

PROLOGUE

Derecik, Turkish / Iraqi border

The bullet smashed into a tree, two metres to my left. I froze, belt buckle pressed into the dirt, sweat stinging my eyes. Crows swirled skywards from a knot of yew trees, croaking in protest. I reckoned that put the shooter just shy of three hundred metres away.

I first heard the myth as a lance-corporal in Bosnia, a life-time ago. A Yank from an armoured recce unit told us the story over coffee and donuts, said he'd picked it up from the Intelligence guys up in Zupanja. Although it sounded like an urban legend at the time, Balkan service had a way of degrading your faith in human nature. A few years later we all deployed to hot and sandy places. I forgot all about it. Iraq confirmed my lack of faith in our species, but that's another story for another time.

The American was a long-service Master Sergeant called Nolan. He didn't strike me as a man given to bullshit. He told us a story about an outfit called *Die Jagd*: The Hunt. Wealthy Germans, big-game hunters, paid Serb criminals big bucks to take up a sniper's post. They'd snipe Bosnian Muslims as they ran back from getting food or going to prayers. For the Serb militias it was a win-win:

some other fucker was paying to do their day job, and the hunters experienced the ultimate murder porn, slotting civvies through the scope of a Dragunov.

It sounded too twisted to be true. But, like I said, I should have known better.

The sun was behind me and I was in good cover: long yellow-green grass in dead ground, near a copse of gnarly blackthorn bushes. My camouflaged jumpsuit matched it well. I'd threaded grass into slits slashed in the shoulders and sleeves. I'd lost three stone for this role: head shaved and body inked with Russian prison tattoos: a wolf's head on my arm and pentagrams across my shoulders. Orthodox crosses and stars stretched across a newly-found pectoral. Oz beasted me every day for six weeks, I'd given up booze and was as fit as I'd ever been.

The operation to take down The Hunt had come through a BKA informer called Bernard Schmidt, a convicted people-trafficker. The *Bundeskriminalamt*, the German FBI, wanted nothing to do with it directly. Oh no. Maybe send them on a sensitivity awareness course, or confiscate their hunting licences. So we'd been sub-contracted to do it for them.

"They only come together in one place for a hunt," said Schmidt nervously, flanked by two stony-faced BKA handlers, "at the site where the kill takes place, so you won't get them all anyplace else. They are very careful."

I'd seen Schmidt's file. He'd trafficked girls, illegal immigrants and refugees. He was a sleazy bastard, with dead eyes and bad breath. He told me he was fifty, but

looked older by a century or so. He was the sort of man I was usually sent to kill, but now he was my lifeline.

"Get that?" said the BKA agent coldly. "They must all be... *managed*, simultaneously, no German government involvement."

"Then we'll 'manage' them out on a hunt," said Oz, "won't you Cal?" Oz was my team-mate. Still recovering from a bullet wound to his arm, he was out of the active roster for another couple of months.

The Hunt had moved on, to Eastern Turkey, where the border with Iraq is lively enough to absorb casual murder. Schmidt had been contacted to provide fresh meat, which he reported back to the BKA. The Germans even put up a reward, showing that virtue is sweeter with a briefcase of used Euros attached. Schmidt reported that The Hunt had set up a new game: They would hunt a paid volunteer who won a bounty if he crossed the playing field without getting sniped. Inevitably, these volunteers were people with serious debts to criminals, or drug addicts or other losers. It was meant to be Darwinian. It was also an opportunity.

"They shoot up a village on day one," said the people-trafficker during our briefing in Cologne. "That gets blamed on bandits or terrorists. The local police get paid off. Then on day two they hunt the professional target."

Schmidt reported The Hunt had good OPSEC, or operational security. The criminals who provided logistics and targets were compartmentalised from the guys who looked after the murder tourists. Schmidt had been tasked with providing 'The Hare,' the stupid fucker who agreed to

be hunted. There were enough trafficked people desperate enough to do it.

For the next hunt, I was going to be The Hare. Yeah, that's the type of job I have. It's not like I volunteered.

My legend was Mikhail Susenov, a Russian ex-squaddie and drifter with a heroin habit. I was qualified: I spoke fluent Russian. I'd worked in Siberia in energy security. And I'd be lying if I said I hadn't had my fair share of problems with recreational chemicals. I not-very-reluctantly smoked some Afghan heroin, as I knew they'd give me a blood test, and we stuck needles in my arms and feet to try and make track marks.

Bernie flew me to Turkey on a professionally forged EU passport. I even grew to tolerate him, in the way you get used to rising damp or toothache. We stayed in a flophouse hotel, on the outskirts of Istanbul, to meet The Hunt.

The organisers were German, apart from a guy from Marseilles called Henri. Henri was a rangy, skin-headed psychopath with a pock-marked face. He was suspicious of me from the start, asking detailed questions about the prisons I'd been in and pretending he could check. Bernie looked at me hopefully as we sat drinking and smoking. I told Henri I'd done a four-stretch at Lgov for assault. He nodded sagely, slinking off and making a show of getting his mobile out. His German colleagues took over the questioning, which wasn't as hard-core as I'd anticipated.

They offered me a syringe to see if I'd inject, which I did. It was so good it reminded me why I'd taken that trip to The Priory.

I was offered ten thousand Euros to be the hare on the next hunt.

BANG. The second round was closer. The shooter had seen something, but I was lying statue-still and a stiff breeze was moving the trees like leafy puppets. I looked at the map I'd recovered from the tiny plastic tube up my arse and tried to orientate it to the ground. The map, that is, not my arse. Schmidt had agreed to hide the weapon on the plot, which as far as I could work out from the map was on top of the Yew trees where the shooter was. I'd told him not to hide it anywhere a hunter might choose as a firing position. It would be an interesting de-brief.

I decided to wait a while, see if the shooter got bored. Good hunters are patient, and the playing field wasn't big. To make the game more fun for the customers, and in case I loitered in one place too long, they had beaters with dogs to flush me out if I lost my bottle. I hadn't heard them yet.

After half an hour I saw movement near the yew trees. Amongst the foliage I saw a camouflaged figure, wearing a full ghillie suit and mask, crawl to one side and out of view. I began to inch slowly towards him, at an angle in the dead ground using the thorn bushes for cover. The hide I was looking for was ten metres away from the shooter and now two hundred from me. There was barking in the distance. These weren't The Queensbury rules I'd been promised - maybe the hunter was bored and wanted his kill in time for dinner. I crawled forward, trying to make as much progress as I could without showing out. After another ten metres I found a shallow trench, possibly an old irrigation ditch, to my left. It ran towards the yew

trees. Screened by long dry grass, this was the best luck I'd had all day, allowing me to crawl quicker, knees bloodied and raw. The elbows of my jump-suit were torn to shreds in the gravelly grey earth.

When we'd trained for this, Oz had taught me to stalk.

An ex-SBS commando, Oz was once an instructor on the Royal Marines sniper course. "Right, Kurdistan ain't exactly Woodbury Common but we'll do our best!" he'd said, loading an air rifle to punish me with if he spotted movement.

Stalking ain't rocket science but it is tough: you need to think exactly where you're going to move next, in a range of inches rather than feet, and be fit enough to haul yourself for hundreds of yards in tiny, stealthy increments. I wasn't a natural, but I'm a stubborn bastard and I threw myself into it.

"You need to move faster!" said a voice in broken Russian through a loud-hailer, "or we send dogs." It sounded far away, from the direction where I'd last seen the hunter.

I figured the hide was about fifty yards away. Standing up on the brow of a hill was one of the guys I'd seen in Istanbul, wearing a dusty camouflage jacket and scanning the field through binoculars. Slung over his shoulder was a Kalashnikov.

He couldn't see me.

The barking louder, I took my chances and loped forwards in a low run, like a lunatic doing a monkey impression. I dropped to my belly and crawled over the top of the ditch, towards the hill. The guy with the Kalashnikov

was gone. If the hunter was where I thought he was, he was stalking in the wrong direction, but would still be able to bring his rifle to bear if he heard me. I painfully clawed forward, inches at a time, across rough ground and through thorns. I tried to tuck my bloodied hands into the cuffs of the jumpsuit so I'd be able to pick up my buried weapon. I finally made it to the yew trees, spotting the crushed foliage and disturbed earth where the hunter had crawled away. Spent brass from two .357 rounds still lay by the base of the tree.

I looked again at the tiny map, blood from my fingers smudging the waxy paper. Schmidt said he'd buried the weapon next to a distinctive mauve and orange coloured rock, three yards from a dead yew tree. I tugged off my boot and pulled away the heel. Hidden in the sole was a thin piece of hardened plastic which I used to scrape away the earth next to the rock.

I saw the edge of a black canvas bag when the voice threatened me again over the loudhailer. "Faster you fucking junkie! I swear we'll put the dogs on you."

I heaved at the edge of the canvas, the loose earth packed round it crumbling. I got both my hands underneath and tugged with all my strength, a tool bag emerging from the ground. I unzipped it and pulled out the plastic-wrapped rifle. My hands felt like I'd been rubbing them on a cheese-grater, slippery with blood and sweat.

Finally I ripped the weapon free. It was a compact Russian SVU-A sniper rifle with a bipod and PSO-1 scope. There were five thirty-round magazines in the bag, which I tucked into my pockets. In a separate bag was a

canvas belt with a holstered Browning pistol. Less than three feet long, the SVU-A is easily hidden but the shorter barrel only gave me an effective range of four hundred metres. It would do. I assembled it quickly, slid a magazine into the housing behind the trigger group and made ready. I crawled on my belly into the firing position, the low branches of the yew tree providing cover. Opening the bipod I settled myself into the weapon.

The Russian PSO scope is arse-about-face, the stadia marks and chevrons the wrong way round from NATO weapons, so it took me a moment to orientate myself. I peered over the top of the scope and saw the guy with the loudhailer walking across the plot, a hundred metres away, cigarette in mouth. There was no clue as to the hunter's position. I guessed he was stalking towards my last hide.

I lined up loudhailer guy in my sights and shot him in the chest.

He crumpled to the ground, but I was already panning right, looking for the first hunter. I saw movement in the long grass three hundred yards away, then a dark shape. I lined it up in the scope and fired again, my bloodied finger too fast on the trigger. Startled, the hunter broke cover, a fat guy cradling a rifle. He put his hand in the air, as if a referee was going to make this stop. I squeezed the trigger again. The hunter's head exploded like an over-ripe piece of fruit, his body flopping back into the sea of grass.

Dogs appeared, three grey-brown blurs loping through the grass. The dog-handler, wearing green fatigues, was crouching in the trees fifty metres away from where I'd

shot the hunter. I fired and he tumbled backwards into the shadows. I switched my aim to the dogs, three mutts barrelling through the grass like furry sharks. I did some time, pace and distance math in my head and squeezed off another shot. It missed. The second took out one of the animals, which disappeared in a crash of blood, teeth and fur.

An incoming round hit the embankment to my front, sending up a geyser of dust and grit. A second zipped past my shoulder. The other two hunters had risen to the challenge. I heard the rattle of assault rifles as men began to riddle every possible piece of cover with lead. I began to crawl backwards, the SVU-A cradled in my arms and out of the dust. Another bullet smacked into the tree where I'd taken cover.

Then the dogs were on me. They looked like pit-bulls crossed with crocodiles. Dead black eyes rolled backwards into sharp, angular heads as they attacked. The first hound sank its fangs into my leg, just below the knee. The second went for my neck, fetid breath and foam-flecked teeth inches away from my face. I rolled onto my back and dropped my rifle, pulling the pistol from my belt and firing at the beast as fangs sank into my shoulder. The bullet smashed into the dog's skull, the animal scrabbling into a ball. The second was tearing my leg, crazily shaking its head from side to side. Instinctively I kicked it with my free boot, which did nothing. Waves of pain crashed through my leg as I sat up and rammed the muzzle of the 9mm into the side of the dog's head. I pulled the trigger five or six times before the creature died.

Holstering the pistol, I staggered to my feet and picked up my rifle. I had puncture wounds in my shoulder, blood oozing slowly from the bite. My leg, from calf to knee, was bleeding freely from multiple injuries. I tore off the bottom of my jumpsuit and bound the wound as best I could. Crawling away from the yew trees, I headed back towards the irrigation trench.

The Frenchman, Henri, was creeping along the top of the trench, an AK tucked into his shoulder. I aimed and fired a hundred metre sense of direction shot. It hit him in the arm and he fell out of sight. Rolling into cover behind a pile of weed-covered rubble, I waited. He crept back the way he'd come. I whistled. Henri's face turned towards me, centred in my sights. I fired, his head evaporating into a red mist.

I scrambled on my belly towards the trench, leg burning with pain. I lay on my back, rifle cradled in my arms as I looked up. The sun burned in the midday sky and I heard movement through the grass. Rolling onto my belly I put the bipod on the lip of the trench. I could see the last two hunt organisers, but not the hunters, walking towards me with their AKs ready. I sank back into the trench, put my rifle down and slid a new magazine into my pistol.

They were less than five metres away.

I counted to three and stood up, firing the Browning and hitting the first guy in the belly. I hurled myself back down again. My target swore in German and fell sideways as I heard the crack of the first huntsman's rifle. The bullet hit the baked mud wall of the trench behind me. The other shooters were on the ball, and now knew my position.

"Get in the trench or you're next!" I shouted in English. I put my hand over the top and let off three rounds with the pistol.

"OK!" gibbered a terrified voice, a man scrambling down into the trench in a cloud of dust and grit. He was in his forties, paunchy with a red baseball cap and a deep suntan. There was no sign of his AK. "What the fuck is going on?"

"Payback," I said quietly, "it's usually about payback." I aimed the pistol at him and smiled. "Now strip."

"Huh?"

"I said strip. We're swapping clothes." I unzipped my jumpsuit to the waist and tugged off my boots.

"No way," he said.

I shot him in the soft part of his left arm, just south of his elbow. He winced and fell to his knees, hand clutching at the exposed, glistening meat of the exit wound.

"Strip or the next one is in your head," I said slowly.

"You're not Russian" he said, his blue eyes watering.

"No, Sherlock, I'm not. Give me your hat."

"Why?" he said, gazing at the blood running freely down his arm. "I don't understand."

"We're swapping places. You're going to dress as me and try to get away, like bait. Come back towards me and I'll kill you. Get spotted by your customers and they'll try to kill you. So you're better off heading in their direction. I'm a good shot and I'm closer."

"The first guy you killed was an idiot. He couldn't shoot, but the others are big game hunters, experts. I won't

stand a chance!" If his eyes had gotten any wider they'd have fallen out of their sockets.

"You've got a better chance than the villagers you shot yesterday, or those Bosnians back in Sarajevo, right?"

"Sarajevo? That was before my time..."

"Tough shit, now get your clothes off." I pushed my pistol into his head and treated him to one of my deranged smiles. I have about fifty to choose from and they all seem to have the desired effect.

We swapped clothes. I pulled my pistol belt tight around the waist of the shorts and rolled up the bloody sleeve of the camouflage shirt. Finally, I put the red baseball cap on my head. "Off you go," I said, picking up my rifle.

The man looked down at the filthy jumpsuit he was wearing. He gripped the bullet wound in his arm and started off in a low run along the trench, then broke cover, waving his arms in the air and shouting. I peered through the scope of the SVU-A, my finger taking up the trigger pressure.

CRACK!

The faintest heat shimmer, and a wisp of smoke, rose from my adversary's rifle on a ridge some five hundred metres away. I wasn't watching the guy I'd shot in the arm, who I knew was already dead from the hunter's bullet. The hunter was outside the effective range of the SVU-A but I took the shot, aiming off for windage and slightly high. I imagined where the largest part of the hunter would be, in relation to the smudge of smoke I'd seen from his rifle.

I waited. After half an hour I crept along the trench to the tree line, entering the woods where I'd started the engagement. I limped towards the hunter's position. Apart from a whistling breeze and the chirrup of crickets it was eerily quiet. The ridge ran for about ten metres at an angle to the wood, edged with dirty grey-green and yellow foliage. I flipped the fire selector on my rifle to automatic and patrolled into the copse slowly, painting arcs as I went.

The boot was brown and waxy. It was sticking out of the bushes, attached to a camouflaged leg. Groaning and swearing, I hauled the body out of cover, a big bearded man who must have weighed eighteen stone. He was wearing a ghillie suit, jungle hat and a green net over his face. My bullet had hit him in the shoulder, underneath the clavicle, and exited his body below his shoulder blade at the back. He'd bled out, trapped in his fire position by his bulk. Beneath him was a rifle, a custom '98 Mauser.

"You missed the other guy," said a voice behind me.

I spun around, rifle shouldered. It was Bernie Schmidt, wearing jeans and a checked shirt. A Kalashnikov was slung over his shoulder, a cigarette smouldering in the corner of his mouth.

"Don't *ever* creep up on me," I hissed. My head was pounding from the heat and the stalking. The bleeding had stopped on my leg, a swarm of flies buzzing around the scab-encrusted wounds.

"Come on, there's a first aid kit in their truck," said Schmidt, offering me his hand.

I nodded and went with him. "Where's the other hunter?" I said.

"In the truck," he smiled. "I was just behind him when you shot his friend. He radioed to ask what was happening."

We walked the half mile to a rusty pickup, Bernie offering me some water and a Russian menthol cigarette, which was a worse experience than the dog bites. In the back of the wagon was a sorry-looking man, hands and ankles bound with duct-tape.

"What's your name?" I said to the prisoner in English.

The hunter was in his early fifties, as lean as his dead friend was big. His grey hair was cropped close to his skull. His flinty eyes narrowed. "Martin Weiss," he said carefully.

"How much did you pay for this trip?" I said, resting my back against the truck.

"More than I anticipated, I suspect," said the German. "Is that a SVU-A?" he said, looking at my rifle.

"Yeah," I said.

"That was a good shot at five hundred metres, the one that got Wili. You shouldn't be able to do that."

I shrugged. "Wanna know how this ends?" I walked to the tailgate with his rifle, a Steyr.

"I would be lying if I said no," said the German.

I cut the hunter loose. "You get your hunt, Martin. Same rules I had. Except you get to keep your rifle. Here, have some water."

Weiss rubbed his wrists then gulped down the water. He closed his eyes for a moment, then smiled, "how unexpectedly generous. May I ask you your name?"

"Cal Winter," I said quietly, mouth dry. I passed him his rifle and told him to shift his arse.

He jogged back up the hill.

"That was very noble of you," said Schmidt, shaking his head.

"Not really. I unloaded his rifle," I replied, shouldering my SVU-A. I took a bead on Weiss' back.

I'm a low-life wet-worker. I hate the life I'm in, the never-ending cycle of kill-or-be-killed. Still, I try to find some merit in my trade, and any scrap will do. This man had chosen to kill people for pleasure. Even I'd never done that.

Schmidt was laughing as I took the shot.

CHAPTER ONE

The Daily Telegraph

Johannesburg - The Zambutan Foreign Minister, Joseph Njenga, has alleged that a British Private Security Company has supported an attempted coup. Lt. Col. Mel Murray, 52, was arrested last week in Marsajir, capital of Zambute. Murray, former Commanding Officer of 22 SAS Regiment, is chief executive of *Focus Projects*. The company, based in Mayfair, specialises in providing protective security services to overseas energy, construction and mining industries. Doctor Kwame Nwebe, President of the African Union, said 'despite the current conflict, UN-monitored elections in Zambute must go ahead. We urge President Aziz to honour promises made to The AU and the UN.' President Omar Aziz, a reclusive and paranoid figure, has signed controversial trade agreements with China, but the regime is threatened by nationalist rebel groups and Islamist guerrillas. Zambute's annexation of the disputed border zone with Somalia has intensified the conflict, displacing Al-Shabaab terrorists and their latest off-shoot, *The Shadow of Swords* militia. The crisis has also thrown the new Somali government into fresh

turmoil, foreign Islamist fighters travelling from Yemen, Sudan, Pakistan and Syria to join the fighting.

The regime has been persuaded to hold UN-monitored elections, on pain of suspension of Western aid payments. Zambutan authorities have yet to release any specific allegations against Murray, who was arrested with political activists linked to Gen. Kanoro Abasi of the Free Zambutan Army (FZA). Tanya Rigby, Executive Director of Focus Projects, said 'Mel Murray was on a feasibility trip for a Russian client in Northern Kenya, conducting routine logistics and security survey. Mel was not involved in any activity detrimental to the Zambutan government and we urge the authorities to release him immediately..'

La Rovellada, Catalonia, Spain

The Firm's 'decompression facility' was a crumbling stone *Finca* overlooking the Mediterranean. An ask-no-questions local doctor visited to check my dog-bites. To begin with, they'd leaked stinking puss. Now they just leaked puss. The doctor said I'd be fully recovered in two or three weeks.

Whereupon we'd just be given another shitty, high-risk job... rinse and repeat.

I mooched around, itching for a fix after the stuff I'd taken in Istanbul. Choosing the lesser of two evils is the story of my life, so I settled for cognac and tranquilizers. Sitting on a lichen-covered wall, I took another swig. I picked at scabbed-over bites, making them ooze. Everyone needs a hobby. Now and then I wondered where

I could score some brown. An addict is always an addict, even when you're more or less clean.

"It would be easier to cut it off," said Oz, looking at my leg.

Neither of us wanted to be here. The Firm black-mails us all. I'm looking at a life sentence for murder after stalking and killing my former CO. I don't regret it as much as I should, because the glory-hunting bastard deserved it. We get paid, but the money is held back until we're time-served. I had fourteen months to do. Then I'd supposedly be free with just over three million quid in my back pocket. I wanted out, the sooner the better. Most of us died on ops before we got the pay-out anyway.

"Please give us somewhere warm for the next job," said Oz, basking in the afternoon heat.

"Be careful what you wish for."

"Have you spoken to Sam recently?"

Sam Clarke was the nearest thing I had to family, and even she was wary of me. Oz thinks we're an item, or it's a severe case of unrequited love. The truth was Sam and her kids were my window on normality. I spent three months in a mental hospital after I was invited to leave the army, via military prison. Her visits stopped me making a noose from my bed sheets, or slashing my wrists with a piece of glass. Then she let me kip on her sofa, until I got a job.

Got back on the straight and narrow, right? What a joke. I became a security contractor, straight back to the sand-pit. Then the murder, and The Firm...

Sam's late husband, Clarkie, was my platoon sergeant in Iraq. We'd done our infantry training together, before I became an officer. He died near Amara when a Yank airstrike went wrong. It wasn't the pilot's fault, it was mine - I called it in.

"She thinks I'm still doing energy security work," I said uneasily, tapping the rubberized satellite phone on the balcony. "When will this bloody well ring?"

It rang.

"You can't teach that," Oz grinned.

Harry's voice was scratchy over the encrypted line. "When are you two good to go?"

"According to the Doctor, I'll be match fit in a couple of weeks."

"I said when are you good to go, *not* what some local quack's diagnosis is," he snapped. Something in his voice sparked me up. He sounded in a hurry, which was unusual. "I need you in London on Thursday. I've also assigned Syndicate Three, they'll arrive after you."

I sat up in my chair, "what's the deal?"

"What if I said you're going to break into an African prison?"

"I'd put my head in my hands and cry," I replied, taking another gulp of cognac.

"Prison breaks are the most fun you can have with your clothes on," he said, lightening up a bit. "It gets even better: you've got a new handler. You'll know him as Monty. And you'll be picking up a new team member, to replace Andy."

When Andy died on Salisbury Plain, trying to disarm an IED, he saved my life. "You can't *replace* Andy," I said.

"Sure, I understand. Anyhow, the new fella is American," Harry continued. "A hard bastard, but this is only his second operation for us."

I'd never met Harry. He was a just voice on the phone, my remote control gaoler. But I still felt a sort of closeness to him, which I put down as some especially twisted variant of Stockholm syndrome. "Where are you going?" I asked.

"Retirement: I'm too old for this shit."

"Is that it?"

"More or less, anyhow I hope you make it to the end of your contract."

"Why" I snorted, "do you know something I don't?"

"I know lots of things you don't. Just be careful with Monty and keep your head down. Stuff's happening on The Firm, it's going through one of its reinventions."

"What does that mean?" I said quietly. Harry had never elaborated about The Firm before.

"It means there are new butchers operating the meat-grinder, and you poor bastards are the cheap cuts," he sniffed. "Just do your job, ask no questions and you'll be OK."

"Harry, give me a break. What's going on?"

I heard him exhale smoke, his gravelly voice lowering to a growl. "I know how you feel about The Firm. Fuck it: I used to feel the same way too, so I'll go out on a limb. In London there's a tailor's shop off Old Street, run by a man

called Isaac Samuels. Tell him *The Saint* sent you. He can help you..."

"What's this about, Harry? Why help me?" I tried to keep the note of pathetic gratitude out of my voice.

"Two reasons," he said. "First, once upon a time I was sat where you are, with The Firm holding a gun to my head. Second, if things ever go tits-up, I'm going to need you on my side. Are we agreed?"

"Yes," I said. "We're agreed."

"Roger that," he replied. "Good luck with Africa."

"You know if I can take The Firm down one day, I will," I promised.

"You won't be the first to say that," he sighed. "Chances are you won't be the last either." He hung up.

"What was that about?" sniffed Oz.

"Harry's retiring, we've got a job in Africa and we brief in London on Thursday. And we've got a new handler." I decided not to tell Oz about Harry's strange offer for now.

"Is there any good news?"

"You wanted to go somewhere hot?" I shrugged...

Oz shot me a look as he left the room. He doesn't see The Firm as a prison sentence like I do. He must have done something beyond the pale to end up on it.

My head booze-heavy, I took a shower and went to bed. I dozed for an hour, under wrinkled, sweat-stained sheets. Sam was in my dreams, skin pale and cool as I undressed her. She straddled me, freckled breasts squashed against my face. Then the roof disappeared from her house, armed men peering in, laughing as they readied weapons. Planes circled above, dropping bombs

on a desert. They dragged Sam away and attacked me, bullets tearing into my chest, freeing me from the crushing black fist of guilt...

I was woken, gasping, by the trill of my sat phone. Looking around, there was no sign of Oz. My body was slick, sheets stained with blood where my bandages had slipped.

"I'm Monty," said a man with a nasal Northern accent. "It's Winter."

"I know. I've *heard* about you," he sniffed, like I was some sort of venereal disease doing the rounds. "You'll be met at Heathrow on Thursday by a man called Jackson. Questions?"

"None," I said, remembering Harry's warning.

"Good. We might get on at this rate." The phone clicked off.

Time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted, so my next call was to Marcus. He's a serving Secret Intelligence Service officer. On my last UK job circumstance led to me doing him a big favour, off-policy. He owes me one in return, which is the way these things are meant to work.

"It's Cal, how's tricks?" I said.

"Synchronicity, Calum. I was going to call you later," he purred. "I take it you're relaxing in that Spanish bolt-hole you think we don't know about?"

"We're heading back to the UK on the hurry-up. Would that be for your lot by any chance?"

"It might be," he said carefully. "We need to meet, before you fly back. Toulouse, I think. Lose Mister Osborne. I'm sure you'll find an excuse." He gave me the address of a

DOMINIC ADLER

budget hotel near the airport, on the Avenue du Général de Gaulle. “Meet me at ten, the day after tomorrow.”

“Has this anything to do with Africa?”

“Yes, it’s all about Africa,” he replied. “And if you help me, you might get back from the place in one piece.”

CHAPTER TWO

Toulouse was spitefully hot. At the hotel lobby I stood under the air-conditioning unit and scanned the room. Marcus had brought hired muscle, a sinewy, olive-skinned dude sitting on a sofa reading a magazine. He saw me, raised an eyebrow and tapped a message into his smartphone.

My phone buzzed. The message said *Room 308*.

It was a conference suite, decorated in tones of grey and beige. The window looked out over the cargo terminal, UPS planes lined up like giant toys. Marcus, all twenty-odd stone of him, was buttoned into a heavy woollen suit, a stained club tie knotted around his chins. He looked at a pile of croissants, like a greyhound eyeing a rabbit.

“Not like you to have a bodyguard,” I said.

“Times have changed,” he shrugged. He shuffled over to a percolator and poured me a coffee.

I took a seat. “How can I help?”

“I need a favour,” said Marcus easily, like he was asking me to lend him a tenner. His accent suddenly sounded harsher, more Scottish. He’d shifted from friendly Highland GP to Glaswegian docker.

"This relationship seems one-sided," I replied. "Once upon a time you told me to think of you like a kindly uncle."

"*Uncle* Marcus will make sure there's a quid pro quo." He smiled, returning to friendly Highland GP mode. Then he mashed a croissant into his mouth.

I raised an eyebrow, "hopefully with the emphasis on *Quid*."

"Quite," Marcus replied, dabbing at his mouth with a napkin. "The senior management at SIS trust me to carry out reviews into internal... *issues*."

Marcus was an inveterate rule-bender. I suppose poachers make the best gamekeepers.

"Generally speaking," he continued, "SIS has a remarkably honest workforce. But we occasionally pick up a bad apple. It's inevitable in our line of work. The responsibility is great but the pay is awful."

"Like Philby?" I smiled.

"Ideological traitors are *very* twentieth century. No, generally speaking our bad apples want money. Either that or they have a Damascene conversion about the ethics of our trade and squeal to *The Guardian*."

"Which one is worse?"

"The second," he shrugged. "The first type can usually be persuaded to go with a pay-off. The second are childish narcissists. They want publicity and a safe billet somewhere open and free. Like Russia."

I peeled open some marmalade and scooped it out with my finger. It tasted bitter and sweet. "How does this concern me?"

Marcus' eyes hardened. "My bad apple is involved in a delicate operation. Yes, in Africa."

"So my next job is already compromised?"

"Perhaps," he conceded. "I'd be remiss not to consider you as an asset, perhaps flush out the suspect."

"Who's your traitor? And what does it have to do with a prison break?"

Marcus fixed me with piggy eyes. They shone with cunning. "I don't know *who* the traitor is. All four suspects are in the field. I don't want to scare them off with a formal investigation, not in the middle of planning such a risk-laden operation."

"Where do I fit in?" I replied. "It's not like we ever meet spooks." It was a golden rule that we never directly interacted with intelligence agencies. That way we remained deniable and they kept their arses covered. When I'd first met Marcus, entirely unintentionally, my handlers found out and went ape-shit.

"Ach, you're too sharp for me. We're deliberately exposing you to them, breaking a rule. It will make them feel more trusted and therefore more likely to make a mistake. Usher them into the inner sanctum, see what they do..."

"I'm not sure I like being bait," I snapped.

"You didn't seem to mind on your last job for the Germans."

"I had a rifle and a target," I shrugged. "I can handle that, but not your spy-games."

"Oh come now," he cooed. "The current DIADEM agrees. We've ensured all four suspects are DIADEM-indoctrinated."

DIADEM was the codename of the deniable MI6 officer who tasked The Firm via our handlers, an arm's-length proxy. And I only knew that because Marcus' late wife, also a career spook, had once been DIADEM. His knowledge of The Firm was one of the things I intended to prise out of him.

Marcus pushed a steel key-ring towards me.

It looked like one of those novelty bottle openers you get in upmarket Christmas crackers. Mind you, I drink a lot of beer so it was less of a novelty and more of a lifestyle essential.

"There's a GCHQ-grade encrypted memory stick hidden in that. It contains profiles of the four SIS officers. Their operation was called CORACLE. You're tidying up, getting an asset out of there."

"Who thinks up operation names?" I asked. "Isn't a coracle a little round boat?"

"It is," Marcus smiled. "But this one's sprung a leak. And the leaker is, I'm convinced, siphoning intelligence to the Chinese Ministry of State Security." The Chinese were buying up Africa piece by piece. Corrupt African politicians were in the pocket of Beijing, China aggressively seeking resources to fuel its relentless economic expansion. Mind you, they weren't doing anything we hadn't pioneered a hundred years ago.

"I'm being asked to play detective again."

"Don't be modest, Cal. You're an excellent problem-solver, I like that about you."

"I don't like it," I replied. Playing spook Cluedo in some hostile East African war-zone wasn't my idea of

fun. I'd rather be in a field in Kurdistan, being shot at by big-game hunters.

"I'm afraid it's Hobson's choice. The alternative is to explain to your new handler why we've had this meeting." Marcus looked sadly at his next croissant.

"True," I shrugged.

"Alternatively," Marcus continued, "go on this operation anyway and get killed because you didn't identify the treacherous bastard planning on selling you out."

"So what's in it for me?"

"This life you're in, an indentured gun? You *do* want out, don't you? Maybe knowing more about The Firm might help?"

"Sure," I said. "We both know my chances of surviving 'til the end of my contract."

"If it doesn't send you mad first, Calum. Are you still on medication?"

"Booze, mainly," I replied.

Marcus nodded. "I'm prepared to give you some information. In fact, you might find a report on that memory stick, just to whet your appetite. It will automatically wipe itself after you've read it, just to be safe."

First Harry, now Marcus... It was like The Firm was a dam, holding back a dark reservoir of secrets. Was I being offered the chance to make the first crack in it? "Why are you offering me this?"

"It's in my interest," he shrugged, offering me a sticky pastry.

"What happens when I've identified the target?"

“I’ve yet to decide,” he glowered. “I’ve a range of options to manage the... *traitor*.” Marcus took the mobile he’d given me from the table. He replaced it with a compact satellite phone. “From now on use this.”

I looked at the phone. It was a good quality commercial brand, the type a security contractor would take into the field.

“It looks normal enough,” said Marcus, “but it’s been through the propeller-heads at GCHQ. It’s as encrypted as it’s going to get.”

He stood up, the meeting over.

“How often do you want me to call in?” I asked. I had no option but to accept. Seldom had a rat been put in such a baroque maze, and with such a compelling piece of cheese at the end.

“I’ll call you,” he replied. “And, for what it’s worth, thanks for...”

“Please don’t say *help*,” I interrupted. “It suggests a level of choice.”

“OK, how about *understanding*? Will that do?”

“I guess,” I replied. I walked towards the door, the satellite phone clasped to my chest.

“There is light at the end of the tunnel, Cal.”

I shot him a look.

“There’s change in the air, Captain Winter, it’s like a bad smell. Men like you and I need to seize any opportunities from it, if we’re to survive. I’m going to need you.”

“Everybody’s talking in bloody riddles at the moment, Marcus.”

“I know.” The SIS man smiled and returned to his breakfast. “We’ll talk after you get back from Africa.”

The bastard was toying with me. Along with what Harry had said, I was sure big wheels were turning. Leaving the room, I took a taxi to an electronics store on the Rue de Toul. I bought a tablet computer and a small digital camera and returned to my hotel. It was a quiet back street place, anonymous but comfortable. Plugging in the memory stick, I brought up the files. Navigating through the device, I could see that they were copy-protected. I tried to use a screen capture tool, but the program knew what I was trying to do. A dull ping noise warned me it wouldn’t work. I suspected as much.

Scanning the material, I decided it was like low-alcohol beer. It tasted like beer but lacked the bite you needed for it to *be* beer. I needed context. I photographed each page with the camera, uploading the lot to an encrypted online drop-box.

Oz was due at any moment. I hid it for later. I’d sold the trip to Toulouse as R&R while we waited to fly back to London. So when Oz turned up we hit the bar, ordered cold beers.

“What have you been up to?” he said, chugging back a cold *Kronenbourg*.

“This and that,” I shrugged.

Oz patted me on the back. “You look like someone pissed in your cornflakes.”

“I’ve had enough of The Firm’s bullshit.”

Oz looked over my shoulder, into my room, and sipped his drink. "What are you going to do about it? All this dripping about The Firm is starting to get on my tits."

I gave Oz a look. He wasn't stupid. My plan, to screw over The Firm, on the other hand, was. "How can they stop us going public, blowing the whole thing open?"

Oz rubbed at the bags under his eyes. "For starters, you've been in the nut-house. You ain't the most credible witness. And all you've got is a phone number for a Handler you've never met."

"But... what if I recorded all my conversations with them?"

"If they thought you were playing that game you'd be dead already."

"Oz..."

"Don't you think that for every job The Firm isn't back-stopping you as a rogue head-case?"

I shook my head. "They can't watch us all the time. I wonder if they watch us at all."

"They do, but they can't watch us all the time. They check up on us now and then. I know they do. They use paranoia to keep us in line."

I had that itching feeling, like the one you get when you have a discussion about fleas. "Who are *they*?"

"You must have heard the stories," said Oz. "They've got people who used to be like us. And if we get too lively, they're the ones who make us disappear."

"How do you know all this?"

The ex-SBS man shrugged. "I see people now and then, in the crowd or in a car near my place: people who used to be in this line of work. It's not a coincidence."

I scratched at my neck, felt it redden as I swallowed my drink. "Doesn't it drive you nuts?" Something squirmed in my brain, the demons that I fought so hard to keep away. Hatred, for The Firm, for Marcus, for *everything*, buzzed in my head.

"No," Oz shrugged.

"How do you deal with it?" I said, voice cracking.

"The Firm is better than the alternative. And when you're time is up they let you go." Oz patted my shoulder, "dig in, son, that's my advice. Hack it for a bit longer then get out and enjoy your dough. It's a clean slate, right?"

"It's never a clean slate. I want The Firm gone, fucked up."

"Why? What do you get out of it? And don't say revenge."

"Revenge."

"Man the fuck up," Oz laughed, finishing his beer. "Let's watch the world go by. It might be the last opportunity we'll get for a while, if we're off to hot and sandy places."

"Sure," I half-smiled through gritted teeth. I felt the hate suddenly dissipate, like poison gas, from inside my head. "I wonder who we're rescuing in Africa."

Oz pulled a face. "Well, whoever the poor bastard is, they must be desperate."

"Why?"

"They've hired us, haven't they?"

CHAPTER THREE

London

We were taken to a decaying office block, overlooking a stretch of motorway. The room smelt of mildew, cobwebs hanging from the ceiling like little silk nooses. Briefings follow a familiar script: they wheel in bosses who won't set foot on a two-way range, but want to meet the tame killers who will. They give you a plan full of holes and expect you to make it work.

Studying my fingernails, I ignored the spook at the door. At Heathrow he'd introduced himself as Hugo Jackson. He was a mixed-race guy of Chinese heritage, all spiky black hair and hipster clothes. "Shall I get us coffee?" he smiled. His accent was cut-glass English public school.

"I thought you'd never ask," said Oz. He wore a new suit and a Royal Marines tie. He looked like he was dressed for a court appearance, or maybe a funeral.

Hugo was the first CORACLE suspect Marcus had identified. His report, anodyne and stripped to the barest details, contained nothing more than a skeleton resume for each suspect. I'd studied his file the night before. 'Hugo Jackson' was Hong Kong Chinese, with fluent Cantonese and Mandarin. English educated, he'd attended Harrow

and Oxford. His British father, a bigwig at HSBC, landed him a job in cyber-security after Hugo graduated from Balliol. He was one of four officers entrusted with operation CORACLE, a cluster-fuck of epic proportions. That, and his links to China, made him a suspect.

He left the room to get coffee. Hugo struck me as a decent enough bloke: laid-back and polite. And for a posh public schoolboy, he was happy to fetch a brew. But experience taught me it meant nothing.

Ten minutes later Hugo returned with a tray of chipped coffee mugs, "Princess Juliet's here," he whispered.

A smartly business-suited woman and an ex-colleague of mine strode in behind him.

"I'm Juliet Easter," said the woman. She was thirty-something, with glossy chestnut hair and a wind-burnt, freckled face. Her accent had a trace of Africa in it, her voice exuding authority. She had a prettily broken nose, just wonky enough to be cute. "But, please, call me Juliet."

Juliet Easter, CORACLE team leader, was the second suspect.

"Can we get a drink?" I said bluntly. I'd been dry for a day, and Easter's confident manner irked me already. Weren't we here to sort out her fuck-up?

"Cal... Relax," Oz whispered.

"I was warned about your legendary interpersonal skills," she replied easily, eyes locked playfully onto mine. I noticed that her fingernails were chewed. No wedding ring, either.

The guy loitering next to her was Tom Dancer. He'd been a company commander in my old battalion, half a

lifetime ago. Unlike me, he'd been successful in SF selection, leaving as a Major after two tours on the SAS. He had a head of thick, fair hair and a broad, handsome face. He'd been a popular guy, tipped for high rank. "Cal," he said, offering his hand. "You're looking great, good to see you after all these years."

"You don't, you fat bastard," I teased.

"Too many business lunches, old boy," Dancer grinned, patting his paunch. Well over six-feet tall and barrel-chested, he wore a bold pinstripe suit and a Hermes tie. He looked like something out of a City of London investment bank.

"There's a lot to cover and not much time," said Easter. "Then, you never know, we might find you that drink. Tom, please begin. Hugo, you can go."

Hugo nodded obediently, performed a theatrical bow and sauntered out of the office. "Of course, my moon and stars!" he purred over his shoulder. So, he was a George RR Martin fan, too. I wouldn't like to be spoken to like that, and wondered if Hugo did either.

Easter rolled her eyes. "Geeks," she sighed.

"What's Hugo's speciality?" I asked.

"What, apart from being an arse? Hugo's role isn't relevant at the moment," Easter replied, firm but polite. "Tom?"

Dancer shot his cuffs. "You've heard about Mel Murray?"

"I saw the news," I said, the penny beginning to drop. "He was taken prisoner by government forces in Zambute, right?" Zambute: your standard-issue basket-case African

dictatorship, forever teetering on the brink of failure. It was like North Korea with wildebeest.

Oz nudged me and rolled his eyes.

"Yes," Easter added. "The CIA world fact book describes the Zambutan-Somali annexed Zone as *possibly the most dangerous place on earth.*"

"You're not selling this job to me," I said.

"I don't have to," Easter replied, eyes sparkling. I couldn't work out if Easter was agreeably jaded or simply trying to lighten the mood. She slipped off her jacket and sat down, revealing a neatly-ironed white blouse that contrasted nicely with her tan. I noticed Dancer quickly brush her leg with his hand below the table. She didn't seem to mind.

Oz sipped his coffee. "Murray owns Focus Projects, right?"

A Private Security Company, Focus Projects boasted Mayfair offices and a corporate box for the rugby at Twickenham. Retired Generals queued up to beg their former juniors for a chance to sit on the board, earn a small fortune for a couple of days work a month 'consulting.'

"I'm Ops Manager for Focus Projects," said Dancer proudly. "Mel Murray isn't just my boss, he's a good friend. His work in Zambute wasn't about energy security."

That wasn't the gossip I'd heard on the private security circuit. Apparently Murray was a bastard when he was CO of 22 SAS, fucking-up Tom Dancer's chance of promotion to half-colonel. Then again, Dancer wasn't the sort of bloke to hold a grudge, especially where a boatload of money was concerned.

"Since when does SIS care when a deniable drops in the shit?" I replied, straightening my leg. It still hurt when I flexed it.

"Murray was my responsibility," Easter replied, not taking the bait. She pulled a file from a treble-locked case. "This contains what you need to know about Operation CORACLE, which *was* our effort to covertly disrupt Chinese economic expansion in Zambute."

"CORACLE is fatally compromised," Dancer added. "We're implementing an exit strategy. Scooping Mel up is the last piece of that jigsaw."

"The Chinese?" said Oz. "Ain't we mates with them now?"

Easter shrugged. "The Treasury's *volte face* on China hasn't exactly... helped our position."

Britain, like everyone else, was selling their crown jewels to Beijing. We were like a crippled war widow, shuffling off to a pawn-broker with her husband's old medals. Meanwhile the Russians were creeping back across Eastern Europe like poison ivy, while we junked our military capability.

"No disrespect to Colonel Murray," I said, "but why is he so important?"

"Yeah," Oz added, "doesn't he just get a token show trial and a couple of years in prison?"

Dancer put his hand on my arm. "Mel has..."

"...royally fucked up," Easter snapped. Her steel-grey eyes flashed, a frond of glossy hair falling across her face.

I shouldn't have noticed, especially not during a mission-critical briefing, but Juliet Easter looked smoking

hot when angry. There was a slight flush on her face, flinty eyes almost feline when they narrowed. Her lips formed a lush pout, which made me think bad thoughts. Oz saw the look in my eye and guffawed. Like I cared - apart from booze and *schadenfreude*, nothing cheers me up like a beautiful woman.

"Colonel Murray is a grand-standing buffoon," she scowled. "He's wrecked two years of intelligence work playing *Lawrence of Arabia*." She was even cuter when she sneered, discretely painted lips drawn back over a neat row of teeth.

Dancer sighed. "Well, I suppose Mel did step outside his brief."

"*Outside his brief...?*" she snorted. "There's blatant electoral gerrymandering down to Murray, as well as weapons procurement via groups the CIA have decided are linked to terrorists. It's a diplomatic and political disaster if he cracks under torture."

"Not to mention SIS," I smiled. "And you too, right?"

"I think we can safely say I'm not the issue," Easter shrugged. "My career trajectory is now fixed firmly in the *crash and burn* position."

I got the feeling she meant it.

"My brief is to ensure that we get Murray back," she continued, "before he's tortured and coughs everything he knows. It's damage limitation, pure and simple."

Oz ran a hand over his perfectly smooth scalp, "anything else we need to know about this cake-and-arse party?"

Tom Dancer stood up like he was giving a Sandhurst briefing, except we were in a deserted office with sticky

grey carpet and rising damp. “The plan is to extract Colonel Murray from the *Kivuli Hatua* secure facility, inside the annexed zone. I envisage an in-and-out job.” He tried to smile and lighten the mood. “After all, Seal Team Six bagged Bin Laden, didn’t they?”

“Seal Team Six had twenty-three fully-equipped Tier One operators, two secret stealth choppers, satellite cover and the CIA,” said Oz, “and a dog. I know, ‘cos I’ve seen the movie. And they only had to kill their target, not an exfil.”

“And one of the multi-million dollar stealth helos crashed,” I added helpfully. I’d seen *Zero Dark Thirty* too.

Juliet Easter studied her fingernails. “I’ll see if we can get you a dog, if that will improve morale, Mister Osborne. There’s a second objective. You need to escort my team into the prison.”

“This gets even better,” I sighed.

“I appreciate your concern, but my team aren’t helpless civilians,” she replied. “Apart from our technical expert, the rest are experienced officers.”

“I didn’t say you were helpless.”

“You didn’t need to,” she replied, cocking her head.

I finished my coffee and sighed. “I apologise if it came across that way. There’s a lot of new information being dumped on us in a short space of time.”

“Apology accepted,” she replied, rewarding me with a smile. “By the way, your fee is generous by SIS standards: a hundred thousand per operator, plus expenses and a successful completion bonus of twenty-five per cent.”

Dancer stroked his chin, pretending to be impressed. What a load of bollocks. It was chickenfeed compared to

some of the dough I’d made for The Firm. “Wow,” I sniffed. “I won’t spend it all at once.”

Easter caught my expression, a smile twitching at the corner of her mouth. “You should see the pittance *we* get paid. As a bonus, upon completion of the contract you’ll be provided with a credible alibi for the Belov affair.”

You couldn’t put a price on that. It appealed to me more than money, even if I had to go to war to do it. I wasn’t going to tell Easter that half of my work on that job was for SIS, my first taste of skulduggery for Marcus.

“So why don’t you use your own covert operators?” asked Oz, “Special Forces or a legitimate PSC?”

“This has to be *completely* deniable,” said Easter. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but right now we’re a piss-poor little country with an army the size of a cricket team and the force projection capability of My Little Pony. Being sneaky bastards is all we’ve got left.”

“It has to be The Firm,” Dancer continued. “Nobody else has the capacity to integrate into an operation like this *and* remain genuinely deniable. Things need to look as normal as possible, until Mel’s safe.”

“There’s another problem,” said Easter. “The Zambutan elections are scheduled for early September. Whatever the result, there’ll be an army marching on the capital and then we’ll never extract Murray. I want him back within three weeks.”

I caught the laugh in the back of my throat, “three weeks? I’ll get out my pointy hat and magic wand. I’m a mercenary, not a magician.”

Easter smiled. She knew we weren't in a position to turn the job down. "Abracadabra," she replied.

I picked up the thick green SIS file, covered with protective markings. "OK, let's see if you're trying to kill me or not."

"I'll get Hugo," she nodded, picking up her stuff and leaving the room. "He'll look after you for the rest of today."

Dancer caught me checking her out and smiled.

"How did you get wrapped up in this?" I asked.

He stood up and paced the room, "Mel head-hunted me in the early days of the company. I had nothing else going on at the time."

"And what went wrong in Zambute?"

"Mel got too involved with the locals, went native," Dancer shrugged, rubbing his jowls. He looked tired now, bags forming under his eyes. "Some men buy a Ferrari when they have their mid-life crisis. Mel started a war."

"OK, what's the deal with SIS going into the prison?" said Oz. I could tell that escorting a bunch of civilians into a hostile environment concerned him.

"I'm not cleared to know," said Dancer conspiratorially. "But Juliet gave me a heads-up. The Chinese use the prison as a listening post. They've discovered the People's Liberation Army have a piece of their latest Electronic Warfare kit stashed away there. It's too good an opportunity to miss – SIS wants to steal it."

He went to say something else, but Easter stepped back in the room. Dancer looked like a naughty schoolboy and fiddled with his iPhone.

"Right," she announced, "accommodation is ready. You can begin planning there."

I stood up and shouldered my bag. Dancer led us out of the dingy office, towards the bare concrete stairs.

"Captain Winter?" said Easter.

"Yes, Juliet?"

She handed me a bottle of Maker's Mark in a duty-free bag.

"That's my favourite bourbon," I said.

"I know," she winked. And then she was gone.