed it on my lap. It felt heavy.

‘Go into the toilets, where we went the other day, and wait for me. Okay? Understood?’ I nodded. ‘Now repeat back what I’ve just asked you to do. In your own words.’

I repeated slowly and carefully what he had said to me. I know he likes detail and accuracy. I think I got it all right because he nodded. That was high praise indeed from James.

A large car drove into car park, the tyres grinding on the drive. His attention shifted to it. His eyes locked, and he sat still. I did the same, not daring to breathe.

Whoever we were waiting for, had arrived.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE - MARC BALLACK

These days we're rarely worried about anyone seeing us out and about together. After nearly a year of "skulking" around, Simon's solution was brilliant! He hired me as his Personal Assistant! That gave us every reason to spend a lot of time together and for me to be with him at ...almost anytime. Brillo.

As a Member of Parliament, he leads a busy life, sometimes, far too busy. However, as I told him, the more conscientious you are, the more work finds you. And the more work I have to do. I'm just not used to having to work eighteen-hour days!

I got into this for the relationship, not a career. OMG, no. But Simon assures me that it'll only be a short while before he steps down from some committees he attends. I believe that when the sky turns pink, but what am I to do? If I want to be with him, it has to be this way.

We've been to this restaurant before because it's so out of the way for anyone that knows us. As I said to him regularly, would it really matter if anyone knew we were together? He seemed to think it would. But first, he wanted to fulfil this year's schedule of events he felt particularly responsible for. And second, to sort out his past life. Sometimes he puts his constituents and family before me. At all times, actually.

We've got a few hours before the next scheduled event and we decided a lunch was a good idea. But I just know that work will be discussed the most. Natch.

We use this restaurant every second Tuesday, it's a good pit stop on our way to Guildford and his M.P.'s clinic. I'm in for a boring afternoon as he doesn't have me in with him during these sessions. Sometimes they can be busy, others not. I go shopping in Guildford. He takes his own notes and gives them to me afterwards, to work into his schedule of Things To Do.

I'm not a natural driver and uncomfortable with the larger cars. But I like this Jag of Simon's. It almost drives itself. With rear view cameras, assisted parking – everything! Makes driving a lot easier.

This restaurant I like because it has wide parking bays. It was quiet, and I chose a bay that was empty on either side. I pulled in and parked. Simon was thoughtful and melancholy. I reached out and held his hand, he looked up and smiled.

'We're here, Si.' I sighed with the impish grin he likes.

'Yes, of course. You...go on in. I need to make a few calls. Get a good seat, order us drinks. Five minutes. Promise.'

I knew what that meant, he'd call his wife again. Bitch. She would not let go. It was tearing him apart, and he was unravelling before my eyes. If he didn't have such a busy work schedule, I'm sure he'd have a complete breakdown.

I knew something was up earlier when he took a last-minute call in the office. He closed the door, so I wouldn't hear. We have few secrets, but this was a little too personal for him to share. When a man's marriage breaks down, it's hard to share with anyone.

'Don't be long.' I patted his hand and got out of the car.

We like to eat at the bar in this restaurant, very American, I know. Mainly because it's quicker. When you have table service, it's at the speed the waiters decide to move. I found two seats together and smiled at the barman. I think he sort of recognised me. I recognised him from the few times we'd been in.

'Campari and soda and an orange juice, please. Both ice, no slice.' He smiled at me, but he does that to everyone. It was a nice place, nothing special. No real theme at all, several window treatments I would not have chosen. I hate this over-decorated pattern on the chairs and the carpets! Nice hanging lights though.

Why wood? What is this obsession with dark wood everywhere? Okay, I understand low lighting, atmosphere and all that. But, OMG, in daylight, at lunchtime it looks so...depressing.

The drinks arrived, and I asked him to start a tab. I took a sip of the orange and thought it should be real and not reconstituted, at the prices they were charging!

I felt a movement beside me and was aware of a very smartly dressed man taking the seat next to me. He seemed very fit, like he'd stepped right off a yacht in Cannes. He sported a good old-fashioned blazer. I like blazers, I have ten of them.

He exhibited an old-fashioned Major moustache, which was elegantly trimmed and waxed. I like moustaches. Simon said in his business facial hair is a no, no. It's a pity, I really like moustaches.

He wore the whitest shirt I think I've ever seen. I was really tempted to ask him where he'd bought it. But if Simon came back and saw me talking to a handsome stranger...well what would he think? I know what I'd think if the situation were reversed.

He ordered a whiskey and a separate glass of water from the barman. He smiled. 'Hi.' His voice was soft and almost accent less.

I smiled back, 'Hi.'

He pointed to the menu I was holding, 'Anything you'd recommend?'

I glanced back to see if Simon was coming yet. 'Not really. It's all quite good.'

The barman was putting the drinks on the counter near us. I didn't want to rubbish his restaurant in his hearing, then spitting into the food when he brought it to us.

I felt uncomfortable. If I was on my own, I would've enjoyed a nice chat with the handsome guy, but with Simon imminent.....nooooo.

The barman gave me a knowing smile and walked away. Mr Handsome reached across me and took a few napkins to put under his drink. I wasn't sure if he brushed my hand on purpose, or not. I was now even more uncomfortable.

'You need to add water to that.' He sounded serious.

'But it's orange juice.' I glanced at the barman who was too far away to hear us, but I dropped my voice anyway, 'It's already well-watered down.'

'You sure? Taste it. Please.' He nodded at the glass.

I reluctantly lifted the glass and sipped. 'Needs no more.' I said now puzzled.

'No, you really do.' He lifted his glass of water and poured it in the orange glass. It instantly turned purple.

I was speechless. What was going on?

He lowered his voice, 'That could be poisoned. Anyone you know wants you dead?'

I've heard the expression "My heart turned to ice" before, but never understood it. I did now. All the events of the last few weeks came into sudden clarity. The warnings Simon had been given, the veiled threats, the lesser veiled threats. None he'd taken seriously. Suddenly it was all real. OMG, too real.

I didn't know what to say. I spluttered when the stranger picked up the orange juice and took a long swig.

'I said COULD be poisoned, not it WAS. See how easy it is to get to you people?'

'Who are you?' was all I managed.

'Insignificant. But the first thing I want you to do is to take a deep breath. Several if necessary and remain calm.' He leaned very close his voice a whisper. 'When Mr Richards comes in, I want you to introduce me as Mr Smith. Calmly and evenly. Do not give any warning, no secret signals, no coded words. Just introduce me and stay out of the conversation. Am I clear?'

I nodded my head. Anything but clear. 'Who are you?' I repeated.

'I just told you, Mr Smith.' His eyes focused on the front door. 'Calm and evenly.' He reminded me, with a half-smile.

Simon appeared and sat down beside me and nodded to the stranger sitting next to me. 'All done.' He grinned. 'Satisfied her for a while. What on Earth is that you're drinking....Are you all right? You look a little pale.'

I tried not to stutter and managed to say, 'This is Mr Smith.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX - SIMON RICHARDS

‘Pleased to meet you.’ I said, briefly distracted.

Marc did not appear well. He appeared...shaken. What had happened?

‘I’ve heard much about you, Mr Richards. I know a lot about you.’

There was something in the tone in which he said it, made me turn back to him. We locked eyes and there was a sudden tinge of fear creeping within me. Here was a well-dressed, very athletic and confident man. On meeting this stranger for a few moments he’d caught my attention and held it. I felt suddenly nervous.

‘Do you now? In what way?’ I intoned, still holding eye contact.

‘We have mutual ...associates in business. European by nature.’

He was trying to be non-specific as if someone else might listen, but I knew what he meant. I wouldn’t make it easy for him. ‘European?’ I asked steadily.

‘Italians. Are we on the same page, Mr Richards?’

I grew colder. I glanced quickly around, the barman was serving someone else. I heard the buzz of conversation, all vague and indistinct. There was nobody I’d call on to help. I was right to be nervous.

I’m a man that cannot be bullied. Throughout my whole life, from a child to an adult, I was never browbeaten or cowed. Beaten up many times but lived through it, never succumbed. But there was something sinister about this man. Something...no, not sinister..... confident he would get his way. I felt in fear for my life, and Marc’s. I didn’t know what to do. So for now, I just nodded.

Smith sipped his drink and put it down in distaste. ‘Should’ve had orange juice. Okay. We all know where we stand. I came in here and could’ve poisoned both of you and walked away clean. Right?’

Marc and I nodded. I felt myself straightening up, it was time I exerted myself. Show this man I was not a pushover and wouldn’t be threatened by Mafia hoods.

Smith continued, ‘So...I didn’t. Know why?’ Both Marc and I shook our heads.

As he spoke he held both our eyes onto his. I hung on to every word.

‘Because **I** don’t want to. I said **I**, I mean **I**. I don’t want to. But.... I’m in deep trouble if I don’t kill you both.’ He sounded so matter-of-fact, it was chilling.

‘I don’t understand?’ I mumbled, trying to stop the shakes in my hands.

‘Of course you don’t. I’ll tell you why. You gentlemen are the innocents here. You’ve done no wrong, not committed a crime, and are not going to. I don’t take those jobs.’

‘So...are you just going to....’ My heart racing.

‘Walk away? No.’ My heart pounded again. ‘But I need details from you. Accurate and precise. Then we can work something out.’ He spoke without a waiver in his voice.

Marc’s voice had plenty of waivers, ‘You mean...you’ll let us go?’

‘I can’t do that either.’

‘What sort of details?’ I asked sipping my Campari for something to occupy my hands. Suddenly realising it may have been contaminated, I put it back down. Smith noticed the hesitation and took it from me and had a sip. He wrinkled up his face, ‘How can you drink that stuff?’

‘Details?’ I asked, really struggling to understand what this man wanted. Was he playing a game with us? I’ve seen those gangster movies where they get you all relaxed and unsuspecting and then shoot you in the head. I peered around again and noticed there were now more people in the restaurant. This is not the place where he’d shoot us. Was it? The Godfather!.....wasn’t someone shot in a restaurant full of people?

Smith lowered his voice and leaned in close. His eyes sparkled and were extraordinarily healthy. I smelt cologne and tried to recognise it.

‘Why does someone want you, and your friend here, dead?’

Ceasing the subtle sniffing, I asked in a surprised tone, ‘Do they?’

‘I don’t have time for games, neither do you. Why? Everything. Your lives literally depend on it.’

Should I tell him the full story, he must know most of it? I never thought it’d go this far. He’d offered a shred of hope he wouldn’t kill us. I explained to him it began about a year ago. They made me aware that one of the local council members was acting suspiciously. At first, there was no evidence that the man was doing anything wrong, or unlawful.

In fact, even now there’s nothing the police can do. He was a staunch supporter of the council school system and unexpectedly voted to close the

St. Mary's Secondary in Finchley. Not only close the school but quickly sell off the land so the council had money to spend on other services.

As this was not in my Purdue I just reported it through a few committees I sit on and let someone else take the time to sort it out. It really wasn't my problem.

A few weeks later I'd a similar instance. Another council, another councillor, saying the same thing. I got Marc to do research, and we found it was happening in other London Boroughs. I gave the police and other local authorities details and let them sort it out. Marc, being dedicated, despite his overall relaxed nature, followed up a few weeks later.

We discovered that more recently a company called Octopus had a construction project on land they'd purchased from the council. Octopus having bought the land, for what seemed a very low cost. Staff in the council offices had flagged this up, but they did nothing at the committee level.

In another instance, they gave a large piece of council land over to public use. Quietly, it seems, they then sold this off to...Octopus, to build a large school. Once again the land sold cheaply. But when this was raised as a major issue in council meetings, they pacified members because Octopus had quoted to build the new school - at sixty-five percent of the cost quoted by other contractors. So, the council were in profit, after allowing for the cost of the school against the profits from the land.

Smith nodded and waved the barman over to order a glass of water for himself. He ordered an orange for Marc. I hadn't even tasted my drink so waved off his offer to refill.

Smith narrowed his eyes, 'So, did Octopus make money on this school deal then?'

'Unlikely.' Marc said.

I added, 'We think it was more a loss-leader for other land purchases.'

Smith paid the barman and said, 'Continue.'

I continued my side of the events, with as much detail as I remembered.

A few worried council members dug deeper, to find that other parcels of council land were being sold off quickly and quietly to Octopus. These councillors narrowed the people responsible to just six. Suspicions were aroused that they were being bribed by Octopus, to sell council land under-price to the Octopus construction subsidiaries.

These parcels of land were then quickly developed, the planning permission not even being questioned. Houses and offices were thrown up quickly and sold. Nothing seemed to be done to stop it.

That's where Octopus finally makes its killing. I stumbled after using the word "killing". Of course, they questioned the councillors responsible, who denied any misbehaviour.

Probably, because I started the ball rolling, concerned citizens looked to me as their most senior government figure. They wanted me to get an investigation going. As I'd been officially approached, I couldn't ignore it, so agitated for an enquiry.

It was then the threats began. A note here, or there. A man passing by on the street, whispering to me. I was concerned, but there appeared nothing serious to worry about.

'Octopus, you say?' His bright eyes steady on mine.

Marc interrupted, 'Yes. We followed it through and got the details and everything. We had to dig deep, but every transaction was under question went back to Octopus, or its subsidiaries. They call themselves a family business and they are...as you implied earlier, Italian.'

I chipped in with, 'The owner and M.D. is a man named Mario Arzano.'

Marc chimed in again, 'Yes. Once this investigation got underway, the threats increased. They even threatened Simon's wife!'

'Didn't you go to the police?' Smith asked, eyes never leaving mine.

I explained, 'Not initially. Parliament has its own security policy in place, and I reported everything to them. Weeks went by and nothing happened.' I sipped the Campari, which tasted particularly bitter today.

'So, what's changed recently?' He queried.

I shrugged, 'I don't know. All I can think of is that in my borough there's a school and it's earmarked for closure. No one on the council can understand why.'

'St. Justin's. Walthamstow.' Marc helpfully added.

I blew out any pent-up air and continued. 'I...got involved and with arguments and a little pressure, the council got a majority vote to stop the school closing. The few in opposition had a very valid argument for closing the school.'

As had happened in the other areas, Octopus had quoted to build a school well under normal budget. It was to be a big school and able to take

the overflow from St. Justin's, and from a few others in the area. Those nearby school were likely going to be targeted later for closure and redevelopment. By Octopus.

'It was then they offered a bribe to Simon.' Marc blurted a little too loud.

'Who did?' Smith asked.

'Two men came into my office. Bold as brass and said I needed to back out of council matters. They threw a large packet on the table and were about to walk off. I don't know what came over me, but I picked it up and....threw it back at them. They picked it up and walked away without a word.' I shrugged.

'When was that?'

'Two weeks ago.'

'Can you describe them?' his intensity was alarming.

'I don't know. Ordinary men I suppose, both well built. Dressed in dark suits and gaudy ties.'

'Did you call the police?'

'And tell them what? I'd no proof.' I was shaking my head now.

'CCTV?'

Marc shook his head. 'Don't have that, don't need it.'

'So, you've no concrete proof that this scam is going on in several boroughs and there're corrupt councillors who're taking bribes from corrupt developers?' I nodded.

He took a long swig of his water and glanced at his watch. His eyes swept the room, for about the tenth time. It was well into lunchtime and we had ordered no food yet.

He seemed perplexed. 'So, why have you been placed on the hit list now?'

The word "hit" chilled me. Until now I'd thought of it all as petty crime and empty threats. But they sent this man to KILL US!

I blustered and finally got my thoughts under control. 'I've been elected spokesperson for the next fiscal year. I'm now senior member responsible, for the selling and purchasing of council assets.'

‘And now everything’s going through you?’ Smith eyes sweeping the room again.

‘Yes.’

‘Simon’s not to be bought, he’s not corrupt. The council knows that.’ Marc spoke, quieter this time.

‘So do Octopus. Now.’ added Smith. ‘What’re you doing this Thursday?’

I looked at Marc who had everything memorised. ‘Ten o’clock appointment with Counsellor Dennis. A twelve with your financial expert on windmills. Two o’clock you have the speech at St. Justin’s.’

‘That’s the one.’ Smith said, showing animation for the first time.

‘One, what?’ Marc leaned forward.

Smith leaned towards him, ‘That’s where I will kill you both.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN - MARC BALLACK

Although we perceived this was the man sent to kill us, to hear him put it into actual words, OMG, it was chilling. I put my hand to my mouth to stifle a gasp. Simon stiffened. He was stoically going to get through this, tough it out. The contract killer wouldn't throw him.

I glanced at Smith and saw him thinking. He seemed to enter a trance, then slowly came out. To give himself time, he drank the last of his water. Finally, he made his mind up about something.

'I'm taking the biggest risk of my life in telling you this. Just being here is unhealthy for all of us. I'm risking other's lives too, but I won't go into that. I'm trying to save your lives and make sure the Italians will never bother you again. To do this, I need absolute secrecy from you.' He looked hard at me, then at Simon.

I think we both nodded. I was too busy staring at those eyes. What was he saying now?

Smith lowered his voice, so we had to lean nearer to hear him. 'Keeping our conversation secret is paramount. If the police are involved, then the Italians will know what's happening. I'm sure somewhere they'll have a paid informant in there. If I refuse the sanction, they'll put someone else in on you who WILL pull the trigger. So, your absolute silence is the only thing that will keep you alive. Do you understand?'

'Yes.' said Simon firmly. I nodded.

'You CAN trust me. I've chosen to be on your side, rather than kill you to be on their side.' For no reason he softened his voice, over-dramatically I thought. 'Not a word to anyone and be there on Thursday. Go ahead with everything you've prepared. Speeches included.'

'I don't know whether I should be thanking you, or not?' Simon said calmly.

Smith smiled, 'Let's see how it all turns out first. I need to use the men's room. Just a minute.' He eased off the stool and hurried away.

I breathed a deep sigh. 'OMG, what just happened?'

Simon stared after Smith, 'I don't really know.'

'Any point in asking him what happens next?'

'I think he just told us. We carry on and behave as normal. We show up at the school on Thursday, I give my speech....'

‘And then he shoots us.’

Simon shook his head. ‘No. He won’t do that.’

‘If he doesn’t, someone else will!’ There was a shake in my voice. ‘He just said so!’

‘They won’t,’ he said with no sincerity.

We were silent with our thoughts.

I glanced towards the sign that read Toilets and feared what he would say when he came out. Might he have changed his mind? I hoped not.

‘Should we tell someone?’ I asked Simon.

He thought a while and shook his head. ‘What good would it do? They didn’t listen before.’

‘But we now know for certain we will be killed.’

‘What proof do we have? None!’

‘He could just be a psychopath.’ I offered.

‘Who knows about us. How crazy can he be?’

There was another silence. We both peered at the Toilets. No sign of Smith. ‘He’s a long time.’ I said, as something to break the tension.

We said little for another few minutes until Simon spoke, ‘He’s been a long time, go and see where he is.’

‘Really? Me?’

‘Just go and open the door and let me know what’s happening. The tension is getting to me. Please, Marc.’

With a resigned “You owe me” sigh, I slid off the stool. I went into the Toilets and couldn’t find Mr Smith anywhere. The stalls were empty, the window locked tight.

OMG. He’d just....disappeared.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT - THE MAGICIAN

The meeting with the M.P. and his buddy confirmed the reason Mario wanted the hit. What to do about it now, drew my attention.

At least they were forthcoming with the information, which I had to accept was accurate. I'd all my body parts crossed they didn't breathe a word of anything I'd told them. I'm sure Mario had ears everywhere, and his Octopus's arms in many pies.

It was a risk to approach the targets, but I'd realised they were the only source of the real facts. The real details that can make all the difference between success and failure. Failure was not an option.

I wouldn't approach Mario or the moron Primo to get this information. The last thing they'd tolerate was direct contact with their asset. And their reaction possibly lethal. For me and the project.

The restaurant meeting went as well as expected. The simple misdirect with the napkin allowed me to drop the capsule into the orange drink. A simple powder that changed colour when water is applied, basic school science. I guess the bar didn't water the orange too much otherwise it would have spoiled my trick.

The bathroom exit strategy I've used before. I'd watched Henrik walk into the Gents with the backpack. Once I got inside the restrooms, I'd quickly changed outfits in a stall. Applied quick makeup, wig and glasses. Whipped off the moustache and left the toilets smoothly. Henrik followed a few minutes later with my original clothes in the backpack.

I drove back to London in silence. Henrik knows not to disturb me when I'm thinking. And I was thinking hard.

I'm less than two days away from the scheduled Time of Impact. I needed more information and Henrik needed to help me.

This would be the highest profile hit in my career. Many TV channels planned to cover this event, along with newspapers and magazine journalists.

Simon Richards had done a great PR job in bigging up his speech to attract the media attention. He'd promised breakthrough revelations of high-level corruption, going way up into the higher ranks of Governmental departments.

He was exaggerating I'm sure, but it got attention and was going to attract many people to the speech. That can work against you, or for you. I had to make sure it was the latter.

Even if this was a standard contract, through Milo, or another of my clients, I'd have to disappear for a long time afterwards. The subsequent police and governmental investigations would be extreme and highly detailed. I wondered how the Italians and Luca were planning to avoid the backlash? It was time to find out. I called Luca.

'Luca. Situation report?' I spoke in a clipped tone with the accent he was familiar with me using.

'Magic Man! Nice to hear from you. Everything set for Friday?'

'Almost. How's Olga?'

'She's absolutely fine.'

'Good. I'll need proof, I need to speak with her?' I softened the tone.

'Not until you've completed your side of the bargain, Magic Man.'

'I remember telling you that your side of the bargain included her not being harmed, or the deal is off. Now if I can't speak with her....' I let the silence continue while he thought it through. Trying to think of something that would keep his domination in the bargaining procedure.

I knew the answer, it's just that he took a long time to get there. 'I'll call you back.' The line went dead. I waited.

After three minutes my mobile rang. There was a gruff voice on the other end and then I heard a rustling as he handed the handset over to another person.

Olga said, 'James?'

'Hi. Okay?'

She was a smart woman and picked up on my casual and calm voice. 'Fine. And you?'

'Sure. Busy. How's your mouth? Sore gone?'

'Yeah. Wasn't there long. Thanks for remembering.' I sensed the smile on her lips.

'You're welcome. Are they treating you well?'

‘A little better than Luca used to. That’s not saying much, but they haven’t harmed me. That’s what you wanted to hear?’

I spoke slowly for emphasis. ‘I just want the truth.’

‘That is the truth. Are you...okay?’

‘In a few days I will be, so will you.’

I heard the gruff voice again, and the line went dead. A few minutes later Luca was back on the line.

‘Satisfied, Magic Man? My side of the bargain kept. Now yours?’

‘Where’re you keeping her?’ I had an edge back in my voice.

‘Now I won’t tell you that, will I? You’re supposed to be The Magician, read my mind!’

‘I meant is she in a comfortable room, a cellar, tied to a bed....what?’

‘Oh, don’t worry. She has a self-contained apartment. Room service and three square a day.’ I imagined his weaselly face smirking as he spoke.

‘Who looks after her, Luca? One of your Mensa goons?’

‘Both, actually, they take turns so they’re fresh and alert. Don’t even think about....’ He laughed.

‘I wasn’t. I was just wondering if she was comfortable. If she’s harmed in any way Luca....it won’t end good for you. I’ve earned my reputation, you’ll not be safe from me.’

There was a moment’s silence on the line before he got his nerve back. ‘Keep your side of the bargain, Magic Man. Is everything ready?’

‘For what?’ I queried softly.

‘Friday! Are you set?’

‘Is the venue and time still the same?’

A slight hesitancy entered his voice, ‘Of course, why would they change?’

I paused before saying, ‘It’s a little....tricky, Luca. The place will be full of people. Large media coverage. I’m not sure I can pull this one off.’

‘The fantastic and wonderful Magician stumped. Don’t give me that.’ The laugh was false. ‘Don’t think you can pull a fast one with me. None of your tricks, Magic Man. I shall be there to see it go down. If it doesn’t, one instant

call is all it takes for Olga to suffer. The second call.... the rest of her family joins her. You must tell the brother brat, you were responsible.'

I let his words hang in silence, he was enjoying this. His feeling of power was getting him excited. Excited men talk too much. I waited.

He didn't let the silence last long, 'The Italians will be there too. They want a live performance, this is incredibly important to them. If there's a screw-up, my head will be on the platter too. You're on notice, Magic Man.'

This was news, this was a game changer. All my previous plans went out the window.

'What do you mean "be there". Why would they risk exposure like that?' said softly it was more doubting.

'I don't know, perhaps they don't trust you. After all, you tried to retire before.'

'Perhaps they don't trust you, either, Luca. Did they ask for you to be there?' the doubting tone now putting a query in his mind. The silence gave me the answer. 'Are they going to make a speech too? Before the M.P., or afterwards?'

There was a short silence before Luca spoke in a low voice. 'You're not the only one with guns, Magic Man. No screw-ups. No hesitation. No changing the game plan. Do your job and everyone's happy. Fail and see how many go down.' Another pause. 'Look. I'll tell you now....there's a bonus in this for you. I know I haven't mentioned payment, but this is end game for a lot of us. So how about I give you €400,000?'

'Nice gesture, Luca. But, I'm just saying this is not straightforward....'

'Just do it!' The line went dead.

I sat in thought for a while before I returned to the treadmill and put my ideas in order.

I'd four major obstacles. How to prevent a bloodbath at the Hungarian farm. How to get Olga back safely. How to keep the Italians from assassinating me. And how to prevent Luca from screwing me or killing me.

After a few hours, I'd come up with a rough plan. Complex and fraught with possible misfires, but a plan. I had an exit strategy, but no backup. I'd decided on a method and choice of weapons.

I've got an extensive collection of handguns and rifles, part of my stock in trade. As I studied the concealed armoury, I felt a wave of melancholy.

None of these would be used again by me. Retirement can be such a demoralising issue.

I'd decided this sanction was to be close and noisy. The noisy part for the benefit of the Italians. The close up a benefit to me, for my exit strategy. So, I needed a big-bore weapon. I lifted out a gun I'd never used before, a Colt Anaconda. This is a large frame double-action revolver with a six-inch barrel and six round cylinders. No longer made, it's a collectors' piece and probably worth near £2,000. These revolvers were marketed for sports enthusiasts and hunters, they're too large for law enforcement use, or concealed-carry.

A bonus was that the spent cartridges remained in the gun, unlike automatic weapons which ejected the case using the blowback principle. This would save me time in finding the spent cases and picking them up. A rather give-away move of an assassin, when seen on video later. This gun was big, brash, beautiful and suitable for my purpose.

I needed a second weapon and selected the Smith & Weston Model 36, known as the 'Chief's Special'. It's small for such a powerful gun and therefore easier to conceal. It takes the powerful .38 special round, although I wouldn't be shooting at any range.

Now to the ammunition. This was all going to have to be hand-made. I was considering two different types, and this is where Henrik came in. Henrik said he was reasonably proficient in his father's workshop, so I put him to the test.

The hardest task was to find small pieces of Carrera marble. This quality marble has been used since the time of Ancient Rome and is quarried in Pietrasanta, near Pizza. It's distinctive and essentially "Italian". Many of the great statue sculptors down through history used it. Michelangelo's "David" is made from it. As this was an "Italian" hit, what better message than Italian marble bullets.

I sourced bullets to fit the Chief's Special, and I laid them out for Henrik. The lead slugs were removed and discarded, not needed. In their place, the Carrera marble pieces would be carefully machined down to fit. Their size and shape matched exactly the removed lead slugs.

The large calibre Anaconda ammo needed attention. I put Henrik to work on those too, using my small, but compressive tool workshop. Meanwhile, I went back to my makeup box to prepare a few other essentials for the event.

The big gun needed disguising somehow. It was going to be obvious if I stood up, aimed and fired in a crowd, somebody would see me. Some of the many cameras rolling, recording me. That's when I got the idea.

After a few hours, we were finished. It didn't take long, but the process was vital. I praised Henrik for his work and his face had a broad beaming smile on it for hours. At least it took his mind off Olga, whose plight was wearing him down.

I'd like to have tested these new ammunition concepts, but time was a little against us. Also, where can you test such a big unsilenced gun without arousing suspicion? I had to rely on my aim and the closeness to the targets.

Although I was set on my course of action, my mind was still full of what ifs and buts. I was now down to one plan, no alternatives. One exit strategy, not enough for my usual cautious approach. But this was not a usual contract.

Far from it.

Henrik and I spent several hours surveying the school. This was difficult in these days of paedophile awareness, two men watching a school playground while school was in term?

We did it in two visits. Both visits using contrasting vehicles and disguising ourselves differently each time. Henrik enjoyed the drama of it all although didn't fully appreciate why we were spending so much time on surveillance.

I'd called Marc Ballack and had to calm him down. He thought I'd changed my mind about not killing them. I felt guilty when I said I wouldn't shoot them, because my whole plan was to shoot them. But they wouldn't be worrying about that for long, I hoped.

It took a while, but I got full details about the preparations for the speech. Where does the speech take place? Was there a podium? Any cordons to keep public and press away from the dignitaries? Where would Marc be standing? Who else would speak? Exact schedule for each speech. Reception afterwards? Where was that held? Car park accessibility? Where would everyone park? How many TV companies responded? Who were they? Security details?

He was certainly efficient; he had the answers to most of the questions. Even though his nerves got the better of him as he questioned why did I need to know all this when I said I wouldn't go through with the killings?

The CCTV cameras didn't fully cover the whole car park. Once I estimated the areas they covered, this left me my escape routes.

The podium was to be right outside the main school entrance. A fancy sculptured school name above the doors a distinct feature for the cameras during the speech. The car park held about a hundred and twenty cars and would be cordoned off for the dignitaries, invited guests and media staff.

This school was on the corner of two roads. Both had street parking, but being London, this would be quite occupied during the normal term time. The school was to be closed for the day, so parking may be possible during the event time. But if Luca and the Italians couldn't park there where would they go? I located a large underground car park a few hundred metres away. Might they park there and walk to the school?

An open link fence surrounded the school, offering a good view of the presentation from anywhere on the pavement. The nearest traffic lights were several blocks away, so consequently little likelihood of traffic hold-ups. The nearest police station several miles away and the nearest hospital even further.

I noted all the one-way streets and memorised every escape route possible in case something blocked any street, for any reason. Even worked out several routes on foot, should it become necessary.

The weather forecast for the day was overcast and 20^o, no chance of rain. There were no other events scheduled for the area. Being mid-week there were no public demonstrations, carnivals, protests, etc.

The underground car park appeared to be only two-thirds full at around the time of day of the event. I memorised the stairwells. payment costs, whether the machine took cash, or whether the ticket was pre-paid.

Two streets along from the school was a back alley where large refuse collection bins were stored. I checked inside them to find black plastic bags, and the collection day wasn't until the following Monday. I considered putting a change of clothing into a black bag and having a quick change if necessary.

Next on my whiteboard - Olga. Last, but not least. Now it was Henrik's turn to step up.

I now had less than a day left to finalise Olga's rescue.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE – LUCIE

I would never have considered my life could be turned upside-down so rapidly. It's beenwhat...only a week since everything changed?

To say the revelations about James came as a shock, would be an understatement. I've seen the rougher side of human nature. I've had clients who were on their worse behaviour when they were with me, and away from their wives and loved ones. Men can behave differently when they know they can't be caught or found out. With someone that wouldn't judge them, presumably wouldn't meet them again. I've learned to cope and handle that, but an assassin? A hitman?

Never really sure they existed outside of movies, never thought I'd meet one. And for that man to be someone of whom I've become increasingly fond. I think that's the part that hurt the most. I thought I knew men, but now realised I didn't know this man at all.

I felt let down and betrayed, and yet, not really able to say why. When I thought about it – and I thought about it a lot for the first day or two – I realised that perhaps it was no real surprise. Was I so unaware of his behaviour, the timings and reasons for his visits? The ease in which he handled difficult clients? Rico!

So, what was my dilemma?

It most probably comes down to character. What kind of person would take another's life? With calm calculation, so callous, as if the event meant nothing to them? How can that person also be caring and loving? Fall in love and marry? Bring up a family? Touch a woman's face with the hands that pulled the trigger? The dichotomy was beyond my understanding.

With James, I'd only ever seen one side of him, as I do with all my clients. But with him, our relationship had gone further. At least, I thought it had. What did he really feel about me? Would he pull the trigger if I was his paid target?

How much emotion to invest in this man? How many more questions to ask myself? How few answers were there?

Spending so much time with Olga had given very little insight into what James did on a daily basis. What came across, is that he's a normal human being for most of the time. He was exceptionally kind to Olga, a woman who tried to kill him. He risked his life for her at the drop of a hat, and I can tell it's not because he's physically attracted to her. I know those signs, intimately.

He even left the country to help sort out her family problems. What kind of ruthless killer would do that?

I'd almost driven myself mad with questions, and it was with an apprehension he came to see Olga a few days after the bombshell. We got time just to ourselves. I banished Olga outside, drinking and smoking.

I let my feelings known to him and ranted for a while. I can't remember what I said, but I'm sure included every single doubt and question that'd run through my head since I found out who he really was. Waving my hands and pacing the floor, I think I shouted. Not sure.

I must have acted as a love-sick schoolgirl. Like a betrayed wife discovering her husband's infidelity. But did I feel that way? I wasn't sure any more.

He just sat there quietly relaxed. Not disinterested, he was listening. He was waiting until I had let it all out. His self-control was admirable but bloody frustrating. I wanted a row; I wanted him to rave, so I'd rave back louder. I wanted to ...hit him, knowing he wouldn't hit back.

Then I realised. He would never hit back. For after everything was said, he was not a violent man.

I stopped. I stood, my fists clenched and ready for battle. There was silence. His face sad and the maternal stirrings in me were rising, but I forced them down as I'd learned to do over the years.

He spoke quietly and calmly, 'I can only say I'm sorry. I'm sorry I'm not the man you thought I was, but I never suggested anything else. I've always enjoyed your company, I've always respected you. Nothing's changed on my part, but if your perception of me has changed, there's very little I can do about that.'

He moved towards me. He took hold of my clenched fists and stroked the back of my hand with his thumbs. I wanted to tear my hands away and strike him, show him I would always be mad at him. But I didn't. I stared into his eyes. They were so hypnotic.

'Is there anything I can do to change your opinion of me?' I shook my head. Not risking talking anymore. 'Then it's up to you. I'm sorry you had such a shock to find out what I do for a living. I'm sure you've friends and family that'd be astounded to find out what you do for a living?' He looked and sounded so sincere. 'But it doesn't make you a bad person, far from it. You're the most wonderful person I know. I'd hate for that to change. I want to return to our relationship as before.'

He pulled both my fists up close to his chest and gently kissed the knuckles. I felt them relaxing involuntarily, I wanted to reach forward and

touch his face. Was that the professional me reacting mechanically? Or did I really want to do that? Succumb to his reasoning? My eyes were burning, and I didn't want him to see the tears. Tears I never let fall for anyone, even me.

I pulled away and went into the bathroom and locked the door. I needed time to think. By the time I came out he'd gone.

How annoying is that?

Olga was full of questions, but I didn't feel like answering her. I didn't know what I needed to say, I didn't have the answers. I was so confused. How very unprofessional of me.

He was away for a few days. In that time, I was able to pull myself together and rationalise my thoughts and speculations. During that time Olga and I became very close.

When James finally called, I initially kept our conversation very low key, giving nothing away. I wouldn't forgive him. Everything was not "all right".

When he told me it was all over, I cried in relief. I spoke to him through those tears and heard myself saying, 'I've missed you. Come back soon.' I've never truthfully said that to anyone in my life.

Ever.

CHAPTER THIRTY - THE MAGICIAN

The day overcast and as forecast. I showered, breakfasted and changed into my disguise in plenty of time before the event.

I wore creased jeans and an old brown suit jacket. A faded blue shirt and slightly worn trainers. A half pate wig and scruffy underdeveloped beard. Dark brown contact lenses and small rimmed spectacles added to the facial features. Cheek pads and small fat suit finished the job.

In plenty of time, I drove the van to the car park and left it in the nearest empty bay to the exit. I hefted my equipment and slung the backpack over my shoulder. I made a quick tour of the small car park and found the Italians “company car”. No sign of Luca’s car.

I’d done my research, a black Chrysler 300 SRT8. The right number plate, and a man sitting in the driving seat, the chauffeur waiting to be called to pick them up. People who don’t own one call it the “mafia car”. Apt, I thought. Didn’t like them myself, tiny windows and a pig to park. All metal and image.

I walked the longest route to the school playground, studying the streets as I went. No new roadworks. No lorries unloading. No cars parked in wrong places. No additional large waste bins blocking the walkways. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary.

As the school came in sight I walked up and down the streets, studying the cars. All parking positions full as expected. I wanted to find Luca.

Luca was sitting in an off-grey Mercedes, near the end of the school playground. He clearly was able to see through the chain-link fence and the podium a few metres beyond it. He must have arrived very early to find a car park space so convenient.

Approaching his car from the rear, I angled myself to keep in his blind spot and kept low as I crept towards the car. He was closely watching the schoolyard and the events unfolding.

I placed a magnetic tracker under the bumper. I chose a unit that gave me a good range, the size of a large mobile phone and it had to be hidden behind the bumper. I carefully backed away, sure I hadn’t been seen.

Now, where are Mario and Primo? Had they changed their minds? The risk too great? Then I spotted them, standing by the fence, a few dozen metres from Luca’s car.

Other people peered through the fence. Passers-by who'd stopped to see why all the fuss. There must have been over twenty observers there. All looking at the group of people standing around the temporary stage.

For those that were unaware of the publicity surrounding this event, it must be strange to see TV crews and assorted media descending on their little school. One young woman didn't seem interested in the goings-on. She was petite, blonde and very attractive in her tight biker outfit. She was staring at Primo.

It takes all sorts.

Not too surprising as Mario dressed over-the-top casual. Jeans, neatly pressed, sports jacket and a golf shirt. Primo's bulky figure pushed to the limits a bright red golf shirt and golf trousers. He wore a light windcheater even though the day dawned warm. To hide his weapon, I assumed.

I figured where they'd walk to get back to their car. I hoped they wouldn't be in too much of a hurry.

Someone was speaking, being amplified and distorted through loudspeakers. I knew the proceedings were underway. 13:55, I'd timed it right.

The gate offered the only entrance to the school car park, and it had been shut. A single uniformed man on the gate glared at me quizzically. I showed him the press pass I'd forged the day before and told him I was late and in a hurry. He showed brief interest in the professional heavy video camera I carried, then let me through with a wave. I smiled gratefully at him and said thanks.

Around thirty metres away, a stage, and a sizable crowd had collected around it, at least three hundred people. The more the merrier. Media people on step ladders and two TV crews, who'd stationed themselves right in front of the lecture rostrum. The sound of someone talking echoed around the playground, bouncing off the school walls.

I walked to the side of the crowd where I was able to keep an eye on the Italians and Luca. I glanced at the CCTV cameras and positioned myself in one of the blind spots. I hefted the camera onto my shoulder and appeared to be getting ready to record.

The camera was a case only and lighter than it appeared. Inside hid the Anaconda, secured to the side and covered with a piece of plastic to make it blend in as part of the camera casing.

I used the camera sights to aim the gun, and a hidden trigger to fire it. I was sure it'd work. I'd practised dry firing many times over the last few days. I swung the camera around as if to get the feel for the exposure and distance.

On the podium were several occupied chairs and Simon Richards talking with someone dressed like the Mayor. Feather headgear and an elaborate gold chain. They stopped talking when the man speaking announced Simon's name. There was a smattering of applause and Simon approached the lectern.

I moved to get a better view of him while watching the CCTV camera arcs. Marc Ballack was sitting on one of the podium chairs, even at this range, he appeared nervous. He was desperately searching for the nightmare that had frightened him in the restaurant a few days earlier. Fearful of seeing the familiar face that threatened to kill him

Simon opened his speech by welcoming the media and other interested associations. The cameras clattered, and people remained respectfully quiet as his speech echoed across the grounds.

I called Henrik from my mobile. 'Is she there?'

'Yes, James. The little dot is blinking, upper floor. Still there, I'm sure.'

'Good. Get the weapon and get into position.' I clicked off the call and concentrated on Simon and his speech.

I'd been sent a copy of the speech because I needed to know the timing and where the controversial sections were due to be announced. My sanction required me to make sure that none of the relevant facts to be publicly disclosed. Simon had to be silenced before damning evidence broadcast. The guilty parties name not to be mentioned in connection with Simon's crusade.

Simon eloquently decried the disappearance of many London schools, sold off to make huge profits from new-built flats and offices. Careful not to name council members and outside interested parties at this early stage of his speech, he gave a harsh warning that several other schools nearby are being targeted. Soon to be aggressively persuaded to be closed, and the land sold to developers. But it was not too late for this school.

As a senior Board member on both the school and council, he was able, personally, to save this school from closure. And he vowed to stand against any other schools threatened by closure and redevelopment.

He railed not at just the obvious corruption of officials, but the damage to the education of the youth in this city. One school closure alone had 3000 pupils scattered throughout several boroughs. Friends are torn apart, parents having to get their kids a further distance to strange, new schools. The cost and disruption to the curriculum. What damage to further education? This has got to stop.

He paused for dramatic effect. There was applause, bouncing off the walls, adding to the eeriness of the atmosphere.

I'd steadied my breathing and slowed my pulse. I focused on why I'm doing this and thought briefly of Olga sitting in that lonely room. Not knowing if she'd ever get free. And if she did if it was for her execution.

'I have details on how these schools are being sold off, illegally.' A pause, 'And who is responsible.' Simon had raised his voice for his revelation. The big announcement, the core of what the media had come to hear. The details the Italians didn't want the world to hear.

I fired two quick shots.

The gunshots were deafening. There followed a stunned silence while the sound of gunfire still echoed around the car park.

The muzzle flash and smoke emission were contained inside the fake camera case, so no one saw where the shots had come from. I had dropped the camera quickly to my side, to hide any indication the shots had come from around me.

A woman screamed as she saw Simon Richards's chest explode in a red spray. He was flung backwards with a scream in his throat. Further screams came from the crowd. When they realised that Marc Ballack had been thrown from his chair, his chest now a mass of blood.

Confusion, then panic.

I waited for a beat and triggered my phone. 'Go, Henrik, go!'

At the fence, the two Italians remained standing, a smile on Primo's face. Mario more serious. A little further along from them Luca's car still there. I couldn't see into it but assumed he was still in there.

I was on the move.

The crowd now dispersing and surging at the same time. People were stumbling in their haste to get away from the firing zone. Many ran for their cars in the playground parking areas. The majority hurried for the single gate out into the road. Voices raised and amplified to a roar.

I moved with the crowd, unnoticed and invisible.

The man guarding the gate had the common sense to swing it wide to let people through, before he ran towards the podium. He may be the designated security for the day, but he was unarmed, elderly and overweight. A lot of good he'd be.

I had a quick decision to make. The Italians hadn't moved. I decided.

I ran for the exit with the rest of the crowd. Once through it, I hurried along the fence. Up ahead Luca's car pulled out from the parking space. The tyres squealed as he skidded down the road. He'd gone, uncatchable now.

Primo was shaking hands with Mario, out there in full public view. The two people who'd ordered a high-profile hit congratulating themselves. Were they aware that TV cameras are still running? The footage analysed afterwards? They'd be identified and police action against them initiated. Or are they so sure of themselves now? No banner waving do-gooder standing in their way anymore. No evidence to connect them.

Their arrogance infuriated me. Someone should do something about that.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE - PRIMO VESPA

Sometimes Mario stretches my patience. If he wasn't related to me....sometimes I want to

His arrogance is appalling. What he says, what he does. Sometimes I just don't believe it. How can this man run a successful family with his attitude? It beats me.

I'm being increasingly told I can't do things. We must now do things this way. Not the old way.

Bastard!

I don't see an end to it either. He's my age, give, or take a year. He's in good health. Fitter than me, anyhow. He will outlive me. So, when am I going to take over some power? Ever?

How far down this road to ruin will he take us before I can turn it all around and bring us all back? He doesn't give a fuck for the soldiers, us Capos, anyone. Profits are slowing down. We all need to earn. He doesn't understand that. Legit this, legit that, doesn't pay the bills. The mortgage, the kid's school, the mistresses. All cost money.

This obsession of his to go straight is ruining me and the crew. And what's wrong with the old ways, anyhow? There're still many times when bribery, kidnapping, violence and blackmail are still necessary. The odd clip and pop here, or there. Prostitution, gambling and drugs have always been money earners. And do you know why? Because everyone wants them. They'll pay for them. Time and time again.

I know the days of the Kray brothers in the 60's has gone. They ruled their defined patch with a rod of iron. We can't do that anymore, but this...sanitised approach to organised business is a killer.

Real Estate! How the fuck can my ten crew earn any money out of that? For fuck's sake. Or me? Okay, I don't have the family to support, but I've a lifestyle that cost money to support.

The one saving grace in all his mad ideas is that he realises he needn't drag me along with him. I can see a time shortly where I can take over specific areas of business and run them on my own. My own way. Then we'll see real earnings.

I can't wait to ramp up the more profitable sides of the business. The Pros, gambling and of course the big money earner – drugs. The crew can all earn from that. It's exciting. It's a business that runs on coercion. Men can

be men. It's a great outlet for pent-up emotions. Violence and intimidation. I love it.

I'm contemplating an offer from an up-and-coming source. A newly emerging outfit that's hoping to dwarf any organisation operating in the London area. They're talking about my crew joining them.

But before all that, I've got to help Mario dig himself out of a hole he's created. He'll never learn, the fucking idiot. It was me who had to deal with the assets. No, Mario wanted none of our boys to handle it. It has to be the expensive, sanitised, "they can't connect me with the hit" contractors. He wouldn't handle it, too dirty for his lily-white hands.

So here we are at a school fence, with the great unwashed standing all around us. We're wide open here! For the second time the blonde girl was staring at me, I think she might have recognised us. What has Mario got us into this time?

I've had to cancel Antonio for the afternoon for this. I was looking forward to that, too. Let off a bit of steam without actually hurting someone. Whatever. There's always later.

One-fifty. What time is this going to happen, two?

I must confess to a little excitement, seeing someone killed from the side-lines. I know it doesn't float Mario's boat. But then what does?

So where is this Magician, then? I've searched everywhere and can't find him. I know he's good, let's just see just how good. He's lucky to be alive. Mario told me to tie up the loose ends when he said he would retire. A spring clean. I put the contract out and now I've had to retract it. Fucking Mario changing his mind again. I can't guess what Luca told him, but it's all back up the same old road again.

Luca was sitting in his fancy Merc. What a crass car that is. Is that puce colour? I wouldn't trust that creep with my cat. If Mario wants to tie up loose ends, he should start with that guy.

I can hear the droning of someone talking over the loud speakers but can't make out the words. Don't care either as long as my name isn't mentioned.

We look so conspicuous. I thought it was bad enough we had to be here at all. Mario's fucking idea. Again! He insisted he wanted to be here at a milestone in his career. What fucking milestone would this be? Are there milestone to denote levels, or distances, of foolishness?

And in disguise! I can't believe how ridiculous Mario and I must appear dressed like this, it was his idea. That explains a lot!

I do not get his idea it didn't matter if anyone saw him there. He was a genuinely interested party in the event itself. I get that, but not when the principal speaker gets gunned down and we're watching! Coincidence, or fucking what?

Where is The Magician?

The noise startled me, I wasn't expecting it to be so loud. Two shots. Big bore weapon by the sound. There was a moment of absolute silence, except for the shots echoing around the playground. Then the screaming started.

I stared at the raised stage watching the idiot politician explode into blood and guts, quickly followed by his butt boy. I had to smile at the drama, but where had the shots come from? Both victims were on the ground. The Magician was pretty good after all.

There was an intensity on Mario's face, I'd not seen for a long while. It was like a great weight lifted off him. Silly fucker.

I watched the panic develop in the school yard. People are like headless chickens when fearful. The shooting's over you silly bastards! Calm down. They were streaming through the gates on our right and to their cars in the car park. How did they think they'd drive out of there, when the only gate exit was already full of panicking people? I had to smile.

Mario let out a long deep sigh, and I looked straight at him, still smiling from the chaos in front of me.

'We did it, Primo. The last hurdle. We did it.' He gasped breathlessly.

'You more than me.' I reminded him.

'The Arzano family will be free for ever.' I hoped he didn't include me in that future plan. 'Thank you, Primo. Great job.'

He put his hand forward, and I just shook it. I was a little surprised at his outburst of emotion. It wasn't like him and certainly not like me. I've known the man all my life and never realised he was so soft inside.

'Well, if congratulations are in order, Mario. Here's wishing you the fucking best of.....'

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO – LUCA

There was a lot to consider concerning the Magician, because he's a tricky customer. His reputation was legendary and justified. Many a time I wanted to hire him, but he was out of my price range. Until now. Free is cheap after all. But this was a one-off and after that I'd be gone, but I wanted no loose ends.

I thought hard because if I was to try to eliminate him – and failed – I'd be looking over my shoulder the rest of my life. So, it left me with two alternatives. Kill him, or befriend him. The latter would be difficult. Actually, impossible. So, redefine the problem to mean – let's leave it so he doesn't hate me enough to pursue me.

The only way that would work - if he thought he'd get everything he wanted out of this mission. So far, I'd pacified the Italians. I don't think they'd worry about The Magician disappearing after this event. They would be happy with the end result. If The Magician got Olga back in good shape, he wouldn't hold that against me. Too much. Especially if I left the family in peace too.

So, okay so far. I'd offered him money for this sanction, as a stimulus bonus to leave me alone. Any one idea on its own probably wouldn't work. But combined!

The opportunity to put the plan into action presented itself when he called me. I know the call was to ensure the contract was still a go, but he doubted its success.

I was mad and angry and in the past have used forceful aggression to get my point across, but this was The Magician. Some things won't work on him.

I still had the upper hand with Olga in my care, so I used that card. But the call left me uneasy. It confirmed he was a difficult man to deal with. He'd be trouble all the way. It also confirmed that my getaway would need to be directly after the event. I wouldn't hang around to see him barging through my door.

One way was to delay giving him Olga's location, offering to release her to make her own way to him. That might give me a few more hours. Would he stand for that? Maybe not. An alternative would be to get Zoltán and József deliver her to a meeting site. That might work, again a few hours to get a head start. Whichever way I looked at it I need a quick and secure getaway and it took a while before I'd an idea that'd work.

I still don't know why Mario wanted me at the kill zone. I thought it was far too risky for any of us to be there. I told him so, and he laughed it off and insisted. I assumed, as I was an important cog in his machine, he just wanted to know where I was.

I had a darker thought. He might believe if he went down because of this hit, he wanted me too. Another incentive for me to get it right. On an even more sinister note, I hoped Primo wouldn't take me for a solo drive afterwards. So, I had my own transport, my own getaway vehicle and never be too far from it.

I considered taking Zoltán and József with me but decided against it. I needed them to take care of the Olga situation. At this late stage, I didn't want to bring in strangers to help me. I needed to be on my own to make a clean getaway on my own terms.

Arriving there early I found a good spot to watch the events. I parked so I'm able to pull out quickly and get down the street without having to shuffle my way out of the car space. After the two drivers to my front and rear had left their cars, I backed until I was almost touching the rear car. This left me room to peel out quickly from the space.

I'd a good view of the playground and watched as people arrived. Seats were being put on the makeshift stage near the school entrance. I wondered where The Magician would be? Where would he shoot from?

I stepped out of the car and scanned the buildings all around. Plenty of high-rise flats. This was an easy shoot, what was he on about? Winding me up, getting leverage. I didn't care now, as long as he did the job.

Time to put a call in to József. His heavy voice just said, 'Yes?'

'Everything all right?' I was the only one who'd call on that number.

'Yes.'

'Keep alert. Any time now. Bye.'

'Yes.'

The line went dead. Stupid, but reliable. My motto for support teams. Both had the second company car there. I didn't need to worry about what might happen to them. I got back into the car to wait.

It was sometime later that Mario and Primo walked up to stand by the fence. Could they be more obvious? I think they saw me, probably recognised my classy car. I was only a few metres away from them and thankful they didn't come over to say hello.

Primo was built like a brick shit house. Mario wasn't slimmer of the year either. For all his pretending they were not the typical Mafioso, they still looked like they should be.

Still, it was their business, not mine. As long as they paid me, what did I care? I'd received half payment, that in itself made up a retirement fund. Mario to pay the balance two hours after the hit, straight into my offshore account in The Caymans. They were reliable in that way, they wouldn't default. I decided not to pay the Magician. Clear profit.

I tried to relax. 1:45.

More people had lined the fence now, and I was getting anxious that I wouldn't be able to see. There seemed to be all sorts. A few kids with their parents, two teenage boys ogling the younger girls. One young girl appeared to have eyes only for the Italians, rubbing her motorcycle helmet as if it's his head. The Italians stood out.

Should I get out and claim a space? I was right at the end of the fence and people hadn't drifted that far away from the action yet to block my view.

I was dreading Primo lumbering over to talk to me while we all waited, but he didn't. The two hardly spoke to each other, just waited. They looked odd dressed in such a casual way, it didn't suit them. I idly wondered where they'd bought the clothes. Mafia Casuals 'r us?

Time dragged on.

I ran through my plans in my head. As a last-minute thought, I came up with an idea that ensured The Magician wouldn't be on my tail as I made my escape. But it required me to detour back to the office first. And get him there too. I was sure he'd have seen me by now and would try to follow me as I left.

Did I have that time? It'd only add a half an hour to my overall journey. I decided that it might be a good sudden addition to the plan; I needed that last-minute detail to make sure I distanced myself from him. Timing being essential here. The more time I gained at this end, the more secure I'd be at the other end.

Margit and the kids had flown ahead and should be in our little cottage in the wilds of France by now. It left just me and my minimal luggage to join them, fast and secretly.

1:58.

The speeches had been going for a few minutes now and people getting ready on the stage. Waiting for the big revelation. I still wasn't sure how

Mario and family fitted in, clearly hugely important to them and I'm getting paid big bucks. Who cared?

Two loud bangs startled me. God, they were loud!

The next noise caused by a wave of excited and frightened people. Screams and shouts as panic set in. The stage clearer now. People scattering, two lying flat. Even from here I saw the blood. I wasn't sure it's the right two targets, but The Magician never missed.

People were panicking through the gates and rushing past me down the street now. It was time to go. I pressed the starter and hauled it into drive. Floored the pedal and yanked the wheel. I powered out of there and shot along the road.

In my rear mirror, the panicking crowds spreading all over the place. I almost smiled. Magic Man did it! The end of an era. I drove swiftly back to my office.

It was quiet and peaceful in my home. With the family gone, I'd the house to myself. I needed to make the last adjustments to my plan and went to work.

I booked a single seat on a plane from Heathrow, not caring where it went, I wouldn't be on it, anyway. So I left the confirmation open, plainly time dated.

I packed the last of my things. A few items from the safe, all my available cash. I considered life's little mementoes and decided against it. Margit had taken everything she wanted. I wanted nothing from my old life.

There was no reply from József. I tried Zoltán's phone, no reply. What were the idiots doing? I'd have to try later. They knew what to do, just waiting for my go ahead.

I made a call to another number, I simply said, 'Go!'

I checked the time, I was running a little late. After a final check, I walked away from my home of the last ten years and didn't look back. I'd sold it, so that money would come in handy. I left the lights on and the doors open. It was like I'd panicked and left. Far from it, it's my master plan.

There was a good hour's drive ahead of me and I gulped water from a bottle as I got into my car.

I became frustrated with London traffic until I got onto the A3. Then I put my foot down until the Chobham turnoff. Within a few minutes a sign for Fairoaks Airport, I pulled through the gateway. I parked the car and hefted my large bag and shut the door to the Merc.

David was standing waiting for me at the main entrance and he waved. I was glad to see him. I'd only spoken to him on Skype and hoped he would be as reliable as recommended. We shook hands, and I held out my car keys with great ceremony. He handed me a large envelope of money.

'All yours. Enjoy.' I grinned.

My phone rang.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE – HENRIK

We have now visited the Ötvenöt house four times. Each with different disguise. Once as "leaflet droppers", James had small amount printed up, so he got right up close to the front door. He went all down one side of the road pushing these papers through the doors. As he shoved a few through Ötvenöt letterbox, I never seen letterbox before, he pushed a balsawood wedge through until it caught. That, he told me, gave him exact sizes for letterbox. Then he made equipment that would post through it.

He told me to expect the unexpected. What might happen, how to avoid, or get around it. Luca turning up, for instance. One man guarding her, or two? More, or none? What if they moved her? I would have to learn to use tracker to confirm she is still there, and mobile phone.

There is rough piece of ground near back fences of row of houses. Under large flat piece of waste concrete, we hid handgun. A little way along under tuft of grass we hid bullets wrapped in plastic bag.

James did not want me roaming around city with gun. If they stopped me for any reason on way there, game would be over. Olga would be in trouble. Detail, always with the detail.

I know James is unsure how I operate under pressure. I was not sure myself. But this is my sister, this was her life at stake. Also, there was matter of Luca, justice had to be served on him. Two very good reasons I would do anything, and everything, to get this right.

Yes, I thought he should rely on me.

One option James suggested getting Olga to somewhere he called "safe place". During one of our trips to the area, we discovered café, library and pub. Public places where Olga and I should sit and wait for James. These options he asked me to remember. So much to remember.

It is vital I was on time at house and ready to go into action. Vital I had all information and plans ready for when time came to act.

All these complex things came naturally to him, but harder for me to understand. He is unsure that I am the person to save Olga, but there is no one else. Not at such short notice. This is what he told me. I felt little hurt at that, until I realised he was just as concerned about Olga as I was.

I know it concerns James that Luca will want to tie up loose ends after operation. He fears we are all going to be in danger and that is why Luca will become his target after this job. He needed to make sure Luca called of his new bunch of holligans from my family.

We spent the evenings going through everything he told me, making sure I understood. It was tiring and worrying. But slowly, I think he is happy with what I learned.

This morning James gave me £1000 cash for emergencies. A map of London. The tracker and mobile phone with fast dial to his mobile. He studied me and then with the smile and hard stare from those eyes, 'Ready?' I nodded. 'You'll be fine. Any problems just call. Okay?'

'I will be fine.' I agreed with more conviction than I felt. It all seemed túlnyomóoverwhelming.

He dropped me off at our nearest Underground station and I took series of trains that got me near house Olga was being held prisoner.

Why is this Underground system large and complicated? Why so many "lines", going in all directions. I had written instructions, and I did what he called "dummy run" several times, so I am sure of way. But I was still relieved when I walked up Boscombe Road at 13:50.

As I passed house, I looked at "tracker", as James calls it. The dot blinking. It blinked faster as I raised it up to first floor and to the right. That was room she was still in.

I had time to waste and so took stroll around block. Standing and waiting might have drawn attention, so I keep moving, but ready near front door when call came. If it came!

The phone rang and frightened me. James said, 'Is she there?'

'Yes, James. The little dot is blinking. Upper floor. Still there, I am sure.'

'Good. Get the weapon and get into position.' The line went dead. I pressed end call button, just in case.

I turned over stone, then collected bullets. In the quietness of alley, I loaded weapon. This is something I am used to.

My hands are shaking as time nearer to two o'clock. I am taking slow walk back down street. My eyes are everywhere. There were few people about, none seemed interested in me.

At home whenever we meet someone, even total stranger, we say hello and have talk. But, England! Nobody talks to anybody. Right now I was happy about that.

With surprise, I heard my mobile phone ring. I fumbled it out of my pocket and pressed correct button as instructed by James.

'Hello?' I said little too quietly.

‘Go, Henrik, go!’ His voice was quiet but urgent.

‘Okay. I will.’ I said as line went dead.

From my backpack, I took out book-sized package James made in his workshop. I watched in awe the care and knowledge James took making this.

The street is empty, no one watching. I opened silly small gate of number fifty-five and briefly surprised by squeak. “Expect the unexpected”.

I checked my watch and pulled special tape away from package, which I then slipped through letterbox. I heard it thump quietly on floor inside house. Walking out of small front garden I headed towards back alleyway. James said I had about thirty seconds before first effects and probably a minute, or two before other things happened.

Arriving at back gate I checked my watch. One minute, twenty seconds. Reaching over the gate I found small bolt and pulled it back. James discovered on our third visit, this was gate’s locking mechanism. The gate opened easily, and I walked down scruffy and overgrown garden to back door.

The row of houses was all same. All made of one wall of rusty-coloured bricks. There was small back door to each house, with small window to one side, which might be kitchen.

The door was raised up few centimetres with small step made from more red bricks. The glass in door was dirty and some kind of lace curtain on inside, making it difficult for me to see in and anyone to see out.

Two minutes.

I heard noises inside, a few loud voices. A shuffling noise, then sound of door being unlocked. I pressed myself against wall to one side, noting first which way door would open. I would not be trapped against it if it flew back.

The door opened, and gust of smoke blew out, quickly followed by huge fat man, coughing and spluttering. He staggered into garden and bent over trying to clear his lungs.

Seconds later Olga came out, she was holding blanket over her head. Unlike fat man, she knew of her surroundings and spotted me. She took a step to her left and was soon right beside me. She appeared even thinner than ever, and very pale. My heart sank at sight of her, I had not seen her for nearly a year.

I held gun, pointed at fat man, when second man staggered out of house. He was troubled with getting breath back and had problem standing upright

as if his leg was injured. The smoke bomb at front door had done its job well, forcing occupants of house out through back. As James said it would.

Olga's arm around my waist felt good. I felt her thin body shaking against mine. Partly with coughing, but she also sounded like she was crying. But job was not done yet. James said job was not done until we were safe away. I fixed on two men, waiting for them to see me.

The big one looked up first and his face changed. His reflex was to reach for object in his belt. I flicked gun upwards and shook my head. His hand froze mid-way to his belt. 'Take it out slowly and put it on ground. Both of you.' The other man had now seen me, and James told me to say that. I was pleased I had remembered it under all this pressure. I now realised I was shaking, almost as much as Olga.

'Slowly.' I said calmly.

To my surprise, they both did. I heard Olga speak quietly behind me, 'Zoltán has another gun. In his sock.'

'What? Who is Zoltán?'

'The thin one.'

'Oh! And you. The other gun. Slowly and on ground. Now!'

I had flash memory of being in cinema when I was very young. We had gone into Budapest as treat and to picture show. We saw John Wayne in movie. I was haunted by that film ever since.

For years I wanted to be cowboy, live in Wild West. It seemed like part of dream was coming true now. My hand steadied and gun stopped shaking.

The smaller man slowly took small revolver from his boot top.

'Now what?' asked Olga, almost recovered from her coughing fit.

James had told me so many things that should happen, or might happen. I struggled to think. 'We get away, we get back to Luca's. Meet James there.'

'How? We cannot drive.'

'No, but they can. They must have car nearby. James said they would.'

'And James is rarely wrong.' Olga said as she strode out from behind me and moved towards two men. My heart raced, what was she doing?

The smoke was slowing down from doorway now and both men recovering. They were staggering, unable to understand this sudden and

unexpected trouble. They stared at each other, secret signals passing between them. I raised gun higher and slowly moved it backwards and forwards between two targets.

Olga picked up three weapons off ground before men thought of making play for them. She waved smoke away from her face, 'Is that fire?'

'No, smoke bomb. Misdirection, James called it.'

She nodded and moved towards fat man. He took step backwards and his friend did same. Fear had now replaced cunning in both men. Their prisoner with gun. That must be frightening.

My mind flashed back to farm just over week ago. György sinking to his knees, blood spurting from his right thigh. His face in pain. My second shot through his left hand. More pain. György knew his end had come. He had been frightened. All the years of tormenting me. Now it had come to this. I fired out of anger and my pain, bullet between György's eyes. Same pent-up rage in Olga's face now, and fear in the fat man.

She growled through gritted teeth, 'So you wanted to see me on my knees with my mouth open, eh? See how you like it. On your knees.' He dropped quickly. 'Mouth open!' He opened wide. With snarl, she put barrel of gun in his mouth. 'Is this what you had in mind, József?'

He was so terrified, I almost felt sorry for him. What had he done to Olga to deserve this?

He jerked his head back releasing barrel from his mouth. It must have broken his teeth. 'Please. Do not. I did not mean....do not. I had to...Luca...he told...both of us...'

'He will soon be dead. So will you. So will all your friends in Herceghalom.'

She straightened her arm and pushed gun closer to his head.

The man she called Zoltán spoke quickly, 'We have no friends in Herceghalom. Never did. They were Luca's. Just four.'

'What!' Olga said as she glared at Zoltán, the gun pushed nearer.

Zoltán spoke quickly, 'It was just threat. It was Luca's way of getting you to do what he wanted.' Olga's gaze moved to fat man, who was nodding furiously.

'Only us two left. He was glad to be rid of Herceghalom fools. Peasants with guns he called them.'

Olga not yet convinced they were telling truth.

Zoltán added, 'He does not need you anymore. Luca told us to release you once The Magician did his job. He says two more new recruits are to take your place. He has washed his hands of Herceghalom. It has too many bad memories for him. It is true. Why would we lie? I heard him make calls, myself.'

Olga laughed. There was no humour in it, only frustration, followed quick by anger. Her finger tightened on trigger. They held their hands out to protect themselves from bullets about to end their miserable lives. I held my breath.

So did Olga.

'We need one of you to drive.' She barked. Both put their hands up quick. 'Who has keys?'

Zoltán frantically dug into his pockets and pulled out car keys. He glanced gleefully at fat man, thinking he would be driver and fat man take fate dished out by vengeful prisoner.

'Watch him, Henrik. I will be right back.'

She motioned for fat man to go back into house. He had frantic glances at József and then me, his eyes were pleading. With gun as more instant suffering, he had no choice but to do as she said.

Zoltán stood still, not making move that would cause me to shoot him. He was still holding keys to remind me he was only way out of there. His other hand was rubbing his leg. Was he able to drive? I thought.

I tried to remember everything James had said. He said to get both men into car and get away. He gave me plastic handcuffs to help. Where was Olga?

It must have been five minutes before Olga came out of house again. There was no sound of gunshot, so she did not shoot him.

'What did you do?' I had to ask.

'What he did to me. Lock up.'

I smiled and studied her face. That was old Olga, my sister was back. Which reminded me. I gave her small bottle of vodka and packet of cigarettes and box of matches.

'James said to give you these. He thought you....might need them....but should give them both up. He said to tell you.'

Her face lit up, almost as fast as first cigarette. She drew in one long breath and let stream of smoke slowly from her lungs. I thought she might have had enough smoke in her lungs for one day.

‘That feels good. Why give up something you like?’ She took long drink from bottle and grinned. ‘Let us go, Zoltán. You know way. Drive carefully, no tricks. I really do want to kill you. Do not think only one to drive is going to save you. I am used to getting my way around London. All the contracts I covered, I learned how to use all the transport systems.’

They parked the car way up street. Large black shiny thing it was. Olga sat in front with driver, while I sat in back on very soft and smooth leather seats. I had gun pointed all time at Zoltán. Sometimes raising it so he saw me in rear-view mirror.

He pulled away from kerb on our journey to freedom.

‘How long will it take us?’ I asked.

‘Where are we going?’ Zoltán spoke nervously.

‘To see our friend Luca.’ I hissed, my way of being frightening.

He watched at me nervously in rear-view mirror. ‘About an hour. Maybe less.’

‘Hurry, but do not drive stupidly.’ Olga said with sidelong glance at him. He looked down to gun resting calmly in her lap. He nodded.

We drove with windows down as Olga refuse to stop smoking. I think she was trying to finish whole box before we got to Luca’s.

‘Would you have pulled trigger?’ I asked eventually, to break silence.

‘I have killed people for less. Would you?’

I shook my head, the memory of György haunting my dreams ever since. ‘Not again.’

‘Good. Neither of us need to do that again.’

‘What about Luca?’ I asked hesitantly.

‘Except for Luca.’ Zoltán glanced at her. ‘Only taking out Luca will finish this.’

I understood her need to finish off Luca, the man controlling her, and our family is an example of 21st-century slavery. People like him have the tentacles. Cut one off, another replaces them. You need to cut off head.

She spoke after long silence, 'Until Luca's gone, there is always threat of more hollgans coming onto farm. Which reminds me. Do you have phone?' I handed it over to her. 'I need to speak to mamma.' She said, with tears already in her eyes.

'Me too when you have finished.' I said. 'We also need to call James, tell him what is happened. He'll be pleased to hear there are no more hollgans in Herceghalom.'

Suddenly I knew we just might have won after all.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR - THE MAGICIAN

I slowed my breathing as I walked rapidly, but steadily, along the fence. I became just one of many people who was hastening along that road, to get away from the chaos of the playground. Nobody noticed me.

The large fake camera in my left hand as my right went into a shoulder holster and pulled out the "Chiefs Special".

As I walked behind the Italians I fired two quick shots.

The silenced barrel making two small reports, hardly heard by any bystanders. Both shots into the base of their necks, severing the spinal column. Downward so the slugs stayed in the bodies. I wanted the Carrera marble bullets found by the police. Appearing like an inter-family hit, nothing more.

I strolled on, sliding the gun back in my holster. Past the few people who still stared through the gate in a sense of shock. The pretty blonde girl was studying the dead people on the podium, her mouth wide with surprise. Good job she wasn't still watching Primo, or she'd have a bigger surprise.

I glanced through the fence, the podium now devoid of people, except for a few brave souls trying to care for the shot victims. The blonde girl gasped as I walked past, and I saw what she was watching.

Simon and Marc were rising to their feet. Both the dead people now stood, in an obvious state of shock.

In the distance, Luca's brake lights coming on as he made the turn in the road. He'd gone.

I took the shortcut through to the car park, keeping a watchful eye for anyone paying particular attention to me. People were distressed with their own safety, or too interested in what was going on elsewhere.

Panic has its uses.

I'd considered several exit strategies for this sanction. Leaving a motorbike, or even push-bike as a getaway vehicle, although removing the padlock would take time. In the past, I've disguised myself as a jogger, a messenger cyclist and a postman. They all work, it depends on what's suitable for the job. In this case, I'd decided on a van in a car park. There was minimal CCTV in, or around this one.

The sanction business is getting more difficult and more technical. No matter how far you are from the target, how clever you are in covering your

tracks, there was always the possibility of a spy satellite, miles above, recording your every move. Military and police have access to these and no matter how careful an asset is, one day these will track them all the way to their lair.

Many of these surveillance systems are recordable, so even weeks afterwards they can replay it to discover who was where and when. Technology has advanced so that vast amounts of data are stored easily and cheaply. Data used as evidence for future criminal issues.

Drones are becoming more commonplace. These can do the same tracking in real time. These can have weapons too.

So today I enter as one person and exit as another. A quick change, and a check on the tracker screen. Luca making a few turns, but still heading for his office. That's where he'd said he'd be, that's where he said he wanted to meet me. But did I trust that? No!

I drove slowly out of the car park and headed towards Luca's home. Driving as quickly as I dared, I was now more concerned over Henrik and Olga. I'd heard nothing yet, but it'd only been a few minutes. I'd just have to be patient as I fought the traffic going into town.

It was fifteen minutes later that I got the call. Henrik speaking so quickly that I couldn't comprehend. I got him to put Olga on instead, she sounded calmer and happy. No surprise there.

'James? Are you okay?'

'Fine. You? I guess you are. Where're you now?'

'We're driving to Luca's.'

'Who's driving?'

'Zoltán.' I sensed the disdain.

'Henrik has a London map. Check he's driving to the right place.'

'He wouldn't dare do anything else. Some news.'

'What?'

'Luca is lying.'

'That's news?'

'No, about more holligans in Herceghalom. He has none. No one. The family will be safe.' She sounded happy.

‘How can you be sure?’

‘You should’ve seen Zoltán and József. You’d be sure too. He is looking at me now. He knows what will happen if we find out he’s lied.’ She laughed.

‘That’s good news. We must confirm that with Luca. How long before you get there?’

A muffled conversation. ‘Zoltán says about fifty minutes.’

‘Good. Luca’s ahead of me and I’ll be there in forty. Be careful. Glad to have you back. Did Henrik do all right?’

‘He was excellent. You would have been proud. I know I am.’

‘See you there. Just be careful. Watch Zoltán. Trust no one.’ I ended the call.

I felt a sense of relief at the news. They were both safe. I wasn’t so sure how true it was about Herceghalom, but we’d find out.

I focused on the road and the rear-view mirror. There was a small dark car that seemed to be following my route. It puzzled me.

They say you can easily become paranoid in this job. As the old saying goes, being paranoid doesn’t mean there isn’t someone out to get you. But after years of careful exits and watching my back, old habits were hard to shake.

I made a few left-hand turns and then slowed again. I did another few and ended up back on my original road. The car had gone.

Was I being paranoid?

I parked the van in Luca’s side alley, it was empty of cars. Checking again his tracker to discover it’s on its way out of London, about ten minutes ago. I should’ve kept an eye on it more on the drive. He’d come and gone. So much for him meeting me here. What surprises had he left for me? I still had time to catch him up, I thought.

Cautiously, I entered his home. His alley door wide open, the digital code entry not a security barrier for now. The passageway quiet and well-lit and the door to his office wide open. Lights were on inside and just silence.

I had the Chief’s Special in my hand as I went through the door fast. The marble bullets not needed. The office was empty.

His safe door now hanging open, and empty. Otherwise, the room appeared the same as when I was there last. The walls were full of photos and mementoes. Certificates that meant nothing to anyone but Luca.

The laptop on his desk was still on. I pressed a key, and the screen woke up. It showed a booking site, and he'd booked a flight from Heathrow to...Chile. A nice part of the world. Flight due to leave in a few hours.

I checked his tracker again. Well, Luca wasn't heading to Heathrow. Did he think I was that stupid? I sat down at his desk and opened the other icons on the laptop.

Email. He'd left his email open! The opened mail confirmation of his flight to Chile. So why's he driving in another direction? Heathrow direct west and he's heading more south west.

There was a yellow sticker on the corner of the screen. It had my name on it.

"Magic Man. Goodbye and thanks for the retirement present. You won't see me again. You can find your friend at 55 Boscombe Road."

He even included the Post Code. Perhaps Luca was not all bad? Or even reformed in his retirement. He meant to let Olga free. It wasn't like him. Chile, that wasn't like him either.

I get this feeling when things don't add up. It's saved my life often and now it was tingling again.

I searched for a bomb.

I took ten minutes, but I was sure there wasn't one. I stood and stared at all his personal things he'd left behind. Why would he do that? Photos of his family, wife and daughter. On holiday. In the garden. More holiday. Lots of holidays. Same place holiday. Looks like the countryside.

Where would you go to Luca if not Chile? Your family too. Not to Chile, I'm sure.

Out of habit, I took photos of the room with my phone. You never know.

I was still puzzling Luca's strategy when Olga burst through the door and threw herself into my arms. I'm not an emotional man, but it made my heart miss a beat when I realised she's finally safe.

That didn't detract me from watching the door to see who came in next. Old habits die hard. My hand flinched a little as Zoltán entered, but Henrik followed him holding a gun. Henrik looked happy, Zoltán did not.

'Thank, you. Thank, you.' Olga breathed into my ear.

'Henrik did all the hard work.' I whispered with a smile.

She kissed me fully on the lips, which sent a shiver down my spine. Her eyes were sparkling. Her arms around my neck and she was about to kiss me again when Henrik asked, 'Where is Luca?'

I disengaged from Olga and pointed to the laptop. 'According to this, he's on his way to Chile.'

'Chile!' Olga, Zoltán and Henrik exclaimed together.

I held up the tracker, 'But according to this he's heading past Heathrow to God knows where. That's what I was trying to find out when you arrived. Give me a moment.' I sat down at the laptop again and went through his emails.

'Should we be getting after him?' Henrik said quickly.

'Just a moment.' I shushed.

I felt their tension. Henrik waved Zoltán to a chair and sat down himself. Olga hovered over me. 'What are you looking for?'

'Anything. Anything that gives me a clue as to where he's going.' I was trying not to get frantic in my search.

'We can just follow him?' she suggested.

'We could, but he's at least a half an hour ahead of us. In a fast car and me with just a van.'

'We could take Zoltán's car. It's big and fast.' beamed Henrik.

'He'll always be too far ahead of us. We might need the equipment I have in the van should we catch him.' I was searching quickly, but carefully.

'Equipment?' Olga asked.

'You should see what he has in there!' Henrik volunteered.

'Just be...quiet for a moment. Please.' I begged.

I knew Luca would've eliminated any incriminating emails on his business activities. But he wanted me to find his laptop and his supposed exit strategy. In doing so, he'd stupidly allowed me into the rest of his private communications.

He thought I'd see the flight information and get right after him, rushing to Heathrow to find him not there. By then he would've left for somewhere else.

Where somewhere else?

I was delving back several months and found a series of interesting emails. It seems like he was buying a property in France. As I read them a pattern quickly formed.

Olga's breath now in short bursts of frustration; I touched her calmly on her shoulder, 'See if you can find your passport. Didn't you say he kept it for you?'

She nodded and pointed a gun directly at Zoltán. We all held our breath. No shooting now!

'Where is it?'

Zoltán's face almost collapsed in relief. He pointed to a bookcase. She waved him over to it and he rummaged around until he found it. He handed it to her with very shaky fingers.

I'd found what I was searching for. He'd recently purchased a small farm holding in Southern France. Limoux. Languedoc province. I had the address. Now I knew where I might find him. But can I stop him from getting there?

Time was becoming precious to us all. This man was dangerous until dead.

Olga was holding a large leather handbag. 'My things.' She now had tears in her eyes. 'The bastard kept all my things.'

She sorted through the minimal contents. A few photos, some money. Not much to show she was ever here. I pulled myself back to my task.

No time to go way back in the emails, but any arrangements he made would only be five days old. That's when we had that meeting and all these plans came into being. He didn't know he'd have to run much before that time. I concentrated on the latest emails. Last few days.

I was only going by the subject line and first few words of each message. The word "helicopter" sprung out at me. Then I read the email and had it.

'He's hired a helicopter to fly to France.' I announced.

'Kibaszott!' shouted Olga. 'Kibaszott, kibaszott, kibaszott!'

'Let us go!' Henrik stood.

Olga asked hopefully. 'Can we not stop him?'

I shook my head. 'Not in time. We need something to slow him down.'

Olga pointed at Zoltán. 'Can we threaten to kill his man here?'

I shook my head. ‘He wouldn’t care about him. He’s already deserted him. Did you know any of his plans, Zoltán?’

He shook his head. ‘None. I am surprised as you are. What am I going to do now?’

My mind was racing. ‘No. Not one of his men but...his family.’

After a quick search, I found an earlier email. ‘Phone number. Let there be a phone number.’ I glared at Zoltán, ‘Does he have a contacts book? Diary? List of telephone numbers?’

He nodded. ‘In the top drawer.’

I opened the drawer he’d pointed too. There was nothing there. Of all things to leave behind, incriminating evidence wasn’t one. Phone number.... ‘Phone bill. Find a phone bill.’

There was a cabinet in the corner. He’d locked it, but using a large clasp knife I carried, I forced it open. There were rows of neatly hand labelled folders. I flicked through aware of the time ticking past.

‘Get ready to leave both of you.’ My fingers flicking as fast as I was able to read.

‘What about him?’ Henrik’s gun still levelled at Zoltán with no waver.

‘Let him go. What happened to the other one?’ I observed distractedly.

‘Olga locked him up in the house. With no Luca, no one knows he’s there. He might starve!’ Henrik was smiling.

‘He can afford to lose weight.’ Olga with venom.

‘I understand. But we want no police investigation on his death, do we? Not with our fingerprints all over the place. Especially yours, Olga.’

She pulled out keys from her pocket. She threw them to Zoltán. ‘You can let him out if you want to. If you can be bothered. Or let him rot. That is what I thought might happen to me.’

‘You can leave after we do, Zoltán. But you must release József. Ahhh...here it is.’

I threw the folder on the table and pulled out the first sheet. The latest of his phone bills. It took seconds to locate any calls made to France and there they all were. All to the same number. I memorised the number as I was disconnecting the laptop from the power supply.

‘Zoltán. How much did Luca’s wife know about his business?’

Zoltán shrugged. ‘I do not know. Never had much to do with her.’

‘Think!’ I shouted at him. ‘He left you and József behind, knowing I’d be looking for vengeance. Not to mention these two here. He expected me to kill you! You can see he’s fled. Leaving everything but his family. Do you think you owe him any loyalty now?’ He shook his head. ‘Think. How much did she know? Did she know he hired hit men?’

He was recalling. ‘I think so.’

‘I’m hoping so.’ I dialed the memorised number from Luca’s office phone. ‘Olga. I want you to make this call. She’ll believe you more than a male voice. Here’s what you’ve got to say.’

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE – ZOLTÁN

I can still smell the smoke bomb. My throat is dry and I'm still a little blurred, fear has a lot to do with that. I cannot remember being so scared at having a gun pointed at me. Apart from the last time I met The Magician, and he shot me. Then I was scared too.

It was all such a surprise. József was screaming at me 'Tűz, Tűz!'

'What fire?' I shouted, then again in Hungarian, as the mamlasz does not know much English. Never learned it for over five years. All he really cared for was food and vodka.

He panicked and ran for the back door, away from the smoke. I rushed upstairs as fast as my wounded leg let me and unlocked the bedroom door. József should have been doing this although he would take twice as long as me. Luca would kill us if anything had happened to the Kobay woman.

Kobay was standing in fear watching the door, standing ready to attack me. I sensed she knew her time had come, but I gave a smile and took blanket before waving her out and moving her down the stairs. Fear in her eyes, she thought this was her end. She covered her head with the blanket I gave her.

The whole house was full of smoke. My eyes streamed, and my lungs were full. I coughed and was unsure where I was going. I was following her.

Even in the fresh air it seemed the smoke was all around us. It doubled me up in pain as I tried to clear the smoke from my chest. József was on his knees with a coughing fit. Being overweight and unfit, breathing was a problem for him, anyway. You should see him try to run, it is hilarious. The Benny Hill.

It was a relief when we were finally on our way. I was almost happy to be alive and in the driving seat again. But the young lad sat in the back with a gun always in my vision. I did not need that as a threat, I would not do anything stupid. But he did not know that.

Back in Luca's office brought back memories for me. Luca hated failure, he did not permit it. Punishment followed. József was mostly useless, and it all came down to me. Now I just want to return home with some money.

Henrik waved me to a chair, and I gratefully sat down. My leg was troubling me, especially after the drive. What would happen to me? They might as well shoot me soon and get it over with!

I had to believe I'd walk away from here. A large hope, but I had to believe that. What to do? The more I thought about that, the angrier I got with Luca. He held all our money, our passports too. I stood by the open drawer and glanced down; there were two more bundles there.

I heard their level of conversation getting a little louder. Henrik jumped up excited. Momentarily nobody was watching me. I slipped the two packets into my jacket pockets.

For a while my mind went into a daze, needing to have a plan for when I got free from these people. IF I got free. What to do about József, how would we live? Where to get work and who with? I had no idea.

The Kobay woman was using Luca's phone, I forced myself to listen to what she was saying.

'Yes, Mrs Lacusta. That is right, he said it was urgent and he could not call you right now, but it is....yes I am working with him...it was very urgent that you...no, you have not met me.....'

She was rolling her eyes at The Magician who was scribbling on a pad. He glanced at me and there was something about the look in his eyes. He moved to me and slid the piece of paper into my hand. Kobay was fencing questions about her relationship with Mrs Lacusta's husband, Luca.

'Do you understand this?' The Magician said, with a glare from steely eyes.

I read it quickly and nodded, although I was not too sure I did, written English harder than spoken.

The Magician motioned Kobay to pass the phone over to me. My heart raced, I disliked this Hungarian woman and I know she disliked me. The Magician flapped his fingers urging me to talk. He pointed to the paper which I quickly read again.

'Hello, Mrs Lacusta? Margit? It is Zoltán. I work for your husband? Yes? Remember me? Good. Please listen, Luca asked me to call you because this is very, very urgent. He said....you are to leave the house right now. Yes, that is right. Right now. Leave everything, take your daughter. Do not use the phones. They have been tapped.' I was being watched intensely. 'I do not know what that means, either. But he insists you do not use them. Do not answer the phone. Do not try to contact him. He made that very...yes. He asked me to tell you. I do not know. Soon. He will call you soon. Until he does...I do not know how he can talk to you if you do not answer the phone....'

I glanced in despair at The Magician. He nodded encouragement and mouthed, 'Repeat the message.'

With a deep breath, 'If Luca has asked you to do this for him, I suggest you do it, and now. You are in danger and so is your daughter.' The Magician gave me the thumbs-up at that. 'Leave the house and do not use the phones. Please. I have to go.' I hung up exhausted. 'What have I just done?' I pleaded to The Magician.

'A good job. You'll be useful to us, come along. Let's get on the road and call Luca from there.'

I was in a state of confusion as we crammed ourselves into the van outside. I sat in a makeshift seat in the back facing Henrik. He still held his gun, but it was not always pointing directly at me anymore.

Olga was lighting up a cigarette when The Magician told her to put it out. 'Can I have a drink then?'

'No. We've work to do. I want you sober.'

The Magician was driving and Kobay seated beside him. She was staring at a small screen sat nav. It must have been a while before I heard The Magician talking on the mobile phone.

'Luca. Magic Man. We need to talk.'

I did not hear the other side of the conversation, but there was a pause.

'No, I think we need to talk. You're not going anywhere today.....I know you're not at Heathrow, you're heading towards.....Portsmouth.....are you there?.....good. Stay where you are. I'm on my way. Yes, you do. I've something to tell you about your family.....no they're not. They're in your place in Limoux. Well they were until my team took them away.....are you still there?...stay with me, Luca.' His voice was frightening as it sounded quiet and slow. 'For their sake. I'm sure you don't believe it and yes it's impossible, but then you know my reputation. I'm highly paid for getting the impossible done. Call her if you like, check it out. I'll call back in a few minutes. Go nowhere, Luca. Right now, I'm mad at you, don't make me furious.' He put the phone down.

Henrik seemed as much bemused by the conversation as I did, 'But you have not taken his family. Have you?'

'Of course not. I don't touch innocent people.'

'You shot me!' I shouted before realising it drew the attention back to me.

'Just to make a point, Zoltán. I apologise unreservedly, please forgive me.'

He stared at me with the most penetrating eyes I have ever seen. All I said was, 'Okay, then. Do not do it again, it hurt. Still does.'

'I'm sorry.' The Magician tore his eyes away, his mind now on Henrik and the road. 'Luca doesn't know that. When he gets no answer, it'll seem to him I've kidnapped them and he must negotiate with me face to face. It'll hold him there for that long at least. That's what we all want, isn't it? A chance to confront him?'

Kobay and Henrik remained silent. I had to say, 'I want to talk to him. I want my money.'

'You must wait your turn.' Kobay said with menace. I do not know if she directed it at me, or The Magician.

'It will not work, anyway.' I said.

The searchlight of his eyes found me again through the rear-view mirror. 'Why?'

'He will think more of his personal safety than his family. Well, maybe his daughter. But his wife...no. Glad to be rid of her.' I said feeling the anger rise in me.

'The daughter, eh?' The Magician seemed to be thinking. 'Tell me more about Luca, while we still have time.'

'About thirty minutes. His car has stopped. Fair Oaks Airport. That is what it says here.' Kobay said calmly.

I did not know where to start, or which parts would help me the most. I just talked and carried on until I had finished. There was not too much to tell.

Luca Lacusta was born somewhere outside Budapest and his family moved into the Herceghalom area when he was a young lad. If you dislike Luca, you should have met his father, he was even worse. Like father like son. Eventually he was, yes.

He started small and built up a gang of petty criminals, and then he recruited Károly. He was different, more city gangster, than hollgan. This is where Luca recognised the possibility of a larger crime future.

He learned a lot from Károly, whose biggest mistake was to outshine Luca. We never saw him again. By then Luca had decided Hungary was not big enough for him so we came to England.

'Was he married to Margit, then?' The Magician asked.

'Yes, but the child Elena was born here in England.'

The van swerved as James avoided two motorbikes that came flashing by, close to the van. They were weaving in and out of lanes in tearing hurry.

Olga huffed, 'That is what we should be on, not this snail of a van.'

'Beggars can't be choosers.' James said.

'What does that mean?' from Henrik.

James shook his head, 'Why not bring all the gang here, Zoltán?'

'He had a few things going on, still in Herceghalom. One was the Kobay family.'

'Bastard!' Came from Kobay. Followed by. 'Twenty-five minutes.'

'Besides, he did not like András and György, or any of them he left behind. Did you really kill them all?' I asked hesitantly.

'No.' He said.

'But you ARE the Magician, right?'

A slight pause, 'Maybe.'

'We killed them. Our family. We did it.' Henrik was glaring at me. I noticed the gun had risen again, to my groin area.

'Good. I did not like them myself. Especially György.' I was being honest.

'Especially György.' Repeated Henrik.

'What happened in England, after Luca came here?' The Magician glanced at me to continue.

'Well.....Luca, me and József set up a business similar to what we had in Hungary. Why move, really? It got bigger, then Luca got into contract killing. Things took off.' The van swerved to avoid a mad English hog of the road. 'We dropped all the petty stuff. He got Kobay here as his personal hit man, sorry, woman. Kept his costs down, kept her like a slave. Sorry, Miss Kobay, it was never personal.'

'It is with me. Twenty minutes. Stay on A3 for another ten miles.'

'He treated us just the same. He sent any money we earned back to our families in Hungary. We were kept here without money, passports, anything. He rented a tiny two-bedroom flat for us, near where he lives. Almost as bad as yours, Olga.'

'Miss Kobay to you.'

‘Sorry, yes.’

Kobay glared at me, ‘You mentioned he has replaced us now. What did you mean by that?’

I shrugged. ‘Just that he knew The Magician, here, would not work for him anymore. You were gone, Miss, I assume he thought he had to find new assets for jobs in the pipeline, he told me he had. Now he has gone. I don’t understand....’

‘Any names?’ The Magician asked.

‘None I can think of.’ I was still trying to remember.

‘And you don’t think he’ll stop for his family?’ The Magician asked quietly.

‘I do not THINK he will, I cannot be sure. He always has himself at heart, he is basically a coward. He has shot people and beaten them up, but underneath he is a coward. That is why he kept József around. He has just run out on me and József. We have no money, prospects. Where are we going to live?’

‘You can use my old place.’ Kobay mocked me. ‘Either of them.’ I had no answer to that. ‘Can you drive faster?’ Kobay suggested quietly.

‘We’re nearly there, aren’t we?’ The Magician asked.

‘Take the next exit. About ten minutes. What’re we going to do when we get there, James?’

‘Let’s find out, shall we?’ He dialled Luca’s number.

‘Luca. Still on the ground?...good to hear it. What did Margit say?...no, no....nothing will happen to Elena...’

The Magician looked at me and I felt suddenly glad I had that bit about the daughter right.

‘About fifteen minutes. Where are you?....okay. Don’t go away. We need to chat.....hello?...hello?’

‘He can’t wait.’ The Magician grimaced.

We pulled in through a very narrow entrance way. Fair Oaks Airport - the simple sign said it all, this was a small private airport.

Up ahead a single-storey building dominated the area, we drove to the right, passing a few parked cars. I spotted Luca’s and pointed it out. The Magician nodded as if he had already seen it.

We drove around the main building and out onto the open field. Concrete aprons ahead of us had ten, or so, small light aircraft parked. Some covered in tarpaulins, hardly used.

There was a large circular disc of concrete in the middle of this, just to the north of the single runway. There was a helicopter warming up in the middle. The rotors were idling, the pilot in his seat waiting. Luca was standing waiting by the side. His head slightly bent against the downdraft.

'Here we go.' from The Magician. 'No exit strategy, so everyone be on your toes. Someone watch Zoltán.'

I felt momentarily hurt. I was the last person who wanted to defend Luca now. With my hands held up, 'You will get no trouble from me. Do what you like with him but try to get some money for me and József.'

The van stopped about fifty metres away from the helicopter. I felt the throb in the air from the gas-turbine engine, the noise was loud. Not much chance of having a "chat" with that going on. But Luca was still there. It surprised me. The Magician trick had worked. So far. Never trust Luca, especially when his back is to the wall.

The van engine died, but no one noticed because of the rotor noise. The Magician eased out of his door, a pistol in his hand. It looked like a large caliber Colt to me. Kobay was out the other side, gun in hand. Henrik slid the side door back and moved out cautiously, gun in hand too. I sat in the van. Feeling safer, but not by much. The van had thin walls. Not bullet proof.

I was sure no one wanted to have a gun fight at an airport. But then, you never knew with Luca.

For the next few minutes I strained to hear what was going on. The constant and regular thump, thump, thump made listening impossible. I slid into the front seat to see better what was happening. They were shouting at each other above the noise. Not in anger, I thought.

I am not sure what happened next. I think Luca pulled a gun out of his jacket. The next thing, he was inside the helicopter and it was taking off.

How was I to get my money now?

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX – OLGA

The sight of Luca waiting by helicopter affected me more than I thought. Since last time I had gun trained on him, my thoughts had been on next moment I got a gun on him. This time there would be no mistakes, no hesitation. No emotional gloating. Right between piggy eyes.

I saw Luca standing under whirling blades of helicopter, looking weary and constantly buffeted. Waiting, but he stood close enough to open door to cabin to get in quickly. He was about to run; I am sure. Did he think we not shoot helicopter out of sky? Luca misunderstood mood I am in.

He dressed in light grey, lightweight summer suit, with light-coloured loafers. Like, business man on trip to tropics. James thought he was going to France. I guessed helicopter big enough to get him there. Certainly not to Chile.

James was out of van, I followed quickly. I heard the van door open behind me and knew Henrik followed me. Who was watching Zoltán?

Luca just stood and smiled. He appeared confident. Too confident? We moved nearer. Luca shouted above noise and I just heard him. 'You wanted chat, Magic Man. Here I am.'

James had his gun pointing at Luca, who ignored it. 'I'm here for my money, Luca. I believe you owe some salary to your staff, too.'

'Are they still alive? I see Olga is with you.'

I was getting closer.

'We need to talk about your wife and daughter.' James was still having to shout as we got nearer.

'Nothing to talk about.' Luca was smiling as he held up mobile phone. 'Just spoken to her. She sends you her regards, by the way.'

'She spoke to you?' James shouted.

'She never ever listens to me. Never do as I asked. She called me right away. Nice try, but how the fuck did you find me?' he was grinning.

'Tracker. In your car. While you were at the school. So, your laptop ploy didn't work.'

'Ah, well. Win some, lose some. What happens now, Magic Man? Any more tricks up your sleeve?'

He was openly laughing now. I noticed his hands were hanging loosely by his side, they had been more clenched together when we had arrived.

‘I know where you’re going, Luca, but I think it may surprise you when the Mario money doesn’t come through.’

‘Why shouldn’t it?’ The smile was more forced now.

‘They wouldn’t have paid you anyway had they lived. They’re dead. I shot them as you drove away. I didn’t shoot the two original targets, either.’

The smile went. ‘I saw them shot. You killed them!’

‘Blood pellets instead of bullets. They didn’t know when it was coming so the effect looked real. Leaves no forensic trace. I used marble bullets on the Italians. The marble won’t have any barrel rifling either, not soft like lead. The police will puzzle about this for long time. It will connect Mario, thanks to Simon Richards. But you don’t want to know all this, do you?’

Luca had moved his hand casually to rest thumb in his belt. I am sure that James would have noticed it. I hoped Henrik did.

‘More tricks from The Magician, then. So what good did it do you, to kill the Italians? It wouldn’t change my mind about the farm.’

‘I think it would. There was nothing left for you, Luca. Only death from me. I’d let you live if you called off the Hungary goons.’

Luca made a sharp laugh. ‘You’d have been wrong Magic Man. Very wrong. So, it’s good bye. We’ve nothing left to chat about.’

‘I think the Kobay family have some issues they want to resolve.’ James said, finally stopping our approach.

Only about five metres away from Luca now. Sweat on his brow and an anxious set to his face. Inside the helicopter, the pilot getting agitated. He was glancing from Luca to James and back again.

Luca smiled, ‘Olga the drunk and her baby brother? What do they possibly want with me now?’ In one smooth movement Luca pulled out gun and pointed it at the pilot.

‘He dies first.’

Before we reacted or moved, he was inside helicopter and shutting door. I had been too slow again.

The rotor spun up rapidly and helicopter vibrated heavily.

In horror I called out, ‘He is getting away. Do not let him get away!’

It shuddered into the air, and I stood there feeling helpless.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN - THE MAGICIAN

I was considering my moves when Olga distractingly shouted he was getting away. The utter despair in her voice was poignant, even above the deafening rattle of the chopper. I moved before thinking and found myself tightly claspng the slowly rising helicopter skid. My legs wrapping around the horizontal part of the skid and my arms around the riser that attached it to the helicopter body. The light fat suit was not helping me hold my grip.

The buffeting was trying to force me off. I knew my strength under normal conditions, but this was extreme. In all my career I'd done nothing like this before.

It suddenly popped into my mind that this was like some action scene from a Bond movie. But in those movies, the hero always had a good outcome. This one seemed like it wouldn't.

The chopper was rising, and the vibration was trying to shake me loose. My peripheral vision showed the green grass of the ground slowly rotating behind me. I had to do something fast.

I was already too high up to let go. In the movies, the pilot seemed to cater for the extra unbalanced weight on their skids. Would this guy? He had a gun to his head, so I hoped he was good at his job.

I considered what equipment I had on me and realised I'd dropped my gun to get a two-handed purchase on the skid. In my jacket, I had a Taser. Would that affect an aircraft's electrical systems? Would it suddenly drop it out of the sky and kill us all, not worth the risk. I had a clasp-knife and a few other items.

There's little I know about helicopters. I know this one is a Bell 407, only because I can see that name and number on the fuselage. I'm assuming this wouldn't fly straight to Limoux. It would have to refuel somewhere, or Luca was taking another form of transport once in France.

As I was thinking, I was searching around the craft's fuselage and spotted a panel that said "Maintenance". I took the risk, reached up with one hand and pressed the stud that looking like a catch. The twenty-centimetre panel door sprung open, flapping in the downdraft.

Inside was a mass of electronics, avionics, and hydraulics. Most of which I didn't understand. But I recognised the red piping of the fuel line.

I pulled out my clasp-knife and pushed both hands together to open it. I reached into the panel one-handed and sawed at the fuel line. Aviation Fuel

sputtered out everywhere, making my grip slippery. The heavy aroma getting up my nose and almost making me gag.

Quickly the rotor lost its rapid thump, thump, thump as the computer-driven systems registered a drop in fuel supply pressure.

The craft yawed and pitched, and the height was rapidly reducing. The pilot was having to make a forced landing. Good luck explaining that to the man with a gun at your head. 'We're going down, anyway. You shoot me, and we'll go down harder.'

I held tight with both hands and now concentrated on the ground below. The craft was in a slow tailspin and I watched carefully the landmarks beneath me. As we neared the ground, it seemed like he was going to land on the grassy area just to the south of the main runway. If it had been concreted, I'd be in danger of broken bones.

Grass was raising slowly upwards, the pilot being extra careful. The rotor was slowing, and the roar of the engine almost stopped now, with no fuel left to turn it. It was rapidly coming to a dead stick landing.

Trying to judge the ground distance below, I watched the shadow on the ground rising to meet us. When shadow met hard metal, we'd be down. The shadow rushed towards me and I finally let go, rolling when I hit the ground. I must have got it right because the skid thumped down and bounced once, less than a metre away from me.

The next few minutes would be critical, and I had no plan what to do next. I didn't have a gun, I knew Luca did.

The rotors still swished above my head. I took a deep breath and edged towards the rear of the craft's body. I knew the tail rotor was still spinning to a halt and was only a few metres behind me.

Under the belly of the craft, a pair of feet hit the turf and ran away, towards the buildings to the west of where we'd landed. The pilot. I waited for the shot from Luca that brought him down. It never came.

The cabin door opened, and Luca leaned out. He pulled his head quickly back in, thinking I still had a gun. I pulled the Taser out of my pocket and tried to hold it, so it appeared a bigger weapon. Meanwhile, I eased further under the tail to keep Luca from getting a clear shot at me.

He pushed his arm out of the partly open door and fired three shots blindly in my direction. I couldn't see the gun he had, so couldn't be sure of just counting shots. Besides, he might have more ammo on him. The slugs ploughed into the grass several metres away from me. I hoped that meant he was a poor shot.

I heard the other cabin door open and knew he was trying to see me from the other side. I eased further back away under the tail. The tail rotor was slowing to a stop now and the main rotors had stopped altogether. There was silence in the airfield.

I heard the drone of a light aircraft in the distance, but nothing else. Were there any emergency services at this facility? Shouldn't people be running towards the chopper? Gunshots! Police will be called. How long to get here? Did I want them here?

We played the cat-and-mouse game for a while until Luca decided that perhaps I didn't have a gun, or I would've come after him. His feet touched the grass and hesitated. I eased away to the other side of the chopper.

The end was near unless I got near to him quickly enough. My knife wasn't suitable for throwing, or I would've relied on that. I'd nothing useful left on me.

Fuel was still dripping down the side of the craft onto the grass, draining from the tank. Not too much, but enough to get my hands sticky, and the smell was a little headier now. Had I fired a gun I would've set myself alight, anyway.

Luca was bending down trying to see me under the helicopter's round fat belly. I scanned all around me. The nearest shelter was where the pilot had headed. He was now running a hundred metres away. But I stood no chance of outrunning a bullet.

Directly to the south were more open fields and then a line of trees separating farmer's fields. Maybe only eighty metres, but still too far to reach without getting shot. Zoltán said he was a coward, but a dangerous one. How good a shot was Luca?

I soon found out.

A slug spanged off the fuselage a foot from my face and ploughed up a small furrow in the grass by my hand. He'd missed me from eight metres away.

Rolling quickly away to the other side of the craft, I heard a whoosh and felt hot air. The slug striking metal had set the spilt fuel alight. Flames flickered, and smoke spread slowly.

I couldn't see Luca now but guessed he was no longer waiting. I kept moving. My clothes had some fuel on them. I had to stay clear of the flames or become a human torch.

He'd be ducking down to see my feet. I half expected a bullet to shatter my shins at any second. I hopped onto the skid, hoping it was high enough

above the bottom of the fuselage to hide me. I edged towards the cabin, quietly opened the door and slid into the cabin, trying to duck low. There's no room in those things for that.

The fire was reducing and the smoke dissipating. It wouldn't be long until Luca thought of checking the cockpit. If he came close enough I'd reach out with the Taser, but he might be too cautious for that.

He had nowhere to go now; it was just me and him. No chance of him escaping.

Nor me.

It was quiet inside the cockpit, but I heard the drone of the aircraft somewhere close overhead. The smell of fuel on me was filling the cabin. A shadow moved on the grass and I got ready for a quick exit, or a quick lunge. The shadow stopped moving.

The droning grew louder.

I held my breath and tensed, ready to spring either way. The drone became a roar and interspersed with a thumping sound. It was quite loud now, and I risked a glance out of the passenger side window.

My white van was bouncing across the rough grass, heading straight towards the chopper. A few shots rang out as Luca fired at it. I took a risk and flung myself through the door, hitting the ground in a roll. I came up in a crouch ready to rush Luca with the Taser.

Luca was pointing the gun at the van which had now slid to a stop. He swung it towards me when a cry from the van distracted him.

Olga shouted, 'Luca!' Her gun was pointing at him. 'You are dead if you pull that trigger.'

There was now a stalemate. Henrik came out from the van, pointing a second weapon at Luca. He glanced at me, then the two others, and knew it was all over.

I tried to take everything in as quickly as possible. Zoltán must have been driving the van. How many shots had Luca fired? Six. I now had sight of the gun, it was a Smith and Wesson 686. Seven bullets. He should have one left. Who was he going to use it on and then die happy? Unless he'd reloaded?

We waited in silence. I heard birds singing. The drone of that plane somewhere to the south. The harsh shriek of a fox coming from the ridge of trees to the south. No police sirens yet. No emergency vehicles coming from the buildings to the west.

The pilot was out of sight, he'd made it alive and was telling his story. People wouldn't come into a gunfight without police back up. We still had time.

Luca lowered his weapon. He smiled.

I edged towards him, ready with my Taser. 'Why try that, Luca?'

He shrugged, 'I knew I was in danger with the three of you. Four now, by the looks of it.' He raised his voice, 'Traitor, Zoltán.'

He stood still, arms by his side, relaxed. 'You think this is the end game, Magic Man? Think it's all over? You're wrong.'

He seemed to sag, collapsing into himself, but he straightened up. The last of the smoke had drifted away over him and the air was clearing of vapours.

It was lucky the flames hadn't found their way to the fuel tank. Planes and cars don't automatically explode when they're on fire. It's not like in the movies.

'Figured it all out, Magic Man! I'm a little impressed. I thought you were over the hill but look at you. You're here.'

'I do my best, Luca. Why run? You didn't know the hit was a failure. You didn't know the Italians wouldn't pay you. Why run?'

'I wanted a clean break. I'm tired, Magic Man. Tired of thinking for everyone, doing all the planning. Just tired. A few million in offshore and I'd live off that. I'm not an extravagant man.' His eyes were avoiding mine. 'I suspect your retirement requires a lot more. You demand more from life, being a single man with no commitments. I somehow envy you, right now. But I won't for long.'

I sensed he was drawing out the conversation, wasting time. Waiting for something. What?

With a casual, but exaggerated, gesture he ran his hand through his hair. It appeared to be a signal, but to whom? His other arm came up with the gun and aimed it at me. Olga's gun still aimed at him, she would not make the same mistake twice. She didn't hesitate in pulling the trigger.

The bullet entered dead centre of Luca's forehead. Blood and brains splattered the white paint of the helicopter. The slug careened off the fuselage and into the field.

I heard another shot come from near the van at almost the same time a small red dot appeared on Luca's heart, arterial spray came out. Then

another spurt of blood came from Luca's left lung area. He collapsed like a boneless rag doll. Dead before he knew it.

His body spasm flung the gun out of his hand and lay on the grass.

I mentally ran through all the things we need to get sorted before we left the scene. I left his gun, it might get connected to other crimes in his career. I had to get everyone and the van out of there. I scanned around, the only exit was through the main gate. I'd seen no other.

No exit strategy. Time was vital.

'Get in the van, both of you. Now!'

Olga was in a state of shock, staring at the corpse of the man she hated the most. Henrik moved to her and pulled her away. I heard Zoltán start the engine.

I found the time to wipe where my hands had gripped the skid and risers with my sleeve. I'd used the cockpit door too, so I ran around and wiped that clean with my other sleeve.

Two slivers of grass flew up near my feet. I instinctively moved, just as two more pinged off the fuselage near where I'd stood.

'Get in the van. Sniper!' I shouted while running to the side door. I pushed Henrik in, 'Zoltán, gun it. Main gate.'

Snatching Olga's gun from her hand, I leaned out of the open door, I emptied the mag in the rough direction I thought the shots had originated. Seconds later holes appeared in the side of the van. Someone was shooting from a non-elevated position. Luckily no one was hit.

I grabbed Henrik's gun and watched for flashes. There were two. I ducked automatically but fired three shots more accurately this time. The range was too far to expect a hit, but it might make him keep his head down.

We were bouncing over the grass and onto the concrete. The speed increased, and tyres squealed as Zoltán hauled the van around the main building. People were shocked at the commotion and gunshots, but helpless to do anything about it.

We were out of sight of the shooter now, but for how long? Where was his car? I'd memorised all those we'd seen on the way in, and now on the way out I checked to see if there were any additions.

'Which way?' shouted Zoltán as he got to the gates.

'Left. Towards the country, not the main road. The police will come from the main road side. Step on it.'

I knew it was a risk as we'd be passing the shooters firing position. Whether he'd see us through the trees along the side of the road, I didn't know. I hoped not.

There were no further shots at the van.

'Everyone all right?' I said casually to keep them calm.

'Olga's hit.' Henrik was afraid, it was in his voice.

'Let's look.' I slid over to her. The inside of the van was not comfortable, the chairs just simple seats bolted to the floor. We were being thrown about as Zoltán hurtled down the country roads.

'Where to?' Zoltán asked.

'Anywhere. Anywhere there are trees.' I said. 'Police helicopters.' I added.

Olga had her head back, and she appeared in pain. There was blood on her arm and I pulled it gently towards me. I pulled the material of her blouse away from the skin and peered inside.

'Just a crease.' I spoke lightly. 'What's with you and bullets in the arm?' I smiled as I reached up and pulled down a field dressing kit from one of the many racks in the van. I handed it to Henrik. 'Clear the blood away. Put the alcohol cleaner on it and plaster. Bandage to keep clean.'

As I moved forward to the passenger seat, I picked up a road atlas. I recalled how many turns we'd taken since leaving the airport. Locating the airport on the map I tried to estimate where we now were.

A signpost came up ahead, Knaphill. I found it on the map and had a good idea where we were. The nearest mainline station was Woking.

I said to Zoltán, 'Slow down, we will find somewhere to stop.'

'Now? With someone chasing us, to kill us?'

'He's not behind. he would've had to get to his car and then try to follow us. He won't be behind. We're reasonably safe for a while.' I felt less sure than I sounded. 'There on the left, small road, take it.'

We ground around the corner, the old van making it hard and uncomfortable. A little way on we found a small earth layby, I told him to pull in. The trees arched above us, and I breathed an internal sigh of relief. I needed a moment to figure out an exit strategy.

'Stay here, stay, I'll be right back. Is Olga okay, Henrik?' He nodded, I got out of the van and stood on the road listening. Apart from animal and bird sounds it was quiet.

I pulled off my jacket and jeans. The aviation fuel smelt strong but would eventually evaporate. I'd spare clothes in the van I held for emergencies.

Now I slowed my breathing, allowing my mind to assemble the details of the last half an hour. I slowly pieced everything together and decided. I breathed in deeply and went back into the van.

Olga's arm was neatly bandaged, and she'd be fine. Zoltán leant over the seat staring back at me. His face neutral, waiting to be told what to do next. I assumed he was grateful to be needed, or he'd be dead. I never considered killing him. No point.

Henrik was loading the two weapons, and it struck me I'd dropped my weapon and left it behind. 'Shit!' I vented my frustration.

'What?' Olga's face showed fear.

'I left my gun behind.' I always wore rubber gloves, so prints were not a problem, but the gun may have touched other parts of my skin. There was always DNA to be aware of.

She smiled and pulled out my gun from her waistband, hidden by the blouse. 'This, you mean?'

I felt a wave of relief. She'd remembered her time as an asset - clear up everything afterwards. I felt so grateful. 'Clever girl. Thanks.'

She beamed with pleasure. 'If you had kept it you would have shot Luca, right?'

I nodded, 'Probably.'

'But I did.. Right here.' She pointed to her forehead.

'Good shot.' I smiled as I peeled off the fat suit, threw it in the van and pulled on clean clothes.

'He died too quickly. I wanted him to see my face before he left this life.' Her face was serious now.

'He's gone. Good riddance. Isn't that what you say in English?' Henrik smiled.

'Some would.' I suggested.

Zoltán muttered from the front seat, 'I am also glad he's dead. Apart from my money he owes me.'

‘Was that why you were so eager to get to him in my van? It saved my life, you know.’ I said.

He shrugged. ‘I wanted my money. That is all.’

‘Who’s the hitman after us then?’ Henrik wanted to know. Everyone was quiet.

‘I’m not sure he’s after everyone.’ I answered softly.

‘He shot Luca, right?’ Olga responded slowly. ‘Why?’

I shrugged and tried to sound casual. ‘I think he’d aimed at me and hit Luca instead. I’m guessing Luca hired him to get me. He tried, but he missed. Maybe he'd only just been able to get into position? He was probably originally positioned near the helicopter when we got there. Planning to get me before Luca took off. If I hadn’t jumped onto that helicopter he would’ve nailed me there. Lucky break.’

‘But he was shooting at us too. When we drove away?’ It puzzled Henrik.

‘Shooting at me, the shots were blind. He was hoping for a lucky strike. There’s no reason you two should be targets. None at all.’

Zoltán spoke quietly from the front seat, ‘Luca’s vindictive. That is the right word? Vindictive?’ I nodded. ‘He has taken on more assets. He could be cleaning houses.’

It was the thought train I didn’t want the others to hear, but now it was in the open I felt I should address it.

‘Okay. Here’s what I suggest we do now.’

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT – HENRIK

The gunfight disturbed me.

My whole body shook as I watched Luca lying there. I glanced over at Olga, she'd frozen, only James seemed unaware of what had just happened. I had helped kill a man. The second time in my life. I hated both of them, so did this really make me a killer?

James hurried around helicopter, wiping anywhere he had been. I guessed it was because of fingerprints. If they caught us, how would we explain death of Luca to police?

Yes, I was murderer; I saw my bullet hit him in heart. He would have died from that.

I was still in shock when tufts of grass suddenly flying upwards. I thought I heard sounds coming from behind me. Was that silenced gunfire?

Everything seemed to happen at once. Before I knew it, I was in van with James falling on top of me, then being thrown backwards, as van pulled away. It threw me around and I fell on Olga several times. I tried to hang on to rack and that helped a little.

Holes appeared inside of van with tearing metal sounds. The slugs hit various items in van but did not bounce around too much. Their energy much spent getting through metal side.

It all happened too fast for anyone to panic, we sat still and hoped for best. I hung on until we left airport. The roads were now tarmac and ride less rough. It threw us around some more and I was feeling sick.

Olga was holding her arm and shook her head. We did not have to speak, to know what other is thinking. I reached out and pulled her arm away, some blood there. It did not seem too bad, but this was my sister!

I let her cup it with her other hand and waited to do something about it later. I told James once van stopped its more violent movements. He told me to bandage it. Olga said to wait, but I help make her more comfortable.

James decided it was safe enough to stop. He needed thinking time and got out. Still on adrenalin from fight and flight, I had to do something, so I loaded empty guns. You never know when you need them.

When James came back, he was his usual calm self, full of confidence. I felt we were in good hands. It was confusing to realise that we were now out of frying pan and into fire - as the English say.

We were convinced we are now all target of another assassin. Someone Luca had sent from his grave to kill us. James was not so sure. Zoltán was sure and said so, but James had a plan.

We spent some time taking as much useful equipment out of van. We found a few duffel bags and backpacks. We loaded them up, enough so we were able to still carry them.

Somebody had to mention Zoltán, so I did. 'What about Zoltán?' There was silence. 'I think we should let him go.'

James nodded. 'Perhaps.....' he was thinking. 'Zoltán, take the van and get as far away as you can. Do you have anyone here that can help you, family?' He shook his head. 'Well, head for Dover, get over the channel. Oh, you don't have a passport do you?'

Zoltán smiled and dug into his back pocket. 'I got it back, and József's. I must let him out first. I have to go back and do that.'

James was thinking again. 'On second thoughts, I don't know how risky it'll be to take this van much further. The police will have a good description by now, and a direction to search. Our marksman is out there searching too. Too risky to continue with it. So, I suggest we all hit the road on foot. Get to a mainline station, Woking's the nearest. Get into London and plan from there. Agreed?'

I did not like being exposed on foot. But I did not think to stick with van was good idea either. No one disagreed, so we gathered everything up. We spent while wiping van with alcohol rub from First Aid kit.

'DNA and fingerprints. Try to get it all. Anything you've touched.' James was cleaning everything. We were ready to go, last check of the map. 'This way.' He pointed east. Away from way we had come.

We had a long walk ahead.

We rounded bend and suddenly Zoltán cried, 'Ahh. I forgot something. Go ahead, I will catch you up.' He hurried back to van.

'No fingerprints!' shouted James after him.

We never saw him again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE – OLGA

We waited for Zoltán until our train came. James knew he had taken his own course and run. He may be unsure we would still kill him, or not. I no longer disliked him enough to care. He had helped us, getting James safe from helicopter. We should be a little grateful to him. I am sure fat József would have done nothing to help us.

We walked slowly at first, then realised Zoltán was not coming and speeded up. Once off the main road we relied on James's mobile sat nav to find our way across country. It was only five miles, he knew, but we used footpaths across fields to stay clear of discovery.

It was nervous time for us three. We were glancing all around, for anything out of ordinary. Any sharp animal sound made me jump. James seemed blind to it all, he marched on.

My arm was aching and James noticed. He gave me some painkillers from his pack and I washed it down with one of few bottles of water we had from van.

We came across a pub, off main road and eased into bar. James scanned room, ready for the fast exit, but it was almost empty. It was getting into early evening and people coming in on their way home from work.

They sold all day food and James said it was good if we had something to eat and drink; we had been long time without. The next meal a long time away.

James had pint of water and Henrik tried beer. He sipped it and pulled face. 'Tastes strong.' But he somehow finished it. For me double Vodka neat. And then another one with my cigarette, which I had to smoke outside. I said I would be the lookout.

As I sat quietly and listened to birds and rural sounds, I tensed when I heard car coming, but it passed, and birds had place to themselves. Pills and vodka made my arm seem okay.

I was thinking back to events of last few hours. Everything happened so fast. Now time to realise Luca had finally gone. All his holligans gone. I should feel good, but there was somebody out there trying to kill James. Deep down, I knew they were after me and Henrik too. I had the feeling.

Henrik waved me in as food arrived. I wanted another drink, but James said he wanted me sober. He might need me to help him get us to safety. I agreed with him but still wanted another drink.

The food was large with taste. Better than I cooked for myself. Better than I normally afford. But not as nice as mamma's cooking. I was looking forward to getting home again.

I wanted to call her, but James insisted, 'I think we're being tracked somehow. If we use a phone, it can be traceable. Let's get to safety first. Sorry, better to be safe and sure.'

Being this close to freedom made me want to speak to mamma even more. I pushed my empty plate away and James decided we had better get moving. He scanned around outside before we headed off on footpath again.

It was several hours before we reached main town and found station. A main line, which took us straight into London. Waterloo, taking about an hour and we would be safe.

We sat on platform feeling exposed. James watched all entrances to all four of main platforms as we waited. The train did not come quick enough for us. Zoltán never came.

James paid for First Class tickets. The carriage was certainly nice and cosy. He said there would be fewer people in it, anyone followed more chance to see. I just believed no one could follow us after journey we just took. But James was cautious man, and we were all still alive.

We sat around table and I unhappily watched buffet trolley go by with food and vodka.

James was serious, 'I don't think we can go straight back to any of my safe houses. Not yet. We need to make a few detours, see if we can shake anyone tracking us. Maybe spend night in a hotel if that's okay with you?' We nodded.

'Tomorrow, I'll get you on a plane to Budapest. I'll give you money to get you home from there. Be prepared for a siege until I call to let you know everything's all right.'

He has the sixth sense we were being followed. Nothing he was sure of, but it puzzled him. And worried us. I felt guilty to leave him behind to deal with this killer. We have both been on other ends. The result would be anything but happy.

'We cannot leave you to face this alone.' Henrik announced before I did.

'I can manage. I have before. Many times. This is not the first time someone has shot at me.'

'But it is first time you have been target?' I asked.

‘Counting you, no.’

I felt the stab of guilt at that. More reason not to leave him. ‘No. We will stay and help you through this, James. After all you have done for....’ I tried to say.

‘No!’ his voice was hard and sharp. He meant it. Henrik and I were quiet.

He smiled, softening his face. ‘I’ve got many years’ experience looking after myself. It’s me he’s after, you’ll be in the way and could get hurt. I need to travel fast and often. I can’t do that towing you two around. No. You go home. That’ll help me the most. Honest. But...I appreciate your gesture.’

James went to toilets and came back looking different. I realised he had removed all make-up of his disguise. His eyes were clear, and his cheeks as I remembered. His hair was short, mid brown with slight curl.

We had time to go, he was at ease and wanted to talk. This was first time I saw him this way. We drank from plastic bottles of water and tried to rest and relax as much as possible.

‘Tell me about yourself, Olga.’ He asked, sitting close beside me.

‘Where do I start?’ I tapped plastic bottle on table. I realised it may annoy, so stopped.

‘I am just simple farm girl. My father says with *álnokság és eltökéltség* ... guile and persistence. I am unfit and untrained in almost anything and can be a problem.’

Henrik grinned as he added, ‘Papa says she has got low-tech cunning. Using natural environment to find results. You should see her on farm. She can make anything work. Solves all problems. One of reasons I think Luca spotted her and saw her use.’

Hearing Luca’s name again chilled me. ‘To Luca I was expendable.’ I explained, more to Henrik than James. ‘My experience was so limited, I had to rely on long-range hits, so I did not have to make instant decisions, which require other skills I do not have.’ I drained bottle and put it into my backpack. It would be little lighter now. ‘I always had.... problems in taking life. Luca forced me into it. You, James, choose to do so. I do not know how you do it.’

James seemed deep in thought for moment, ‘Coming from a military family background, I joined the army and worked my way up to the Special Services. But I had an Achilles Heel, which forced me out of the service. I’ve since tried to bring that under control.’ He sipped at the water bottle, thinking. ‘After leaving the army I became a mercenary, but soon became disillusioned with working for, and with, a bunch of thugs and money

hungry grunts. It made me re-evaluate my life needs. On my last mercenary op, I was shot and had to make my way back, alone, without completing the mission. I was short changed and got angry. Then got even.'

He drained the bottle and placed it carefully on the table, watching it as if it was an enemy. 'This set me on the road of choosing my own battles and charging a fair price for the result. So here I am. An assassin for hire, with a big reputation. At the end of my career and still fighting. Sounds funny, doesn't it?'

Henrik laughed. 'No, not funny. In Hungary we have the knock, knock jokes. You've heard of them?' James nodded. 'Now they are funny. You English have no sense of humour.'

There was quiet moment as we listened to clatter of railway. Henrik had never been on train before and doing well in his many new life experiences. To break silence I try to speak to James. He rarely spoke about himself, but I felt now was time he might, I asked, 'Who was your first hit?'

He thought for a while before saying, 'My father. The second was my mother. I needed the inheritance.'

'What!' I said loudly.

He waited few seconds before breaking into broad smile. 'No, it wasn't. Now THAT is a good joke.'

It took Henrik and me little while before we guessed it was joke and we laughed. But it was not as funny as knock, knock.

'Is James your real name?' I asked.

He smiled, 'No. Just one I used with Lucie. Something convenient and easy to remember.'

'So, who is your real name?' asked Henrik.

He did not want to say but relented. 'You've heard of the group Rolling Stones?' I nodded, Henrik shook his head. 'Their lead singer, Mick Jagger?' I nodded. 'My mother was a great fan of Mick's. Dad was always somewhere shooting up an opposing army and so she decided she could name me. So, she named me after him.'

'Mick!'

'No, Jagger. Jagger Gilchrist, at your service. Spelt Gilchrist, but pronounced Gil Crist.'

I ran name around my mind. Somehow it fitted better than James. Better than, The Magician. 'I like it. Jagger Gil Crist.'

There was fuzzy talking about Waterloo on intercom. James stood up and hefted backpack onto his back. 'Let's make our way forward to be nearer the gates.'

Stress was coming back to James's....no, Jagger's, body, as we went through the ticket gates. His eyes were everywhere, scanning for faces watching us. Searching for anything out of ordinary. He had asked us to stay close to him and we hurried across wide place and through large archway.

We were soon on street and waiting in line for taxi. As we waited, Jagger's eyes again everywhere. It was almost relief to get inside taxi. It was very spacious if little uncomfortable. Jagger asked driver if there were any clothes stores open at this time of evening. He said he knew of one, he would take us there.

Neither Henrik or me had been in London taxi before. He was struck at beauty of ancient buildings, all lit up like fairyland. It certainly is pretty. I had seen it before but never in mood where I could enjoy it.

Jagger sat with his back to driver and staring out of back window, counting cars, memorising number plates, car colours, makes and models. For twenty minutes he was like that, until taxi swerved into tiny parking space.

'Here we are Guv. An outdoor clothing shop, open 'til eight.'

Jagger thanked him and paid him. I assume with tip, because driver said, 'Ta very much, Guv.' He drove away quickly. The light on his roof coming on as he did so.

I do not know what a "Guv" is.

We hurried through store. Jagger took lead and pulled out various items of clothing for all three of us. He chose style and colour, we chose size. He said we did not have time to try them on. Henrik did not know you may try them on before buying. All his clothes bought by mamma.

We got to pay just as shop was closing. Jagger paid over three hundred pounds for three bags of clothing! At home that is a whole wardrobe for the family. He walked out of shop glancing up and down street before choosing direction.

We walked in silence through London streets for long time. I am not sure if he knew where we were going, but we suddenly arrived at a tall front door, which said Regency Plaza Hotel, in bright lights.

Inside it was warm and golden. The walls soft colours and there were chairs and tables with people seated, having coffee, or beer. Reading, talking

and just relaxing. I at once liked this place. Henrik just stood with his mouth open. For him, this was Royal Palace.

Jagger moved towards large desk which said "Reception". His eyes were everywhere again. 'Two rooms for one night, please. Double and a twin, please.'

The lady behind desk smiled at him and tapped at a computer keyboard. She was very tall and had her hair pulled back in a small ponytail. She had on much makeup and her skin so smooth. Henrik unable to take his eyes off her. She glanced up at him and smiled.

'Street, or rear view, sir?'

'No matter, as long as they've inter-connecting doors.'

'Here we are. Only a few left. 234 and 235, sir. How would you like to pay, Credit card?'

He pulled out wallet and took out paper money to give to her. It includes 'Breakfast, sir. Would you like a paper in the morning?'

'No thanks. Coffee machines in the room?'

'Yes, sir. All our rooms have them. Would you like your luggage taken to the room, sir?'

'No thanks. We have little. Flight cancelled. We'll be off early. I'll pay now.' He said with a fake anger in his face.

'£290, sir.'

I nearly choked at price.

He counted out the money and handed it to the lady who smiled again. It was a false smile.

'Here's your, electronic keys, sir. Have a pleasant evening.'

'Thanks.'

We took stairs, and that made me realise just how tired I was. My arm now hurting again. I wanted rest, drink and smoke. Did this room have balcony?

Jagger found corridor and rooms. The corridor was clear, we went into rooms. The room very nice. Soft furnishings and very clean bathroom and toilet. A small TV stood on shelf and two made up beds lit with soft lighting.

He moved towards door that looked like part of wall and unlocked it, then pushed and pulled at another door behind it, it did not move. He went out of room again and few minutes later secret door opened, and Jagger pushed both doors wide.

I looked in at other room, which was same, except for one large bed instead of two.

‘Grab a shower and we’ll get food sent up. Change into casual clothes we bought, save others for your trip tomorrow. See you in half an hour.’ He moved away into other room, threw backpack on bed and walked into his bathroom.

‘You first, Olga.’ Henrik said and tried to get TV to work. I switched it on for him and showed him how to use remote handset. He was like kid with toy.

He was still changing channels when I came out of bathroom.

CHAPTER FORTY - THE MAGICIAN

I remained in the shower for a long time, re-running the events of the day through my mind. Luca gone, but a new complication. Will I ever get a break? I had to organise my priorities.

Feeling better after the shower, I sat on the end of the bed and flicked through the TV channels. Someone was channel hopping in the other room too. I got up and quietly closed the door; I needed thinking time. My TV a minor distraction, their TV was a major one.

I settled for a news channel and lay on the bed, letting the images and sound pass by me. There was an image I recognised and sat forward. A helicopter in a grassy field. I increased the volume.

‘.....forced landed after a gunfight. One man was dead, and the pilot escaped uninjured. Police thought Crime Syndicates to be involved. In a separate news item, a white van was discovered in Surrey, burnt-out and a body of a middle-aged man found next to it. The police are linking the two occurrences, and a gang war might be the cause of both. The Police have appealed for any eye witnesses to come forward.....’

It was only a quick shot from a news helicopter, my burnt-out van and a body ten metres away, lying on the ground covered in a sheet. It appeared as if Zoltán was trying to run away, but he'd a wounded leg. I felt a pang of guilt over that. At least, the cremated van left no evidence to trace back.

If I'm the target, the asset will eventually catch me. However well my trail was covered, a good asset will always get their target. I have in the past. The only slight difference being, that my targets didn't realise they were being hunted. So, I had to muddy the trail.

But why was Zoltán killed and the van burnt? I rationalised that somebody was cleaning house. So maybe I wasn't the only target? But who, who cared what happened to Luca, me, Olga, anymore? None of it made sense. I wanted to speak to the hitman before I killed him. I needed to know for my sanity.

Something niggled away at me; it puzzled me how the asset was at the airport ahead of me? Did Luca send him there as a set up? It certainly seems like he did. He gives a signal and shots fired soon afterwards. Luca knew I *might* not fall for the Chile ploy and *might* figure out the helicopter scheme. Did he give me that much credibility? Maybe. Or was it a belt and braces thing, he was covering every eventuality?

Would I give Luca that much credit for planning? He had the time, but was he bright enough? Or, did he see me bug his car? Had he seen me put

the tracker under the car at the school? Too many imponderables to work it out. Stick with what I know. Zoltán might have answers, but he was dead.

I tore my mind away from that enigma and focused on the next course of action. I needed an exit strategy to get out of this hotel and get those two out of the country. I used the room phone and my false credit card to book two flights out of Heathrow for tomorrow morning to Budapest. The card would be untraceable as it was under a false identity and address. Payment made regularly through another false name. I'd only use it in an emergency and this was certainly that.

Luca's laptop was in the backpack. I flipped it open and tried to hack it. Once you have a password, it's easy. I tried the usual passwords people use. Like, "password", their own name 1233456 and 654321. Nothing worked. Okay, Plan B.....

I didn't have a Plan B.

My mind went back to Luca's office and re-ran the images I'd studied. The photos, the postcards, the pieces of memorabilia. Stuck on bookshelves, on the screen. Lying on the desk. I scrolled through the photos on my phone which I'd taken. People and places.

His daughter. Elena. Too few words. Her birth date, what was that? I scanned through the photos again. There on the wall, a child's handprint in paint. A scrawled date beneath it, under the word 'Elena'. I tapped in the date. Nothing! I tried the permutations of the name and date. On the third try the gates opened for me.

I guessed his bank details would be in a password-protected file. On screen I found a folder where Luca kept notes of his financial transactions. I tried the password again. It had worked once..... It worked again. Something he should've deleted, but missed in his haste?

I whistled at how much money he had in there. £8 million. I took a deep breath and hoped there wouldn't be too many security questions to get through as I gained full access to the account. Using just the family names got me through. Luca was not as bright as he thought he was. A leftover from his rural Hungarian background remained. Strong family ties.

Once I had the hotel password for their Wi-Fi, I connected to the relevant website. I transferred his money to my personal overseas account. I had a twinge of guilt about his family. After all, they weren't trying to kill me. So, I left them half a million. They'd just have to make do.

I doubted if Luca had more accounts, but I checked anyway. A knock on the door interrupted me, and Olga's head appeared.

'I'm hungry. Can we go to eat?'

I checked the time, it was past eleven. 'Restaurant will be closed now. Call and order room service, anything you want. Chicken sandwich and a decaffeinated coffee for me. Thanks.'

A while later I'd finished with Luca's laptop. What to do with it? I pulled out my Taser and fired it up, the laptop sparked and smoked a little. That should do it. I became concerned the smoke alarm would go off, so I opened the window to the balcony and wafted the smoke out. I smelt cigarette smoke. Olga smiled at me from a chair on her adjacent balcony.

'You come out for smoke too?' she grinned. She had two small bottles on the table in front of her. Both empty. 'I like the free drinks in the cold cupboard, but we have run out. Any more?'

I shook my head. 'How's your arm? I'll have a look at it.'

'No need. Henrik has put fresh plaster and bandage on it. There was medipack in one of our bags. You all right, James? You look tired?'

She hadn't mentioned the news report, so I hoped they hadn't seen it. I didn't want them concerned.

'We've put our old clothes in laundry sacks we found in the wardrobe. We take them home?'

'No. We'll dump them on the way out tomorrow.'

'Throw them away! There's years of life in them yet.'

'I think they could be bugged. If so, they know we're here. But they won't try anything in a busy hotel, that's why I suggested staying here for the night. Tomorrow we'll leave early and toss them in a skip. I'll get a new burner tomorrow and throw this one away.'

'Burner?'

'Mobile phone you use once and throw away, so you can't be traced. When's the food due?'

'A few more minutes they said.'

'Let me know when it comes.' I went back inside and closed the door.

I sat in the chair and watched the TV, with the sound off. I revised my contacts over the years. Milo was my last handler, there were no more clients left. I'd no one I can call on to help. I even thought of Petros Costas, but discarded him as too new and low profile.

Food came, and we ate together in their room. It was tasty and filling, if a little pricey. We were silent for a while. I noticed how clean and happy the

two of them looked, now they'd showered and wore decent, if uninspiring, clothing.

'Somebody caught up with Zoltán.' Olga spoke out of comfortable silence. 'Did they think we were still in van?'

'We must assume so.' Herrick spoke through a mouthful of food. 'So, they've stopped looking for us then?'

'Only one body found. No, they're still looking.' Olga said through her mouthful of food.

'Somebody should release József.' Henrik grunted.

'We don't have the keys.' Olga mumbled.

'Should not stop us getting him out.' Henrik said after drinking from a bottle of beer.

'Tomorrow, then. Let him suffer another night.' Olga decided with finality.

We ate in silence until Olga wanted to know, 'Can I get my rifle back before we go?'

I shook my head, 'You wouldn't get it through security and customs.'

'I want it back.'

'I'll make sure you'll get it back. It may take a while. I'm off to bed. Get some sleep. Don't drink the room dry, you need to be fresh for tomorrow. We must expect anything and everything.'

The following morning, I was up early and had food sent up to my room. I called reception and paid the bill with the same credit card, as I wanted an express checkout. Leaving without a fuss.

I had a change of disguise with me and checked myself out in the mirror. A wig, skin colouring, spectacles, a tweed suit that had seen better days and brogue shoes I'd bought from the van. The clothes were creased from being in a backpack, but it added authenticity. I appeared older and frumpier than I felt. It would have to do.

Time to sort through the baggage we had and separate the things I needed into three bags. One each for our journey.

We left the hotel carrying our bags, including old clothes, and walked a while until I found an alley with waste bins outside a restaurant's back door. I dumped the clothes and felt easier.

All the while I'd a feeling of being watched, a sniper out there waiting to strike. A moving target in a busy street is not an easy shot. It would have to be up close and quick, but three targets at the same time? Not probable. I don't think I'd try that. He'd have to wait, get us in a quieter and more accessible area. I had to make sure that didn't happen.

On the street we stuck to where there were crowds of people moving around. It was the morning rush hour, so it was a while before I was able to grab a taxi, and we hurried inside. I told the driver Heathrow. I watched every car behind us, we were not being followed. Or if we were, they were superb.

We now had changed all our clothes, and I felt confident there were no bugs on us after I'd dumped my phone.

I told them to hurry from the cab to the main departure door, a distance of only a few metres. I located the Lufthansa Airline desk and presented their passports and claimed my pre-booked tickets. I asked if the flight was full, it wasn't. I upgraded them to business and knew I'd feel happier they'd be securely cared for. I paid by card as it was the same one I'd booked the tickets with, wanting no confusion, or hold ups.

We walked toward the departure area and I stopped at a shop. I bought three mobile phones. I gave them one each and said they needed to call me as soon as they arrived at the farm. I programmed my new number into them and we had a while to wait, so I used wall sockets to charge them.

I hoped the phones would work, Olga had used mobiles to call her mother, and I'd taught Henrik to use mine. I trusted the reception was still as good in Hungary as before.

'Your passports should be fine. Don't worry. Relax. You've been through worse. Have a good trip.'

Henrik hugged me for a long time until I disengaged him. Olga was waiting to do the same. I held her at arm's length, 'Look after your brother. Say hello to the family.'

'Will you visit?'

'Of course I will.' I smiled.

'Will you hell.'

'I promise. I will.'

There was a moment's silence. To my surprise she smiled and just walked away.

'You had Kibaszott well better.' I heard her mumble. 'I want my rifle back.'

I watched them go, I'd miss them. That's not part of my nature. I mentally shook myself awake and moved out of the departure lounge. I used a different exit and found a taxi to take me on my convoluted journey home. Watching the rear view all the way.

Someone was out there to get me. But who and when, were a mystery I wanted to solve.

PART FIVE

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE – LUCIE

That fucker James has given me a duff contact number for him! He said it was for only a day; I didn't think he meant it! He'd always phoned me, arranged a time and came over. We liked that. It worked. No complications. But now....!

I HAD to speak to him. I needed to know. What was happening? Where was Olga? And that strange boy he had with him? Were they all...dead? Shot by other contract killers?

Last time I saw Olga she was saying goodbye and going to see Luca, her boss. Ex-boss she'd said, with emphasis on the 'ex'. I couldn't persuade her not to go. There was determination in her eyes I'd not seen before. Nothing would stop her.

It worried me about their safety, as you do when you've no contact, or information for a long time. But I realised I was more worried about not seeing James again.

I'd let my business slip. I only had the heart for my more regular and long-standing clients. Everyone else I was putting off, told them to call again. I was recommending several of my close friends in the business. I was losing money as fast as I was losing hope. Something had to stop. Something had to give.

The phone rang, and I asked myself, am I up for this job? Yes, or no? If no, who should I pass them on to? Let's see who it was first.

'Hello....James! Thank, God. Are you all right?'

'Fine. You?'

What was I to say? Worried, frightened? 'Fine. Where are you?'

'Outside your door.'

'What! Really?'

'Sort of. I want you to meet me in half an hour? If you're free? I didn't want to barge in and disturb you. We need to talk.'

'You bet we do....what's wrong?'

'Nothing's wrong. Nothing that can't be sorted, anyway. Broadway Café, in Fulham Road. See you in an hour, then.' The line went dead.

He was so exasperating. Clipped messages, a hint of an answer. Unknown situations and resolutions. What was that about? Did he think he was James Bond? An International spy?

But I was happy he's still alive and delighted he was coming to see me in a short while. I needed to look my stunning best, so I'd better get cracking.

I sat in the café with a coffee for nearly fifteen minutes. Why meet here? What's wrong with my place?

The place was half full and the man serving behind the bar was looking at me - a lot. I suppose he would. I wore just a short skirt, thin blouse and very light jacket. I suppose it was the high heels he liked. Men are so predictable.

The scruffy man on the next table reached across for the sugar bowl and said, 'May I?'

'Sure.' I said pushing it towards him.

'Don't react. Keep glancing at the door as you've have been for a while.'

'James?' I was immediately staring straight at him.

He looked like a tramp who's just got benefits paid. Old ragged coat and long straggly beard. A battered Beanie hat and cloudy eyes.

'Watch the door. Not me.' His voice a whisper.

'James? What...'

'I can't take the chance of us meeting. Not yet. I don't want to lead anyone to you. Sorry, but there'll be a short while when I can't see you.'

'Am I in danger, James?' Now I was whispering.

'Not if you don't look at me. When you leave here, act natural, but don't go straight home. Take a bus, not a taxi. People can back-trace through a taxi.' What people, I thought? 'Take several buses. Walk a little. Shop a little. Sit in a café and look out the window. See if the same person keeps walking by, or is across the street, waiting. Extra vigilant. Extra careful.'

That's the most he's ever said to me in one go. 'Why, James? Are you in danger?'

'Not as much as they are. Nothing that won't be sorted very soon. Are you all right?'

'After your call, yes. Now...not so sure. Someone following you?'

A pause before, 'I think so, but I'll get them off my back soon. Iwanted to talk to you.'

'Really. About....what?'

'Once I'm free of...all this....I want tospend more time with you. Is that something you would...agree to?' For the first time he sounded unsure of what to say.

I held my breath, scared to over-react. What exactly was he asking? 'Sure, sweetie.' I tried to sound casual. 'No problem. In...what way, exactly?'

'A...long term relationship.'

My heart was pounding now. Was he talking marriage? So soon, never. 'I'd like that, James. Very much. You do know what I do for a living, don't you, sweetie?'

'The point is....do you want to give it up..... and can you?'

What to say? All these years with one mind set. No thought of giving anything up. No retirement plans. It would take time to adjust. I'd need time to think about this. A week at least. 'Yes.' I found myself saying.

'Thank you, Lucie. That decides what I have to do next.' The confident voice was back.

'If I'd said no?' I didn't want the answer. But sure, I wouldn't get one.

'Just a different outcome, that's all. Leave now. Be careful. Don't be followed. There's only one. If he should follow anyone, it'll be me. I'll call you shortly and give you a number to contact me. Anything suspicious, I need you to tell me. Promise?'

'James....I....'

'Promise?' His tone quiet, but insistent.

'Yes. Sure. I promise. Careful and vigilant. James...I want to....'

'Go now. Please. Watch your back.'

'I've had stalkers before, sweetie. I know how to shake them.'

I wanted to reach out and touch him, but he'd moved his head and hands away and was concentrating on drinking his tea. I turned and walked out the café. I felt nervous and vulnerable. It'd be a long fraught journey home, but he was alive and wanted to be more involved in my life.

I felt ridiculously happy.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO - THE MAGICIAN

As Lucie wiggled out the door, I wondered if I'd said and done the right thing. I needed to know if she thought there might be a future for us. For women in her trade, deluding men comes naturally and easy. Careful and skilled as I am in spotting lies, how easy for her to fool me up to now? I had to know if it tempted her to have another life.

As for me, a relationship had always been out of the question. Who could live with someone in my trade? How could I plan and sort out a future? But now I was definitely retiring...

But did I love her? I really didn't know what that word meant. Exactly. I had...very strong feelings for her. For me, that's a first. She's the only one I recalled feeling that way.

I waited half an hour and left. Working the streets, swapping direction. Even changing disguises once. There's no one physically following me. I was sure.

But my sixth sense of being watched didn't go away. An itch I couldn't scratch. It'd saved me before, was it going to again?

I released József. He was glad to see me, but hatred still in his eyes. I had a moment of sympathy for him until he swore at me in his native tongue.

I told him about Zoltán. He shrugged, and that was his total emotional commitment. I found it sad that József might have taken my van and left the safety of our small group, possibly only to rescue this gross ignoramus.

I felt gracious enough to drop him off at the nearest underground. What happened after that I didn't need to care. As he walked away, I noticed he'd lost a few pounds from his confinement, but it hadn't changed his personality. What happened next in his life was up to him. Nothing good I suspected.

Someone out there had crosshairs on my head. I didn't know who, why, or where. Time to get the monkey off my back. I had to resort to dangerous means.

A day later, something finally happened. In that time, I'd stopped disguising myself, or hopping buses and taxis to go anywhere. Let him find me.

I stayed at my workshop; I felt more at home there. I am at ease surrounded by the paraphernalia of my business. The full total of my life rested on benches, parked on the hard standing, or packed away and labelled in boxes. This is my sanctuary, and I was packing it away for good. I'd resigned myself to retirement from the business.

I'd distribute some of it to my other safe houses. Not that I'd ever use it again. I knew a few people who'd want the more speciality gear. Most of it I'd bought from them, anyway.

The vehicles were problematical. All had bogus registrations, but I knew someone that would make them saleable.

There was little I'd recycle through council tips, too identifiable and easy to flag up for that. I had to be careful with everything; a long and laborious job. But the sooner I started....

My other safe houses were set up after my current one became operational. In this business things changed in an instant, I'm prepared to abandon this warehouse and move to another place instantly. My main concern, being tracked by law agencies. If they connected me to a sanction, I'd be in serious risk of losing my liberty.

There's little here that incriminates me, but they'd find my DNA, along with my fingerprints. But there's nothing here from any of my projects. I at once discard everything incriminating.

Only once have I abandoned my base. An exit strategy had gone pear-shaped, through no fault of my own, but nothing's fully plannable. I went to ground for a month, until I returned to shut down the old safe house.

My main discarding problem was my collection of weapons. I'd over sixty different types of rifles and pistols. I knew three people who'd love to get their hands on these, so I needed to itemise and put a price on them.

I hid the whole collection behind a false wall. This came away in one piece, which I rested against the workbench and studied the weapons hanging up there. I pulled down two items and hefted them in my hands.

A slight noise behind me. I didn't react but shifted the pistol in my hand into its shooting position.

'I assume that's not loaded?' The voice was female and sounded young. A slight hint of a London accent, but slightly upper-class. I needed more.

‘No, that’s too dangerous. Can I turn around?’

‘Slowly but put the pieces down first.’

I placed the two guns on the workbench and raised my hands as I turned around.

The woman in front of me was about five-foot-four. I can never remember what that is in metres. She looked in her mid-twenties but probably older. Long blonde hair in a ponytail that hung halfway down her back, piercing blue eyes that held my attention and never wavered from me.

‘Nice rack.’ she said with a grin.

‘Weapons are pieces of art.’ I argued, waving a hand at the weapons hanging neatly in racks in the hidden recess. ‘They need looking after, cared for. Loved.’ I was trying to absorb further details about her.

She was dressed in skin tight blue jeans and a white tight roll neck jumper, which covered her arms. She had a slim, but curvy figure. I surmised she’d no trouble getting boyfriends, but plenty keeping them.

‘They’re tools. Nothing more. Use ‘em. Discard ‘em.’ Her smile quite charming at any other time. She wore pale lipstick and dark makeup around her eyes. Her pale skin went with the blonde hair.

She was pointing a Glock 26, 9mm compact model straight at my chest. Centre mass wouldn’t miss me, however I tried to move. It kept steady, and her finger rested lightly on the guard, ready to squeeze the trigger instantly.

‘You were at the school.’ I remarked, eventually. ‘Watching the Italians. I remember you.’

‘Good memory Magician. Great. You saw me then?’

‘Biker outfit.’ I tried to relax, leaning against the workbench, my arms outstretched and my hands gripping the edge of the worktop. Slowly crossing my legs, I waited for the next part.

I watched her hand on the gun. Neatly manicured nails, clear varnish and cut short. No jewellery of any sort. The other hand was behind her back.

‘So, you’re the legendary Magician?’

‘I suppose I am. Though, I’m flattered to hear you say, “Legendary”.’

‘Don’t flatter yourself. You’re about to be taken out by a girl.’

She pulled the arm from behind her back and threw a plastic bag at me. ‘Put everything in there. Everything, pants and all.’

Both hands were on the gun now as she took a step back. Her knees bent to take the shooting position. Gun held close to her chest, out of reach of the protagonist. Professionally taught.

An exaggerated sigh from me, as I undid my shirt buttons, pulled it over my head then pulled my vest off. I kicked off my trainers towards her, she didn't flinch. She locked her eyes on mine as I pulled the socks off slowly. I took off my jeans and added them to the pile.

My subconscious mind asked why jeans were a, "them", should they be "it". How're they a pair? I pulled my mind back into focus. Watch her, analyse her, evaluate every word she said.

She nodded for me to remove my underpants. I did so and threw them onto the pile.

'In the bag.' was uttered without humour or any expression on her face.

Bending, I scooped up the clothing and pushed them in the sack. I felt slightly conscious naked, but I've been in worse positions. Something I always keep in mind when in perilous situations. I held out the bag for her to take. She was smart, standing back.

'Tie the top and throw it to my left. About here.' She took one hand off the gun long enough to point by her feet.

I did the tying and throwing. She kept her eyes on me as she reached down and picked up the bag. She threw it across the workshop. It hit something, which clattered to the floor. From the distance thrown, she didn't have much upper arm strength. Little Martial Arts experience then?

'Nice bod. Work out?' The smile was on her face again.

I nodded towards the multiple exercise equipment at the far end of the room. I was sure she'd spotted them. I was also sure she'd analysed everything in the workshop area. She'd been here a while, I thought. Maybe several times in the last few days, but why wait for this moment?

I resumed my stance against the workbench, 'Tell an old professional, how did you track me? I thought I'm good, but you.....!'

'Technology, old man. You've seen the Iraq war troupes targeting a building with a laser, "Painting" they call it. Just send a laser-guided missile out, it locks onto the paint and wham. A satellite can follow your target, doesn't need eyes on the ground.'

'Anywhere?'

‘Mostly. Not always inside buildings, but once you’re out in the open, or even through the roof of a vehicle. We had you to the nearest metre, just waiting for the right moment to strike. Which is now.’

‘I thought that technology was just for the military?’

‘If you’ve enough money or connections, getting military hardware isn’t difficult. The new Sniper rifles have a similar principle. Except the gun sights find the target, a computer does the calculation, and the bullet is fired more accurately than any human. I have two.’

‘So, you “painted” me...when?’

‘After you took out the Italians. Congratulations. We didn’t figure that one. They were our future employers, and you killed them off. Never mind. One door shuts..... Anyway, as you were walking away I zapped your head with the laser and the rest is history. Much like your career.’

I tried to look baffled. ‘Painting! As simple as that. Well, who’d have thought....’

‘Digital information is the future, old man. We’ve got more information about you using technology than we ever could without it.’

‘Well... I wouldn’t say....’

‘We don’t need time-consuming disguises, wasted time infiltrating targets and clients. It fools no one. It isn’t gas propelled bullets any more, calculated velocities, estimated wind direction, allow for Earth rotation, fall of a bullet. Gramm weight of powder, polishing the bullet for speed and accuracy. Technology has taken over.’ She was preening herself now. ‘We’ve got a laser gun that can shoot over a thousand yards. You can’t even see or hear it until it puts a hole straight through you. No one knowing where it came from.’

I smiled, ‘Real, old-fashioned bullets, are like emails. They send a message. Marble ones, a stronger message. You must adopt some sophistication in your approach, young lady. At the moment you’re a bull at a gate. A child with a new toy. You have got a lot to learn.’

‘You’re an old man in this game. Time’s past you by, time to make way for the new revolution. The business has changed, Magic Man. Your last trick will be to disappear forever.’

‘You going to use that?’ I pointed to her Glock.

‘It’s as good as anything.’

‘A bit loud, isn’t it? For an urban area?’

'I'll be soon gone.'

'Maybe. But nothing of the originality of the high tech, you're banging on about.'

'It'll do the job. You won't be complaining.'

'Before you do....a question.'

'Go on.' The hands were steady. She hadn't altered her stance or moved her eyes. This was classical training, someone had given her a course on shooting practices. I needed more information, I had to delay her.

'How did you get to the airfield so fast?'

She gave a little laugh. 'We'd tagged you from the time you left the school. Once you left Luca's office we knew which direction you were going in. He'd already told us where he was going, just in case you followed him. He gave you a lot of credit, Mr Magician. We knew where you were going, so we used our Motorbikes. We even buzzed you on the A3. Call yourself observant?'

'After we drove away from the airport, what happened then?' I was genuinely interested.

She was warming to her subject now. Her pale lips were set in a straight line, trying not to smirk. 'Justin had tagged the van when you entered the airport.' She relaxed, savouring her supremacy. 'We tracked you to the station and knew you were heading back to the comfort zone of your safe places. I went ahead to London and picked up your signal. Easy, peasy. Justin stayed behind and tracked the van. He torched it to avoid any further police complications.'

'Zoltán, did he have to be executed?'

'No, of course not. But Justin thought it messy to leave him free. We like to be neat and tidy.'

'You keep saying "we". How many are there?'

'Just me and my twin brother. Sorry, we haven't been introduced. How rude of me. You should know who kills you, don't you think? Though I'm sure none of your sanctions ever knew what hit them and by whom. I'm Naomi Ryce-Hardin and you met my brother, Justin, at the airport. He embarrassingly missed you.'

'At least four times but let's not spoil this friendship by quibbling.' My hands dangled by my sides, relaxed.

‘He didn’t take the laser weapon, it was too large to carry on the bikes. He wasn’t used to standard rifle and scope. Call that your lucky day.’

‘I will. With Luca gone and the Italians....who’s going to pay you for me?’

She took another step back. For the first time took her eyes off me to check her watch.

‘I know you’re keeping me talking to delay the inevitable, but it’s interesting to chat with you. You could’ve taught me a lot, but I could’ve taught you a lot more. Anyway, what was it?’ She tapped her forehead with the handgun as if trying to think. ‘Who’s going to pay....yes. The Italians have left a power vacuum. There’s a new team in town, now filling the vacuum left by Primo. It’s a consortium, calling themselves The Brethren. Just like pirates of old. But lots of youthful money, high tech desires. Throwing money at mobility, technology and speed of execution.’

‘Apt phrase.’ I added.

Her eyes sparkling as she described her future.

‘Although Mario and Primo were not considered big and all-encompassing, they had a large slice of the pie, it has now been taken over. Someone who’s willing to embrace the new age of persuasion and enforcement. Us. We have our next job booked through The Brethren as soon as we finish here.’ She casually waved her gun at me to emphasise her point. ‘I want them to call us ‘The Heavenly Twins’ because I look like an innocent Angel and Justin is more, The Angel of Death. The Brethren will spend millions of Euros on high tech equipment to make us more efficient, immediate, mobile. The opportunities are now endless. They even provide a jet when we need it. Justin went out to Hungary in that today. He should be almost there now. Nice, eh?’

‘A jet, to Hungary, Why?’

‘Call yourself smart? Finish the job, dumbass.’

‘What job?’

‘We’re hired to eliminate you, the girl and her brother, and that’s what we’ll do. You shipped them off to Hungary, we were at the airport.’

‘I don’t understand....’ I feigned ignorance. She was still talking, and I was still alive.

‘You, of all people, know you never leave a sanction unfinished. Bad for reputation, bad for business. With you gone, they’ll be plenty of business for us twins, but not if the sanction’s left unfinished. How unprofessional would that look?’

She straightened up for the coup de grâce. I had little time left. I uncrossed my legs, which made her tense, but it broke her train of thought a little. She liked to talk, she liked to brag. Catching me was a major incident in her life. She stiffened in arrogance and preening, I planned to work with that.

Straightening up and folding my arms, 'So with all this technology at your fingertips, how many sanctions have you completed?'

After a short, embarrassed silence, she admitted, 'This is the first.'

I tried to cover a smile. Annoyance showed on her face, but she recovered quickly. I tried again. 'No wonder I hadn't heard of you. Yet, you've heard of me!'

'You're my first hit, but you're going to be my biggest.'

I slowly tapped my fingers on my arm as if getting bored. 'So, the two of you are going to go on from here and rule the world?'

'I'm the distraction, Jus, the action. While they're looking at me, he's shooting them.'

'Beauty and the Beast, yes?' with a sarcastic smile.

'Beast, maybe. You don't want to see him riled.'

'Takes his anger out on the victims, does he?' I nodded as if I knew the type well.

'Sometimes. Always a headshot though. No chance of recovery from that. But, you know that of course.'

'Great theories. You've thought it all through, but you've yet to put it into practice.' I was grinning widely now. She was not quite so sure what to say now. This was not as she'd anticipated it. For days she'd worked up to this moment, not visualising this relaxed reaction to her threats. I had to unsettle her some more.

'So if you're asked to do a silent hit, you know, quietly, no noise, look like an accident. Not a thumping big hole in the victim's head sort of deal. How would your technology handle that?'

Another casual wave of her gun at me. 'We wouldn't take the job. Leave that for the minnows to eat the scraps from our table. With you gone they're all that'd be left.'

'It's funny, no.... embarrassing to be caught by another professional. A....virgin in the field. I thought I was above that. The only thing that would make it worse, to be shot by my favourite gun.'

‘Which one is that?’

I laughed, ‘Now I can’t tell you that, can I?’ I let my eyes flick across to the two pistols on the worktop and straight back to her eyes. She picked up on it and glanced at the weapons. Another step back, both hands gripping the pistol firmly.

She was thinking. She stepped towards the two weapons. I uncrossed my arms. Now concern on my face.

She took one hand off the gun and hovered it over the larger of the two pieces. I let my face imperceptibly relax. She moved her hand over the other one. I made my right eye slightly twitch.

‘Ahh. This one! Losing your touch, old man.’ I closed my eyes in frustration.

Now she relaxed her hold on her weapon. She even placed it on the worktop while she checked my gun was loaded. I took a slow step away from her, she watched me with a growing smile.

‘Favourite gun, eh? How many have you killed with this?’

I shook my head, not wanting to give an answer to distract her. She cranked the chamber to ensure I’d aligned a bullet with the barrel and ready to fire.

Her smile was broad and natural now. She sauntered towards me and I backed away, showing fear. I came to a wall and stopped. My hands pressed against it. Defenceless against this new-wave predator and assassin.

‘Last words, Magic Man?’

I thought for a while. Then hesitantly. ‘Don’t forget me, will you? Don’t forget The Magician.’

‘No fucking way. You’ll make ME the legend.’

She cocked the weapon and smiled as she slowly and cruelly squeezed the trigger.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE - JUSTIN RYCE-HARDIN

I should've brought a mat with me to rest on. The ground was becoming dammed uncomfortable. I shifted a trifle without being seen, but it was getting tiresome now. I'd been here for over a day already. I thought it'd only take a few hours.

Once again I checked through the Infra-red scope and counted five people in the house. Two were laying down upstairs, in the middle of the afternoon! They'd hardly been outside.

I swept the scope over the farm. The old man working at something in his workshop. The younger son working in the east field. God! How can you do that day after day? Who'd choose to be ploughing all day? Awful. He must come in soon, it was getting towards dusk.

Six cows in the shed to my left. They appeared hugely grey in the Infra-red light. Pigs out near the edge of the fields in their rambling sties.

On the ground floor, a figure was moving around a small area near the rear. Mother must be cooking dinner. This made me hungry again, I was tired of field rations already.

My thoughts drifted to my sister, she hadn't called. She was due to make the hit hours ago. Knowing her, she was enjoying taunting The Magician. She'd found out a lot about him since we launched our new career. I think she sees him as something of a hero. She wanted to make the hit on him to boost her confidence, so I drew the short straw to come here.

At least it gave me time to reflect on our career choice.

My father had army buddies give us a complete series of courses that the SAS use. It was tough, sometimes too tough, especially on Naomi. We're both light framed, but sometimes that's an advantage. Not so much weight to lift yourself over obstacles, ropes and the like.

Under Nick Baker's tuition, we did sniping, stunt and multi-vehicle driving, close combat, tracking and weapons training. We also covered camouflage and stalking techniques. A little psychology of the terrorist stuff in there too. It was pretty comprehensive and intense. We sailed through it, Dad said.

Dad was always an army man, got that from his father. Ended up a Colonel. Not sure how the family fortune helped get him there because he seemed a right dickhead to me when growing up. When he was home that is.

Dad thought we were army material and wanted us to sign up. But we were already a little too old for the army entrance levels. I know it disappointed him, but he never gave up on us.

One winter he took us hunting in Africa. There were local tribesmen acting as beaters and doing the tracking. We shot big game, and all enjoyed it.

Then, I shot a man by mistake. The thrill was prodigious and long remembered by me. Father paid off the tribesman, and it was all forgotten, but the thrill lingered on. I wanted more. That was the big game that now interested me.

Naomi and I decided hunting was what we wanted to do but didn't know how to go about it. Christ knows how Luca Lacusta found us, but he did. We came to a financial agreement and here we are.

It came as another surprise a few days later that Primo Vespa wanted us to be part of his operation. He promised us plenty of work if this contract worked out well.

It's a pity we had to hit Luca, he would be a source of ample work, but Primo suspected that Luca was about to pack everything in and disappear. Primo didn't like that. He insisted that Luca attend the school event, so we could keep an eye on him. I had to take Luca out but missed my other targets in doing it.

The Magician buggered everything up by taking out our new Italian clients. How did someone like The Magician survive for so long, ten years was it, using his old-fashioned methods?

But luck struck again as we were immediately contacted by The Brethren. Dramatic name, but you know how these foreign criminal gangs have a severe image issue. But this bunch are very positive, they're expanding and need enforcers like us twins to do their dirty work. The more the merrier I say.

It seems this bunch have been around for a while, but as separate and smaller groups. Now they've coordinated, their strength has increased. It's an exciting prospect for all of us.

They wanted Luca out of the way, to take on his business interests. I was happy to oblige. For a fee, of course.

So overall, not bad for a first stab at a new business.

Another two hours have passed. Where is she? Should I call? No. She might be in the middle of something. Perhaps she hasn't caught up with him yet. I'd painted him, so she'll know where he is. He doesn't know she's

coming for him. Perhaps the time is not right for her to make the approach. Too early to worry yet.

The sky was clear and the temperature dropping now. It was a lovely spot this. Crappy farm, they really should do more with it. Typical Eastern European hicks. Too lazy to work at keeping things looking nice.

This was supposed to be an easy assignment. Two hits and off home. But why weren't they coming out of the house?

Before leaving England I'd downloaded military satellite images of this area. I have access to this technology now. This enabled me to decide my shooting position, based on its coverage of the front of the house and shelter it would afford me.

The beauty of using The Brethren's private aircraft was that it got me here quickly and also it carried all my equipment. Customs were nothing to these people. A bag of weapons was no problemo. I threw them in the back of a car they'd arranged and drove straight down here. The plane should wait for me, I told them a day at most.

I chose this position south of the house and at the edge of the forest. It enabled a clear view past the three outhouses and a direct line to the front of the farmhouse where everyone lived.

Luca gave me the files on these people. No picture of the brother, but he'd be recognisable as he was supposed to be taller than any of the rest of the family. I'd know the woman by sight from her photos.

I was using up mental energy fretting over this delay, I shouldn't do that. One of Nick's philosophic sayings. Relax. The less effort you put in for the same result, the more successful you are. Another Nickism: Using technology takes the effort out and makes you more successful. That's my philosophy, but patience isn't one of my strong points.

The targets are just two country hicks. One, a failed asset, I'll take her out first, just in case – smart thinking. The whole family are hicks. These are foreign hick farmers, no need to plan complex exit strategies. Pop and go.

More hours passed. The sun rising, soon it'll be light enough to see without the sights. Still, nothing from Naomi, another hour and I'll call. I can't believe she's failed, especially with all our technology. She can't have lost him! Just caught up in the hunt I assumed.

Movement!

The front door opened. I hefted the piece of gear I call my "paintbrush" and sighted quickly. Two people had come out, one a younger woman – that's her, Olga. The other young man taller than her. That must be the

other, Henrik. I focused the sights and squeezed twice. Two instant hits. It had painted them, the green light invisible to the human eye.

I quickly swapped the sight for my Infra-red target weapon and hauled it to my shoulder. I pressed the start button and a red beam shot out towards the target. Invisible to them but showing up bright red through my gun sight.

They moved and then.....were gone!

Fuck it! Hours of waiting and only seconds to get the acquisition.

I kept my eye to the piece and waited. I gave it five minutes then quickly swapped to the Infra-red scope. Both the people were in the house, both on the ground floor, both near the front door. I swapped weapons again and waited.

The door opened, and I took a deep breath. The girl first if possible, please. My finger tensed on the trigger and took up the slack. The ready light glowed on the small screen to my left. I only had to squeeze the trigger and the gun would adjust itself on the stand to place the bullet in the exact trajectory to reach the painted target.

The girl came out, followed by her brother. The crosshairs were square on her head. I put more pressure on the trigger.

Time to kill.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR - THE MAGICIAN

I thought for one brief moment that Naomi would prove she was smarter than I'd calculated. If she had ANY street craft and experience in this business, she would've fully checked the weapon before pulling the trigger. You never just pick up and fire an unknown weapon. Ever.

As her finger tightened, I was sure she would go ahead. I closed my eyes in case debris and particles came my way. The bang was loud, louder than if the gun had been fired normally. But it was The Magician's gun and had been tricked. As had she.

The gun backfired and blew the whole side of her head off. She dropped like a boneless rag doll.

Once I composed myself, I watched until her body had stopped twitching. I checked my naked body for any harm and it was clear, apart from blood splatters. A touch on her neck and I knew she was dead.

I picked up the gun and looked at its shattered remains. I won't be using that trick again. It's easy to block the barrel near the chamber. Unless you broke the chamber and glance down the barrel to see how clean it was, you'd never notice.

She was too hyped up on arrogance to realise I was setting her up. Too keen to prove her superiority to be careful and wary.

I allowed myself a brief moment to feel relief then I felt the fear. If she hadn't fallen for the reverse psychology, I only had two more tricks I'd planned against my unknown stalker. Thankfully the first and best worked.

I quickly remembered what she'd said. I picked up my mobile and dialled a number. No reply, another number, still no reply. I left a message.

'Henrik? Anyone! There's a young hitman coming to get you. Do NOT go outside the house. Keep armed at all times. Watch for any strangers or unusual goings-on. Be extra careful. I'm on my way. Will call every hour. Jagger.'

My next call was to book the next flight out to Budapest. I was lucky, it was only four hours away, so I booked British Airways Business to get preferential disembarkation. Then I packed.

I was waiting for departure at Heathrow when somebody finally called.

‘Olga. Everything okay?’

‘So far. What’s going on, Jagger?’ Concern in her voice.

I told her the story of the twins and their contract. I admitted I’d been wrong, they were after more than just me. I thought I heard a sob at the other end. ‘Is everything all right?’

‘It is all happening again, isn’t it? Is this ever going to stop?’

‘This is the last hurdle. Don’t panic. Do as I say, and we’ll get through this.’

‘You promised us, Jagger!’ She was moments away from tears.

‘I know and I’m sorry. The game’s changed. Significantly. Can’t explain it all, but you and Henrik must stay inside. That’s vital. Also, ask Tamas to find the best rifle and scope your father has and leave it in the cow barn, where I can easily find it.’

‘Are you going to kill him?’ Hope in her voice.

‘I’ll try. Listen, he might be there by now. Somewhere out there, probably in the woods, waiting. If you or Henrik step outside he’ll shoot you. Stay indoors. When I get there, which should be soon, we’ll assess the situation then.’

‘Jagger, I’m not sure....’

I stayed calm. ‘You’re safe as long as you stay in the house. He’ll have night scopes and Infra-red. He can see you inside but won’t get a clear shot. I promise. I really can promise that. Can you trust me?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Then trust me now. Will you?’

‘Of course, Jagger. Hurry.’

‘I’m already on my way.’

At the airport bank, I spent a fraught fifteen minutes while they called my flight. I had to wait to see an advisor and spent my waiting time searching for the name Ryce-Hardin on the Internet. They were there, a family stretching back hundreds of years. Military background. But there was very little about Naomi and Justin.

It took a great deal of persuading and international phone calls, but I finally had the banker's draught I needed. I ran for the Gate and just made it in time.

The flight was three and a half hours and I became agitated as it seemed an eternity before the umbilical attached itself to the main door. They carried all the procedures out like some bad ballet. I pushed and hurried past everyone and ran down into the terminal.

There was a short wait at Immigration and Passport Control. I'd chosen the best of my fake passports and was confident it wouldn't present a problem. It said British Citizen, and that was least likely to cause delays at the Hungarian borders.

Getting a rental car would take forever. There was a queue for the taxis and I despaired at the state of some vehicles. Some wouldn't make it out of the airport, never mind to Herceghalom. Back down the row, I spotted something newer and shinier.

I know there's a protocol in taxis taking their fair turn, but I was in a hurry. I ran towards the clean one and jumped into the car. I thrust a €100 note into the driver's unshaven face and said clearly, 'Sürgös' I repeated it and waved a handful of Euros at him. He got the message I was in a hurry and peeled out of the line and roared down the ramp.

'Herceghalom. Sürgös.' I emphasised and sat back, trying to relax.

I called Olga. 'Everything okay?'

'No problems. We're still inside. No sign of him outside. Are you sure....'

'Very sure. Rifle in place?'

'Yes. You have a plan?' Hope still there.

'No.'

'Exit strategy?'

'No. Only one of us will walk away from this.'

'It had better be you.' Mock threatening voice.

'It will be. Need to go, driver needs directions.'

I hung up and tried to rationalise everything. The driver wanted to talk. A big spender fare, try to keep him happy. He knew no English and kept throwing phrases at me that he thought I'd like. Yankees, baseball, Tiger Woods. Thinking I was an American with lots of money.

As we entered Herceghalom I leant forward and directed him using hand signals and tapping him on the shoulder. He thought this was a great game. We reached the farm, and I told him to drive past, making a sweep south and ending up at the far end of the forest area that surrounded the farm.

The farm from the air would look like a face without eyes. A broad nose being the main farmhouse. Three outbuildings forming a smile. The fields are the chin and the woods a large bushy beard. I figured Justin's preferred shooting platform would be from the edge of the beard, looking north to the nose, avoiding the barns. A limited angle of vision, so he needed a quick, clear shot.

But he had to get there first. How? By car, or taxi?

I told the driver to slow down, and we drove along a road that was nothing more than a track. We were directly south of the farm when I spotted something in the trees, I backed the driver up and got out. He must have thought I was doing a runner as he got out of the car to follow. I waved him back and crept into the undergrowth to see what I'd found.

It was a car, but not a rental. I had no weapon and crept cautiously forward. It appeared empty, but I'd no idea where Justin Ryce-Hardin would be. I touched the bonnet and it felt cool. The car had been there a while. I peered through the window, it was clean, nothing on the seats.

Returning to the taxi I asked the driver to open his boot. By now he thought I really was a crazy American. The fact I called it a boot and not trunk might have been a give-away, had he known any English.

I routed through his tools and pulled out a length of wire and a few tiny screwdrivers. I held them up to him and gave him another €100 note. He seemed delighted. He wanted me to take all the tools. I wonder what figure he had in mind for that. But the money was not for the tools, more to stop him from worrying about what I did next.

It takes a few seconds with the right equipment to get the boot open. The car was a newish VW, but not with a high spec. It was not blessed with much security equipment and didn't have the style of a rental, but you never know.

The boot was full of high tech equipment. I sifted through it, aware of the time slipping away. I emptied a backpack found in the boot and filled it with what I thought I needed. My own backpack held only water and some food for my sojourn.

I checked my watch and studied the sky. It was getting dusk and there was a low cloud that would help. I got back in the taxi and told him to turn around.

Just before the track that led into the farm I stopped him and paid him off. He was happy with €500. I mimed for a business card and he didn't understand. I wanted a return journey at some stage, at least I hoped I would.

I checked his identification details in the back of the car and made a mental note of his name and telephone number. We shook hands, a little too enthusiastically on his part and he waved as he accelerated down the road. I should've asked him to drive quietly.

I called Olga. 'I'm here.'

'Thank the blessed Madonna. Where are you?'

'Very near. I'll make my way to the cowshed. Stay where you are. Act normally. Let your parents and Tamas make an appearance. If none of you shows, he'll get suspicious. Perhaps not tell your father...just in case. Stay low. Not long now. Can do?'

'Of course. Take care.'

'I will. I'll be in touch. Soon.'

It was dark before I made my journey. A hundred and fifty metres to the cowshed, but all open ground. With a sniper with Infra-red waiting to kill.

I took my best guess at his exact position and moved to keep the cowshed between me and him. If he was using Infra-red I might show up as a prone figure on the ground. But if cows were in the line of sight, perhaps it would be a little confusing. I had to take the chance.

The longer I took, the more chance he'd sweep that area with an Infra-red scope. The quicker I moved, the more attention I might get, as movement can trigger interest. I hoped Justin's inexperience would benefit me, as I took my time, crawling every metre of the way. Pushing and dragging my backpacks.

It took over an hour, but I was finally lying in the dirt of the cow shed, breathing a sigh of relief. I found the rifle, scope and ammunition leant against the door jamb. Well done Tamas.

I checked the mechanism, loaded the gun, then locked the scope in place and wished for a ranging shot. I'd have to shoot quickly and as accurately as possible. After that, I'd have to wing it.

It was ten o'clock. Dawn due around five. I decided to wait. Let him get anxious and unsure.

I was a long while talking to Olga and Henrik on the mobile. Mamma wanted a word and so did Tamas. It passed the time, but I got weary of whispering. It was unlikely the asset with the high-tech rifle would hear me over two hundred metres away, but he might not be there. He might move around, scouting the perimeter.

It occurred to me that he might monitor phone conversations. In which case he'd know where I was by now. I hoped he wouldn't have the sense to do that. Or, perhaps the right equipment, or experience.

Naomi said he'd come by private jet. The car was not a rental, so that too must have been provided by The Brethren. Perhaps the equipment was a bonus. I had to assume Justin was well armed and high-teched up to his eyebrows. Which were probably blond like his twin sister's.

The sun was coming up, striking the clouds a bright orange.

Time to get ready.

I found a spot on the ground where there was a gap in the side of the barn. I placed fresh straw on the ground and made myself a bed. Fresh cow dung piled on the straw would give off a heat signal and help disguise my outline. The closeness of the smell was bearable if it hid my location.

I was conscious of my movements in relation to the cows and tried to make sure a cow was between me and the wall as much as possible. When I finally crawled onto my bed I'd be more exposed than any time before. If he'd located me, now was the time he'd shoot.

With my breath held, I moved slowly but constantly, never giving an easy target. If I felt a shot, I'd roll either way and back up quickly. It would then be a hunt, one of us winning, one of us losing.

I dragged all the equipment and weapons I needed within reach of my prone position. Carefully I slipped Justin's large unwieldy Infra-red goggles over my head and my world dimmed, everything was in a ghostly grey. I scanned the edge of the woods. A grey patch, slightly different to the other grey patches, it had to be him.

Pushing up the goggles I squinted through the Infra-red scope. I zoomed in and now had a clear image of a prone figure. Hello, Justin Ryce-Hardin.

I took a range and adjusted the sights on my rifle. I swapped Tamas's scope for the Infra-red and clipped it to the rifle. I breathed a sigh of relief that it fitted. Modern technology just went up a notch in my estimation.

Rifle into my shoulder, I put my eye to the sweet spot, and gradually rotated the adjustment ring on the top of the scope. The reticule moved to

compensate for the drift. The moving leaves on the trees above Justin's position gave me a rough indication of wind speed and direction.

I tapped my connect button in my earpiece and the phone dialled Olga's number.

'Are you ready?'

'Yes.' She was breathless. Anxious. 'Is this going to work?'

'Sure.'

'On the count of three. One, two, three.'

My sight was restricted, but I knew behind me both Olga and Henrik should make a brief appearance.

Justin made a slight movement, followed by a burst of a single narrow green light. As he was prone with his head pulled up, arching his back, the light came from a source at eye level. He was using a rifle that was on a mounted platform. That must be the computer-controlled device Naomi had mentioned. The computer makes the final adjustment of the shot, no wonder it was too large to be carried on a motorbike.

'Back in.' I breathed to Olga.

I watched Justin. He made a slight adjustment, changing scopes, or equipment and then he held still. Very still. He was ready.

So was I.

I took off my green light goggles and placed my eye to the Infra-red scope. Justin was sharp in focus, the reticules lined up.

'Go.' I whispered.

A red beam shot out from the end of his rifle, with Olga and Henrik in his sights. All he had to do was pull the trigger twice. Justin didn't move.

I did. He who fires first, fires last.

Without blinking I fired. A body shot, the larger mass a surer way of incapacitating the enemy. My unsilenced weapon was loud, the shot echoing around the farmlands. The ghostly imaged jerked once and lay still.

I rapidly aimed for the head and fired again. Another jerk and then stillness. I waited a full minute.

Without taking my eyes off the prone figure, I slipped the bulky Infra-red goggles back on. I stood up and moved quickly to the door of the barn. I studied the edge of the forest and the faint smudge where Justin lay.

With a deep breath, I ran towards him. My rifle across my chest, trigger finger alongside the guard. My eyes on the smudge of grey ahead. Still no movement.

I was getting close, a few more metres. If he was feigning death, he would need to move soon before I was in range to shoot again. Stillness.

Slowing down as I reached the edge of the trees, I stopped. I pulled the goggles off and stepped forward.

His rifle was on a complicated multi-gimbaled device that had its own battery power source. It seemed over-engineered, but it was still a gun on a tripod. Good old aim and fire are still good enough for me.

Justin's eye was still resting on the sight mount, both eyes open. A small hole in the side of his head, but the ground behind was sprayed in claret, where it had exited. Blood was pooling from the wound in his chest, my first shot.

Before the final chapter in the movies, when the hero is about to kill the villain, there's normally a setup scene. Often followed by destruction and near defeat, before the final denouement, when the hero triumphs. In reality, it's swifter and far less dramatic.

Justin was like his twin sister, even in death they looked alike, both faces shot away. I felt no emotion, not even relief. Perhaps that would come later. Would this lack of emotion, developed over the years, be a problem for me in later life? I needed to address that problem.

Quickly going through his pockets I took keys, phone and a small notebook. I didn't know what would be useful, but I thought the phone might lead me to people within The Brethren. I fully intend to stay away from them, but knowledge is everything. Know your enemy, I say. Who Justin contacted might be relevant if The Brethren decided to still come after me.

I heard steps running behind me, Olga and Henrik coming up fast, both holding rifles. They stopped and stared down at the body of Justin Ryce-Hardin.

Henrik spat on the body, 'Hollgan!'

I responded quietly, 'He's not a hollgan. Far from it. He was worse than that. Hollgans know no other way of life, it's part of their culture. Many countries have that culture. This man and his sister came from a well-

educated, well-off family. They'd no reason to drift into violence for violence's sake. He and his sister chose this lifestyle. Relying on technology rather than professional techniques learned over years of self-denial and effort. They would've killed anybody at any price. Women and children too, I suspect. They'd have no respect, no remorse, no conscience. No guilt.'

'Still hollgan to me.' Henrik seemed upset.

'No need to hate this man. But the bullet in his head is the last to be fired on behalf of Luca. It's a closure for you all.'

I stayed for the night. They even gave me my old bed. I slept naturally for the first time in a long while. It all seemed like a dream when I woke up.

The whole family was awake before me and were seated in the kitchen having already had breakfast. Mamma had fussed over me and produced far more food than I'm able to eat. The conversation was light and indirect. There was a lull in the festive atmosphere.

Olga offered, 'We buried him where he died.'

'Good.' I said. 'Fitting.'

'Can we keep all his equipments?' Henrik asked hopefully.

'It's yours. A lot of good it'll do you. You're better off with your familiar rifles.'

'That reminds me. Where is my rifle? Broken promises again!' Olga was smiling.

'I'll get it back to you. One day.' I nodded for emphasis.

'When you next visit?' Mamma was hopeful.

'I must get a legitimate arms dealer to freight it to you. I can't bring it in myself.'

'How we contact you, in case anyone else comes for us?' Olga asked seriously.

'It's very unlikely anyone will come looking for Justin, but if they do, contact me immediately.' I'd been prepared for this. I gave her a slip of paper. 'Here's a number, I'll check once a day. Call me. After a year, I won't be using that number again. I'll call you occasionally.'

Henrik asked, 'Can I come to England again and spend some more time with you? I loved it and it really opened my eyes.'

'You can, but for a while, I don't know where I'll be. Use that mobile number.'

There was a movement at the front door and a handsome tall youth poked his head into the room. He was dressed in corduroy trousers, thick woollen checked shirt and heavy work boots. He had fair wavy hair and a full beard.

Olga's mouth dropped open in surprise and rushed into his arms. He picked her up easily and swung her around.

Henrik grinned, 'Géza. Olga's boyfriend. Lives miles away.'

Olga spoke rapidly in Hungarian to the young man then dragged him by the hand to meet me. I heard just a few words I understood, but she'd said 'Jagger'.

I shook hands. He was strong and had a wide and bountiful smile. He remained silent but put his arm around Olga's slim waist.

'I will tell him all about us later.' Olga said, looking up at him with a genuine smile.

'Not everything, I hope.' I suggested.

'We have not seen each other since Luca came. The holligans kept everyone away. Now things different.'

'Good.' I stood, ready to leave. 'I've called for a taxi. Should be here in about fifteen minutes.'

'Call it an hour, this is Hungary.' Mamma smiled mischievously.

There was a pause, so I said, 'Don't take this the wrong way, but this place needs some work. You have a car from when I was last here, the hollgan's. You need to learn how to drive.'

I threw Justin's car keys on the table. 'You can learn on that second one. It's parked near the edge of the woods to the south. You also need to get your phone number changed so that you can use an outside line. You're isolated here without them. That's how Luca made you his slaves.'

'Easy said.' Olga remarked.

Unobtrusively, I pulled out an envelope with the Banker's Draught in it. I handed it to mamma. 'You're probably best to handle this.'

'We can't....' Mamma whispered, not even opening it.

I smiled, 'It's from Luca. Payment for all the trouble he caused you. He won't miss it.'

I hefted my backpack and walked to the door. 'I'll get some exercise, I'll walk up the road, meet him on the way in.' I'd had as much family emotion as I needed for a while.

Olga held my arm and hugged me close. She kissed me fully on the lips and I felt a tingle right down my spine.

'Whoever this Géza is – he's a lucky guy. Just don't kill him.' I said with a smile.

'I will not. I am changed woman. Thanks to you. No drink, or cigarettes - for two days now.'

'Excellent. Keep it up.'

Mamma gave me a hug and Henrik didn't want to be left out. Géza shook hands painfully again, and I made my escape.

'Say goodbye to László for me. In his shed, is he?' Mamma nodded.

I hoped they'd take my advice. The place was a dump, and they deserved better. But with the six million Euros I'd given them from Luca's ill-gotten gains, they should manage very well.

I walked away, not looking back.

PART SIX

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE - LUCIE

James called and said he'd be with me in thirty minutes!

It was exactly thirty minutes until the knock on the door. I counted the last ten directly from the clock on the wall. I opened the door and just stood there, casual and unexcited.

I'd dressed in a lightweight one-piece pale blue suit that required no undergarments. It was intended to give just the right impression. I didn't want to open the door naked, nor with the full going out to dinner outfit. This was a compromise that wouldn't get in the way and looked good.

'James. How good of you to come. Come in, have a seat. Something to drink, eat. How was your day? Where have you been? How long is it?'

Was what I would say, should say.

Instead, 'Fuck! I've missed you.' And threw myself into his arms.

We lay silent for a long while afterwards. I felt our breathing synchronise and his eyes were closed, but I knew he wasn't asleep.

He wasn't the world's best lover, but he tried his best to please both of us. A person can't really ask for much more. I suppose I've a jaundiced view on the quality of love-making. But by and large, on the whole....expressions that reek of innuendo....he was considerate, and I appreciated it.

I lay and watched him, scrutinising everything about him. Something I'd not done before. Can I give myself totally to someone who's still a stranger to me? Someone that's told me only lies? The truth coming from someone else. A stranger. What is the truth? What do I really know about him?

It comes down to what he's done for me, and Olga, I suppose. Was any of it done for selfish reasons, or reward? Is that the heart of this man? Or, is he a cool heartless killer? He certainly has been - of his own admission.

I'm good at keeping secrets and not asking too many questions. It's a major part of my job. You can say it's a measure of success, but this man....can he be more secretive?

Was I the only one ever to see the real James? Without a disguise? Would I ever get to see the real man on the inside?

'A penny for them.' He was awake and studying me.

'James.....'

'Yes?'

'I have so....many questions, sweetie.'

'I'm sure.'

'Can you answer ANY of them?'

'Sure. All of them.' A smile.

'Really?'

'Really. Shoot.'

'Shoot. You'd say shoot, at a time like this?' I had to laugh as he was smiling too.

'Question one?' he spoke gently.

'Who are you, really?'

He eased himself onto one elbow and I sat on the edge of the bed next to him. 'I'm a little quirky, as you may have noticed. My real name is Jagger. I come from a family of decorated army veterans and won't be joining them in the history books. I now have several offshore accounts and an investment portfolio in the Caribbean. Managed by a legitimate company but under a false name of mine. So, I'm a wealthy, retired, ex-assassin.'

I smiled and lay down next to him. 'Go on.'

'My hobbies are mainly work-related, but occasionally I need to dumb down my mind and let stressful thoughts dissolve. I do the crosswords and like brain teasers. I'm a thinker and a planner, a problem solver. I have a minor obsession with magic tricks.' He was gently stroking my arm. 'I do Yoga and meditation. Oh, and Tai Chi. I can hang by my fingertips for up to an hour. I can memorise ten accounts and their numbers. Many car number plates and phone numbers.'

'More.' I grinned at him.

'I occasionally watch cookery programmes as I don't eat out much. However, I sometimes go into McDonalds to test out a new disguise. Kids are honest and open. If the disguise looks false in any way, the kids would notice, and I can see by their reaction it's not working. Some even told me to my face. If the disguise passes their test, then I can use it on a project.'

'Kids, huh? Go on.'

'I'd also have a burger.'

I patted him lovingly on his head.

'I'm precise on time in every area of my life. Punctual to the point of being annoying. I get my working clothes and some equipment from car boot sales and dumps. Some from open skips in the road. I sometimes watch a few reality TV shows. I like History. Particularly Roman and Elizabethan history. I really like Guy Fawkes.'

He paused with a big grin on his face. 'Is that enough detail for you?'

I laughed. 'Is any of this the truth?'

'All of it. Why should I lie to you?'

'You've not told the truth before.' I grinned.

'You've never asked for the truth before. And besides, things are different now.'

'In what way?' I asked with a catch in my breath.

He took his time in answering. 'I realise I've spent so many years suppressing basic emotions, so now I feel incapable of feeling anything, anymore. My approach to work has dehumanised me, beyond what I needed to be efficient in my work. Does that make sense?'

'You've become a cold-hearted killer to do your job properly.'

'I wouldn't have put it quite like that, but it'll do. Recently, very recently, I've come to terms with the realisation that I need a...partner. I'm seriously considering getting a girlfriend.'

'So you should.' I tapped out each word on his chest with my long fingernail.

'A long-term partner. And I think I've found one.'

Was this the truth? My racing heartbeat hoped so. Did he hear it?

'Good for you.' Was all I'd say without taking a large giveaway breath.

'She's younger and career minded and equally committed to living a solitary life. She needs to consider the offer. The downside...is....she's a prostitute. But is...someone I feel I can really trust. There's no one else in my life like that. Never has been.'

I took a deep breath and leaned forward to kiss him. He responded, but soon drew back. He wanted a verbal response, and I'd no idea what to say.

'Is this some sort of aproposal, sweetie?'

'I suppose it ... sort of is.'

This man was as an accomplished liar as I was. I stared deep into his eyes, looking for a tell-tale flicker, he wasn't avoiding my direct stare.

I kissed him hard and felt my blood coursing through my body. I'd not felt like this since....ever. We must be so alike, holding back any real emotion least it affects us in our daily lives.

'I suppose that's your answer, then?'

'I suppose it is, sweetie.'

I held him tight, not daring to let go in case he changed his mind. This was a man that thought everything through, very thoroughly. He didn't make this offer lightly. Nor did I take it lightly. Neither did he make many mistakes in his life. Me...I've made many.

I held him tight as I said quietly, 'Where're we going to live...Jagger, sweetie?'

He was serious. 'For the rest of my life, I must be low key. We need to find somewhere where we can be self-sufficient. No shopping, no deliveries. No friends, no relatives. I must stress how important this is.'

I didn't like that. So, I queried, 'Why must we be in hiding all our lives?'

'In this job, it's never over.'

'Who'd want to kill you now you've retired?'

He shook his head. His eyes seemed unfocused for a while. 'I've retired many people. They have relatives, friends, loved ones too. Revenge is a heavy motivation. There are two ways to retire. One, you disappear off the planet. Two, your dead. Which one do you want me to choose?'

'Neither.'

He shrugged, 'Why do you want a material lifestyle? We won't be going anywhere.'

'For life! I don't know about that. Can't we try it for say....a few years?' He shook his head. 'Five years?' He shook his head again.

I pouted, that gets to him. ‘I can’t live out my whole life like that, sweetie.’

I knew what he was thinking, so I let him stew on it, while I snuggled my lips into his neck. He likes that.

He was hesitant for a few minutes, ‘Okay.’ He said. ‘But there are rules that are inviolate. We’re never to shop at the same stores or go regularly to any village, or town. Cities are somewhat safer.’

‘Okay. Agreed.’ I snuggled some more before saying, ‘So where do we live, then?’

‘Anywhere you want. Stick a pin in a map. I know of a nice place in Limoux, France that’ll probably be available soon.’

‘I don’t want to learn a new language. I don’t want to change my life too much.’ Another controlled pout.

‘You mean you want to continue your career?’

‘No. I didn’t mean that.’ Lose the pout.

‘I know a nice place near Budapest. Nice people, great friends of mine. Yours too.’

‘I don’t want to learn a new language!’

‘Ok. It has to be in the UK, then.’

‘How will we live, Jagger?’ It was difficult getting used to the new name. It didn’t suit him. Yet.

‘Any way, we choose to, but with those parameters I stated.’

‘Will we always be looking over our shoulder for your past to catch up to us? Like Bourne in the movie?’ I tried to be serious.

‘No. I’m fixing that for good, but it’ll take time. We must always be careful. I’ll agree five years, let’s see how that goes.’

I wouldn’t get any further down that route. I changed the subject. ‘When the preacher says, “do you Lucie Dern take....yada, yada, yada.” What will my new second name really be?’

‘Okay. Gilchrist. Gilchrist. Not Christ, but Crist. When he says “will you Jagger Gilchrist take.... yada, yada, yada.” What name will that be? Lucie’s not your real name, is it?’

‘No.’ I hesitated. ‘Ackroyd. Tamsin Ackroyd. I know...I changed it very early on.’

‘Pity. I was used to Lucie.’

‘You can still call me that.’

‘Maybe I will.’

There was a moment when neither said anything. ‘Thank you for coming into my life.’ I blurted out suddenly, the tears unbidden.

He smiled as he wiped them away. ‘Thank you for always being there in the background.’

I laughed out loud, ‘This has got to be our perfect exit strategy, sweetie!’

He laughed and then pulled away from me suddenly and appeared serious.

‘What?’ I was concerned.

It was a moment before he spoke. ‘Before we go ahead and do this, there’s one thing I want you to promise me.’

‘Anything, sweetie.’

‘Stop calling me, sweetie!’

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX – INTERNET

Monday 18th

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

The police were called to the home of Mr Jamison Willoughby in Chelsea last night, in response to a series of anonymous calls. Mr Willoughby was arrested after the body of a young woman was discovered in the boot of his car, and several incriminating items found in his garage.

The police have named the woman as, Naomi Ryce-Hardin. Miss Ryce-Hardin's parents were informed immediately and there is now some concern for the twin brother, Justin, who appears to be missing. The parents say the twin brother and sister are inseparable.

A source at Scotland Yard has indicated the fate of Justin and Naomi might be connected. In this case, Mr Willoughby may have two murder charges to answer. The evidence is being sought for both cases.

They had linked Mr Willoughby to a crime syndicate the police have been investigating for over a year. Our source says they're very near to uncovering the extent of the activities for the syndicate known as The Brethren.

Thread: Has anyone heard of these people before?

Wednesday 20th

[Askingtherightquestions.com](#)

Someone called the police and rescue services to a fire in Hatton Garden last night. The offices of The Berkeley Trade Association were burnt down after a fire started in their boardroom. They discovered the deaths of all nine board members after they extinguished the blaze.

Thread: Could this really be an accident?

Friday 21st

[conspiracyUK.com](#)

The police released the names of the people who died in the tragic deaths, of all the board members of The Berkeley Trade Association. The police have also reported that the people in question were known associates of the organised crime syndicate known as The Brethren.

According to a reliable source, the meeting was being held late at night and was in direct response to the arrest of Mr Jamison Willoughby, the President of The Brethren. The police are investigating the fire and believe at this stage it was no accident.

The funerals will take place next week, but the families requested the media refrain from attending.

Thread: What have they got to hide?

Monday 24th

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

The police have confirmed the fire started in the offices of The Berkeley Trade Association. The fire led to the deaths of nine members of the crime syndicate The Brethren was started by a firebomb.

Forensic believes the bomb to be planted under the boardroom table and disguised to be part of the underside, with similar wood panelling. It had no electronics and was therefore undetected by the security team of The Association.

The C4 plastic explosive and incendiary materials were ignited by a rifle shot through the main windows of the office. The building opposite has been investigated, but no sign has been found yet of the sniper that may have set off the bomb.

No organisation has admitted responsibility to date.

Thread: Will we ever know the full story?

Monday 27th

Askingtherightquestions.com

The police have released details of a stray bullet found in the wall of the offices of The Berkeley Trade Association. This bullet is reported to be unusual, in that it is made from marble and not the usual lead.

Police are treating this as a significant development as the same ammunition appears to have been used in the assassinations of Mario Arzano and Primo Vespa. These were two known criminals shot at a school a few months ago.

The police are treating all incidents as probable gang warfare. A spokesman said 'There's bound to be a power vacuum with The Brethren gone. Who fills it? It's anyone's guess. Whoever fired those bullets, I assume. We continue with our investigations.'

Thread: We said it was no accident. It's bound to be the Mafia.

Wednesday 29th

conspiracyUK.com

The police released a statement about the bombing of The Berkeley Trade Association. They believe there may be a new a lead on the marble bullet.

Thread: Let's hope he never gets caught!

THE END

Sequel: [Survival Strategy](#).

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Please read on

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Modern stories of Contract Killers (or hitmen) are full of high energy, high octane chases, impossible scenarios and near-death experiences. The highly popular Bond and Bourne franchises have achieved box office success by glamorising the once perceived dark profession, making it macho and yet somehow romantically thrilling.

It might have been easier to create something along those tried and tested lines than to do something different with this increasingly popular genre. So much has been produced about hitmen, so whatever I write believing it to be fresh and new, has probably been covered before – in some form, or another. I can only be honest in saying, to my knowledge, the ideas in this series of novels are original.

The challenge was to make the whole piece somehow more real and credible while still exciting and entertaining for the reader. Also, I wanted to enlighten. Much of the content of this story is based on fact. However, a small portion of the material is fiction and created to entertain only.

The research was very interesting, but also at times, quite disturbing. For instance, this wording is from an actual, and supposedly genuine, website:

‘We are a privately-owned independent enterprise that specializes in reliable contract killings. We offer a variety of assassination services, customized to suit particular needs of our clients.

Our firm consists of a small team of highly-skilled, and experienced, specialists. We are the industry leader in innovative killing approaches and have built a lasting reputation over decades of outstanding services for clients on five continents.

Instead of fiddling around with amateur killing techniques and messing up crime scenes just pick up the phone and give us a call. After reviewing your case, our team will develop a customized package that is best-suited for your particular situation. You provide us with the name of your mark, along with a photo and personal details, and take a vacation; we'll make sure one of our specialists sends flowers to the grieving widow while you enjoy your margaritas on the beach.

Our basic contracts start at \$50,000 per head (plus expenses). A basic contract includes a simple killing that is traditionally accomplished by administering two rounds of ammunition, at close range, into the back of the head, through a silenced .32

calibre pistol. Typically, the mark doesn't even feel a thing. We use Glaser Safety Slugs that ensure a guaranteed kill, by exploding and fragmenting inside the brain.

Thanks to the small calibre pistol the entry wound is extremely small; sometimes the external damage is so minimal that the entry wound can completely be covered by the hair and is often not immediately apparent to a medical examiner that doesn't know right away what cause of death to look for. Typically, there is no exit wound. Furthermore, we use untraceable, first-time-use weapons.

We offer discounts for packages of three hits or more, as long as the marks are all grouped together in one geographic location, and as long as our services have to be rendered all within the same timeframe.'

The casual and relaxed presentation of this service is chilling. An advert for delivering a Pizza might be phrased in such a way, especially regarding a discount for quantity.

So, despite the glamorisation and elevation of professional killers by the media, they exist, and it's an established industry. Apart from the Costa Nostra breeding their own, there is a growing number of people out there earning a living at assassinating human targets.

Part of the fun in researching and writing this novel was taking everyday instances of life and trying to imagine what a real contractor thinks and looks for. Taking an innocent member of the public at random – a total stranger - and imagining how a contract killer would go about trying to assassinate them. And whether I might do it - for a very large reward, or to save someone else's life.

I know my answer to that question. What would your answer be?

Sequel: [Survival Strategy](#).

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