

MICHAEL JENKINS



**THE
KOMPROMAT
KILL**

THE DEADLY HUNT FOR A NIZARI SPY-RING

THE KOMPROMAT KILL

BY

MICHAEL JENKINS

About the Author

Michael Jenkins MBE served for twenty-eight years in the British Army, rising through the ranks to complete his service as a major. He served across the globe on numerous military operations as an intelligence officer within Defence Intelligence, and as an explosive ordnance disposal officer and military surveyor within the Corps of Royal Engineers.

His experiences within the services involved extensive travel and adventure whilst on operations, and also on many major mountaineering and exploration expeditions that he led or was involved in. He was awarded the Geographic Medal by the Royal Geographical Society for mountain exploration and served on the screening committee of the Mount Everest Foundation charity. He was awarded the MBE on leaving the armed forces in 2007 for his services to counter-terrorism.

The Kompromat Kill is Michael's second novel. He has started work on his third spy thriller and hopes to publish it mid-2020.

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To my late Father whose creative Welsh genius inspired me.

And in dedication to the close family of British and American
bomb-disposal teams and high-risk searchers

*'To touch something that was meant to cause death and
destruction and overcome it, to deny it, is the most amazing
feeling.'*

Anonymous Bomb Disposal Officer

2006

KOMPROMAT

Compromising information collected for use in blackmailing, discrediting, or manipulating someone, typically for political purposes.

Origin: Russian, short for komprometirujuščij material
'compromising material'

Prelude
East Berlin
1986

Marcella placed a hand inside her dark grey coat and touched the pistol. She reached further inside, just enough to feel the full comfort of the Heckler and Koch P7 sitting taught and primed within the pocket she had meticulously made for its carriage. With a round chambered, it gave her the assurance she needed to continue with this disturbing mission. Just.

Feeling anxious, she glanced across the dimly lit road watching the late-night comings and goings of East Berlin's Auberge bar situated right in the heart of Friedrichshain. The bristle of a chilly wind caught her hair and the collar of her coat flapped.

Marcella didn't like the gritty bars here and the depressing façades reminded her that these were the surly masks behind which tyrannical Stasi informers were ready to act. She knew she had to be careful on this desperately cold night. Much more careful than her previous mission. For she knew she had enemies who had been ruffled in recent days.

The street lights flickered as she watched a tiny rodent scurry along the gutter before dashing into a pavement crevice, squeezing its body into the void like a chipmunk into its burrow. She curled her toes feeling the chill creep into the arches of her feet wishing now she'd worn warmer boots. She lit a cigarette. Waiting. Remembering. Recalling her actions from three months ago on the inner German border, deep

inside a coniferous forest, where she had dug up her communications equipment ready to facilitate the escape of a high-grade defector into the hands of her MI6 colleagues who were hiding on the far side of the heavily defended border.

The man she was helping to defect was a German with the codename BRUMBY. She remembered the lengthy make up session from an MI6 colleague who created the perfect disguise of a lady in her mid-seventies rather than the forty-one years she was. The immaculate disguises, backed up with forged exit visas, had allowed them to take advantage of the Pensioner scheme allowing the elderly to cross into West Germany for up to four weeks per year. As they were retired, they were seen by the East German government as economically unimportant and no great loss if they defected.

She smiled as she remembered how the Americans trusted the Brits to create these genius escape routes including a tunnel in East Berlin that Marcella occasionally used when security was ultra-high. Marcella smiled again knowing that tonight she would use a route by road, disguised as pensioners, to surreptitiously help an East German Stasi officer defect to the West.

Marcella had one primary role in the cold war as a covert member of the British Embassy BRIXMIS team. Planning escape routes and helping defectors cross the border. She was secretly embedded into the British Military Commanders Mission in East Germany living her life travelling between its mission house in East Berlin and the Olympic stadium in West Berlin. The other eighty odd soldiers and officers of BRIXMIS knew nothing of her missions into the depths of East Germany for clandestine defection operations, nor did they know about her mysterious Czech born consigliere she regularly met in East Berlin. The BRIXMIS staff, who knew her fondly as Marcie, were legitimate British military staff operating from their mission house in Potsdam where they would mount overt patrols to

collect intelligence on the Warsaw Pact forces stationed across East Germany.

Back in the street, the psychedelic bar lights cast a series of curious shadows across the street. Marcella moved slowly to the doorway of a cake shop biding her time. The mist was super fine, small beads of water drifting gently in front of her face, enough to make her strain her eyes as she watched the American officer cross the street and walk into the bar. She touched her pistol once more, felt her mouth go dry, a signature of her stress levels at this stage of a covert operation, and looked at her watch again. A watch that was counting down the last few hours of her life.

Marcella looked over her shoulder as if to check that her consigliere was watching over her, guiding her. He wasn't. And she knew that. But it was a ritual that kept the fear at bay allowing her to get on with the job in hand. Mindfully presuming safety, she began the long walk to the bar and the start of another mission with her CIA contact.

As she opened the door to the bar she felt a chilled breeze quell the lingering smell of alcohol. She looked at the clocks behind the bar - one showed London time, the other Berlin and the last Moscow. It was a moment of a cold war vacuum as she felt the barman's eyes pierce her torso before she made her way to the window seat where the American was sat with two glasses of dark Alt beer. Medium height, nothing distinguishable, a man who blended in well to the nightlife of Friedrichshain, but he did have one distinguishable characteristic when he spoke. A lisp. A lisp so faint it was almost indiscernible, but Marcella noticed it was always more pronounced when he was drinking.

It wasn't a long conversation and the German they spoke was pitch perfect to anyone listening in that night to what was an intriguing exchange between the pair. Their cover stories had been immaculately crafted by their respective

organisations of the Central Intelligence Agency and the Secret Intelligence Service, each of them the best of the best of intelligence officers operating behind the Iron curtain. Marcella listened carefully as the CIA man explained how they would help a Stasi Colonel, a newly recruited agent, escape East Berlin and that it was now up to her how she got him across the border and into West Germany. The CIA would be waiting for her in Helmstedt in the West.

Marcella left the bar first and made for the narrow rear exit before walking down five small concrete steps leading to a makeshift veranda. She walked confidently into the shadows crossing a small pebbled yard to a pond which was collecting water from a tall aquatic feature gently trickling over green moss. The sound of running water gave her a calm feeling of serenity. She sauntered behind the tall water feature and underneath an ornate Arbor bristling with ivy that ensured she was hidden from any peering eyes in the bar. She looked at her manicured fingers. No paint. Just trimmed short. She pinched a small brick using her index finger and thumb to carefully release it from the back of the water feature, placed the antique snuff box inside the void and replaced the brick to complete the dead letter drop. Inside the snuff box was a tiny piece of paper carefully inserted under the powder and into a void in the base of the box. An encrypted message lay inside. A message for her consigliere, her handler if the operation went awry that night. She had carefully crafted the message in the toilet of the bar following her discreet conversation with the American. The writing was miniscule but precise, the result of years of training to get lots of information onto a single tiny piece of paper.

Marcella shrugged her shoulders and sighed before walking under the floral archway walking the short distance to the garden gate and into the darkness of the street. The sharp wind streaming off the river cut through her hair and she

pulled her collar up, tightened her scarf, and squinted hard to adjust her eyes to the darkness feeling her eyes water.

She rounded the corner and strode purposefully along the street looking for a Wartburg 311 with a crack in the top right-hand corner of the windscreen. Within two minutes she was bending down peering into the car checking that the driver was who she expected it to be. A middle-aged woman with a floral scarf over her head who was now beckoning her to get in. Only a brief nod and smile took place between the two females before they drove off with the defector neatly hidden in the specially adapted boot that contained a hidden void, breathing tubes and a manual clicker to operate if he was in any trouble.

Two hours later after an uneventful journey across the East German countryside they arrived at small farmstead in the canopied rendezvous point deep in the Bartenslebener forest. The woman in the headscarf drove over a cattle grid causing Marcella to accidentally bite her tongue before the car was forced with high revs through deep mud and shale before skidding to a halt outside a small wooden chalet.

Marcella scrunched her face inside the warming chalet allowing the scarf woman to accentuate her natural wrinkles with makeup. An expensive ultra-light wig was fixed over her naturally short hair, dark brown eyeshadow applied around her nose to age her sharp features and stage paint applied making her eyes to look harsh and sunken. The Colonel took twice as long to create a workable mask before he too had the appearance of a seventy-five-year-old. Within a few hours Herr and Frau Schroeder were good to pass muster. Marcella bade farewell to her MI6 colleague and began the process of making sure the exit visas and photographs matched their new pensioner identities. They would cross the border at precisely 8am in their two-stroke Trabant 601 estate car, laden with a Zimmer frame and enough clothes for four days to visit a dying

sister in Hamburg. Over the last year, Marcella had made good use of the pensioner traffic across the inner German border which had increased over the years to nearly three million elderly in 1986. She felt confident of another successful defection, but something gnawed away at her from the last words of the CIA officer. Cryptic words from an ambiguous mind.

Marcella peeled off the vinyl gloves to angle a spot light onto her visa handiwork before glancing across to the Colonel checking that everything would be OK. Everything would be fine she told herself despite her mind stoking the fear and her senses dreaming the unknown. Marcella knew she was approaching the most dangerous part of the mission and she took heart that if she did not return then one day someone could decipher her message which would cause bedlam in the intelligence services. She had risked her life to investigate several cases related to East Berlin spy rings and her legacy now lay in that antique snuff box, a present from her closest confidante.

Marcella walked outside to retrace the route to a buried cache she had taken on arrival that night, confident with her surroundings, pleased with her forgeries. A final radio call to her master would signal the operation was good to go. She had walked the route a dozen or so times previously using prominent markers to navigate her way to her secret location in the woods.

A distant owl and the leaves flickering in the breeze were the only sounds she heard amongst the thickets of trees, though she found her mind juggling with the racket of confusing voices in her head. Did her CIA contact know? How might he know? Don't be so silly, you're being paranoid. She touched her pistol one more time before looking to the ground where her stash lay. Below her feet and next to a small tree stump lay a buried cache the contents of which included an HF radio, two Beretta pistols, a variety of passports, exit visa

documentation and a thousand deutschmarks. Marcella reached under the stump of a tree to pull out a small trowel to unlock the turf. She began to lift the lid of the metal container to replace the items she had used for the forgeries and make that final call. She glanced over her shoulder one more time.

Just as she peered inside with a pen torch in her mouth, a tall man stepped out from the shadows of the trees. He approached her from behind, drew his Makarov pistol fitted with a silencer, grabbed Marcella's forehead from the rear, and pumped two shots into her head.

Chapter 1

London

July 2019

Fletcher Barrington was an American spy who carried troubling secrets and wore a cleverly developed mask to hide them. Now in his late sixties he took pride that most secrets in his life remained unknown to others, not even to his closest Washington colleagues. Only a handful of people in his esteemed career truly knew the man behind the aging face who now walked with a slight limp. Those who knew Fletcher Barrington described him as charming and domineering but they knew little of the real man who was walking past the Ritz hotel on his way to a rendezvous in one of London's iconic venues with one such person who knew him better than any.

Two immaculately dressed doormen provided the evening's entrance to Quaglino's in the affluent Saint James area of London. A timeless cocktail bar. A Jazz club with a buzzing atmosphere. A magnificent venue for the discerning, elite and wealthy in Mayfair. Barrington handed his coat to a pretty Polish lady as the maître D appeared through a gap in the neatly hung curtains that concealed the entrance to the huge amphitheatre below. A tall lady, she was immaculately dressed in a black cocktail dress with matching high heels and her hair in a tight bob. She spoke with a distinguished home counties accent and held a smile that drew Barrington's gaze for too long. She exchanged courteous pleasantries and led the way to his regular table just below the showcase stairway. The house was full. There was a vibrant mood as the eight-piece

Jazz band readied itself for the first of its two sessions on a low stage at the far end of the gargantuan hall that preened in its colourful opulence that represented nineteen-thirties London.

Barrington enjoyed his forays to this iconic venue, lavishly refurbished to re-create its genius style of yesteryear, and a place of respite from his slavish political routine as an American official visiting London. Fletcher Barrington was a former CIA grandee - a knotty, gregarious figure with a stare as cold as the wars he had fought in.

Barrington stood to welcome his guest. 'Nice of you to come along Edmund,' he said jovially gripping his friend's hand before giving him a hug. 'It's been too long my friend.'

'A long time indeed,' his friend replied bowing slightly. 'We will make up for it tonight. What a splendid location.'

Barrington nodded 'This is my favourite place in town, great cocktails, fine dining, and magnificent Jazz - now complete with my wonderful British friend. Take a seat my boy.'

Edmund Duff was considered one of the reformers of the British Foreign Office. Handsome, just turned the corner of mid-fifties, single, and with an agile, inquisitive, mind, Edmund had been fast tracked through the diplomatic system following his years in the Ministry of Defence and was widely touted for one of the big five overseas ambassadorships in the coming years. An expert on the Middle East with a particular penchant for Persian history, and a sharp view on Britain's internationalist role alongside the American's, he had established a great rapport with Britain's political elite as a senior foreign and commonwealth office official.

Duff's driver who doubled as his minder sat at the far end of the cocktail bar above the staircase with a perfect view of his charge at the table below him. He would be able to see the comings and goings through a single avenue of approach to his

man and keep a watchful eye from a discreet position above the main hall. The minder drank lime and water with ice and the barman ensured he was always topped up having been primed with hard cash to provide both information and drinks to him whenever he needed.

'Now, where's your lovely Lebanese lady tonight?' Barrington asked in his booming Arizona drawl with the faintest of very faint lisps.

'Overseas I'm afraid but she asked me to give her apologies and she hopes to meet up next time you're in town. It never stops in her world, and makes my crazy world look like a walk in the park as your lot often say.'

Barrington smirked, unrolled his napkin, and replied tapping his fingers on the table. 'I never had such simple walks my friend. Just conflict and wars. It's nice to walk a bit now I'm semi-retired, and anyway, that bullshit New York language is not my kind of world as you know.'

'Your junior officers were always frightened of your bluntness,' Duff said, pointing a finger. 'It's why they ran from you, and we always got on.'

'You had a fine mentor in me, young man,' Barrington replied superciliously. 'Now, let's drink some good French wine my boy. We have a few things to discuss.'

Fletcher Barrington the second was the son of a Mining magnate and the first in his lineage to join the CIA. He graduated from Yale with a first in political science in 1976 and went on to earn the George C. Marshall Award as the top graduate of the CIA Command College Class of 1978 at Camp Peary - a multi-million-dollar spy complex nestled in deer-filled woods of Virginia known to CIA insiders as *The Farm*. A talented athlete and footballer, with a proclivity for young women, wine and classic cars, he subsequently became the CIA station Chief in Sarajevo, capital city of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1995 - just as war was at its most savage. He was renowned

for his no nonsense and blunt style of leadership which belied his acute political acumen. In retirement he was recruited as one of a number of retired CIA station Chiefs involved in the Pentagon military analyst program, designed to propagate disinformation across a number of political and military campaigns. Covert propaganda was now his world.

'What about Jonathon Thurlow? How is he these days?' Duff asked.

'He's still a liability I'm afraid. Drinks himself into depression too much. He's holidaying in Santorini right now, spending top dollar on high class prostitutes knowing him.'

'We need to watch him you know,' Duff retorted. 'He talks too much. Not the kind of Army officer I've ever wanted to trust with my life and my career.'

Barrington leant across to the younger Duff, just as the blues band struck up for their first session. The lights glimmered, and a pale blue spotlight drew everyone's attention to the trombonist smashing his turn as the soloist in the eight-piece band. Barrington spoke loudly into his friend's ear with striking clarity. 'It's been a risk for us for many years my boy. His bloody West Point education didn't serve him well despite him being made a US divisional chief of staff. I saved him from losing his career after our time together in the Balkans. Fear not though, I'll make sure he knows to keep his mouth shut. The years have been OK for us and I have no compunction in taking him out of the game if necessary.'

Two hours later a rapturous finale came to a close on the stage. The applause for the band lasted a good three or four minutes with the best of the cheers reserved for the bald drummer who mesmerized the audience with a string of solo slots in the last piece. He placed his hand on his heart and bowed like a metronome before disappearing through the stage door. Barrington stood and continued to clap as the chants of 'more, more' swirled around the magnificent amphitheater.

Duff looked up and gave his customary fifteen-minute signal to the minder who was attentively observing the peripheral surroundings of his charge.

One drink later, at the end of their evening, Barrington gave his friend a hug and slapped him on the back before pulling his head into his shoulder. Barrington was not one for tactile acts but after a few drinks he always reverted to machoism to show his strong regard for the closest of his friends. 'Do give my regards to your lovely lady Edmund when she returns,' he said. 'Must be wonderful for her to visit her family again after all these years.'

'Of course,' Duff replied reaching over to hear a little better. Barrington's lisp had gotten more pronounced after a few glasses of Chablis and a final brandy.

'She quite a good-looking woman you know. Keep her on your best side,' Barrington suggested.

'I know, and I will. She's always flying around the globe and I often wonder if we'll ever meet again,' Duff joked finishing his French Saint-Émilion wine.

'Make sure you give me some dates when you're next in Washington now,' Barrington said before giving him a wide arcing handshake. 'Great night as ever my boy - I shall send you some details of my current project on Iran, just to see what you think of it. Plenty of influence operations I'm having some fun with.'

'Ah, conditioning your great American public I see.'

'Bon Voyage.'

It was a long-undertaken ritual when Edmund Duff visited London clubs that he would give his minder precisely fifteen minutes before walking to the exit. The minder was on his way out of the club to collect the car when he heard an extraordinary alert on his phone. He had never expected to hear such a strange alert and was jolted by its connotation.

He grappled with his phone to check the message. The Precipio counter-surveillance software had alarmed from the system installed in his car, indicating that someone had placed a metallic device on its underbelly. A bomb or a tracking device? Someone was tampering with the car - right there, right now. The minder had used the system for well over two years on all of Duff's vehicles, but never once had he received a false alarm. This was a real alert. An alert that was transmitting directly to his phone indicating that someone had just placed a magnetic tracker on the vehicle or more frighteningly, an under vehicle improvised explosive device.

'Shit,' he muttered, pulling his jacket on at the same time as calling in to his ops room staff. 'It's either a UVIED or a tracker,' he growled down the phone starting to jog briskly towards the car in Arlington Street. He ran into the street level parking office, knocked hard on the window, and demanded the attendant look at the CCTV coverage of his car in the last five to ten minutes. The young Ghanaian waved him to the side door releasing the maglock to let him into the control room. A fifty-pound note helped the proceedings.

The minder studied the high definition imagery, searching vigorously for any unusual activity at 22.27 hours, the exact time the alarm had alerted him. 'For fucks sake,' he snarled looking again at the CCTV coverage. He checked his watch. Duff would be on his way out of the club soon. He cursed, strode out of the car park office, slammed the door, and walked purposefully to the car park entrance. He side-stepped the barrier and walked quickly down the ramp before turning the corner into the dimly lit lower first level parking lot.

Nothing. It was quiet. 'How the fuck has this alerted,' he grumbled. False alarm or a fault? Taking no chances, he approached the car, looked around, then crouched onto one knee to check the underside of the passenger seat. Just as he did so, he felt the hard-cold steel of a muzzle on his neck, his

eyes flickered, and the firearm jolted sending a bullet straight through his jugular vein.

A couple of minutes later, Duff watched his silver Mercedes CLS approach Quaglino's on the right-hand side of the road. Its lights flashed, the vehicle came to a steady halt, and the doorman opened the rear door for Edmund to enter.

Duff adjusted himself into the plush leather seat and started to scour his phone for any new messages. There was just one. A text from his Lebanese girlfriend:

'Delayed again Darling, will be another few days.'

He sighed. Then he looked up to see a second man in the passenger seat smiling and pointing what looked like a Taser stun gun at him. It was - and it was fired right into his chest.

Chapter 2

London

Jonathon and Elise Van De Lule had been planning their annual trip to Israel for several weeks which had been interrupted by a burst of glamorous social occasions amongst west London Jews. Elise, who had recently been elected the President of the Board of London Jews, had somehow managed to battle and survive cancer during this tumultuous period, but had pushed on through it eager to keep fighting the worrying tide of anti-Semitism she felt was now infesting British shores.

The Van de Lule's had arrived at the west London synagogue at 11am on a glorious Sunday morning, attended prayers and ate lunch in Kensington high street with twelve friends and family. They had been careful to choose a restaurant that offered exquisite fare to celebrate their daughter's new role as a patent attorney at HGF Limited. After a short walk around Kensington gardens, they discussed the merits of a leisurely afternoon at home confirming the itinerary that Elise had crafted earlier that week for their trip abroad. Jonathon had shared the idea of just making love for a while and they both laughed in excited anticipation of an afternoon of pure relaxation.

Elise glanced over her shoulder as they walked to their chauffeur driven car which was parked on birdcage walk - an action intimating to Jonathon *how exactly do we get rid of our minds for the day?* No words were uttered, but they grasped hands, swinging them a little with synchronised joy, relishing

the bursts of a summer breeze that cast gentle eddies across the Serpentine Lake.

Around 2.50pm they made their way along Chelsea Bridge road having decided to walk from the river Thames and make the most of the sunshine before turning right into Sloane Gardens. They had stopped for a moment to take in the views of the new building site that was once the grandeur of Chelsea Barracks, but was now being converted to gargantuan mansions courtesy of hefty Qatari investment. They didn't quite know what to make of the decadent monstrosities. Elise walked first up the few steps to their three-story house set back into the corner of the huge red bricked Victorian mansions. She inserted a large key and entered the house.

It was ten hours later that the Metropolitan Police detective surmised that they had been killed by more than one assailant, and that they may well have been tortured before their deaths. It was amongst the most gruesome scenes of murder he had ever witnessed in a career just shy of thirty-four years.

Jack H arrived at the Mansion at seven am the following morning and was chaperoned by a young female detective to the homicide team command vehicle. Jack was MI5's Director of G Branch having been propelled into the role following the sacking of his previous boss who had become the fall guy for MI5 failing to stop the Manchester arena bombing a year earlier. He cussed that MI5 were again viewed as having failed to monitor the bomber, Salman Ramadan Abedi, a twenty-two-year-old Libyan, when the secret truth of how many they had stopped that year would shock the public to the core. Nonetheless, Jack was making sure he didn't follow suit into early retirement and kept a tight hand on the tiller of Britain's most potent counter terrorist intelligence arm.

Quite a crowd had gathered at the end of the terrace, held back by the blue and white crime scene tape that signified the Police outer cordon. With a glance, Jack spotted the congregation of press photographers at the far end of the street turning his face to avoid any scrutiny of sharp-eyed photographers trying to identify who he was. Just as he stepped into the police command vehicle to change into a forensic suit, he heard the punishing sounds of a helicopter hovering high above him. He didn't look up. Jack had spent too many years on covert operations in MI6 where it had been drilled into him never to look up at airframes that might catch the perfect shot of his boyish looks on high resolution imagery. Everything about Jack was drills that had been hammered into him to stay alive and remain undetected. His life in the shadows was second nature to him but he had one aspect no other spook of his era had. A sharp intellect and an uncanny knack of plotting the most devious intelligence manoeuvres allowing him to stay well ahead of the game. He was a genius tactician.

Jack bore no marks on his face or any history of violence despite having spent decades nurturing the most brutal intelligence agents in the fields of Afghanistan, Iraq and latterly Libya. For this suited civil servant was the epitome of the modern-day spy. His craft dealt not with weapons, gadgets, or high-tech equipment, but political tactics to achieve an aim. This spy was a master of espionage operations where deception, guile, coercion, and meticulous planning were the tools of his trade. And he was bloody good at it. Or so his boss and mentor had always told him. Jack was the *go to man* for the Director General of MI5 or D as Jack always referred to him. D had empowered Jack to lead on a clandestine role acting as the commander of MI5's most secret internal unit that ran deniable operations. A highly capable paramilitary organisation known as '*The Court*' who had been born

from a need to retain secrecy well beyond the probing powers of political institutions. Too many intelligence leaks over the years had created severe damage to Britain's ability to protect itself in D's mind.

The Court was not the first time MI5 had operated a deniable secret unit. During the seventies and eighties MI5 had established an inner cadre of deniable operators known as the Inner Policy Club consisting of a group of officers who masterminded deniable operations via contracts to private security companies often run by trusted former MI5, MI6 and Military personnel, and whose relationships could all be denied. *The Court* ran along similar lines using highly vetted military veterans and intelligence services staff. All the missions tasked by Jack were deniable operations outside of the legality of traditional MI5 operations. D didn't want to expose crucial intelligence to the nosey going's on of Whitehall corridors where senior civil servants had over the years, ensured that national secrecy was being shared far too easily with Ministers and committees for what they called accountability.

Jack was horrified when the *Bond Clause* was exposed only a few months earlier which could have jeopardised the very existence of *The Court*. The Prime minister had been forced to publish the text of a direction by the spying watchdog on governing MI5 participation in criminality. The so-called James Bond clause of the Intelligence Services Act allowed MI6 and GCHQ to carry out criminal acts outside Britain, but criminality within Britain by MI5 had not been previously acknowledged. Jack was thankful that the probing had not exposed the clandestine activities of *The Court* which he commanded on behalf of D, with only one senior civil servant knowing of its existence. Politicians were not trusted to know of such a secret capability where leaks and exposés were now de rigour amongst the corridors of Whitehall. *The Court* was

the mastermind of D and remained one of Britain's most heavily guarded secrets whose activity was known internally as *The Third Direction*.

Jack sat in the homicide vehicle awaiting the arrival of the Senior Investigating Officer. He had been told the SIO at the scene was a prickly superintendent who disliked MI5 involvement. Impatiently waiting, his mind drifted back to the intelligence papers he had read the night before.

Not a man for excessive waste of his criminally low salary, Jack had been sitting in his favourite, but hideously cheap, Ikea armchair trying desperately to catch up on the intelligence of the day. He had put his two young children to bed, praying that Sophia his eldest, might one day recover from her debilitating illness of Multiple Sclerosis. It can be a cruel life he often thought, watching his daughter suffer so badly at only nine years of age, but he countered those thoughts, as the religious man he was, with ones telling him it could be much worse. The fact that she was living - that they were both living - was enough to give this humble man the solace he needed.

Jack had witnessed enough barbarity in his career of nearly thirty years' service to the crown - a service that had seen him promoted on each occasion very early, and a career that D had mentored closely to ensure Jack got all the right senior posts to groom him for one day becoming Director General.

Jack sighed as he read through the classified file with his written notes in the one-inch right hand column - just as he had been taught all those years ago when analysing high grade intelligence. What he read saddened him. It was bad enough having the Russians running riot but now Iran too. Are we this far into the depths of a new war? Multiple enemies on

multiple fronts from cyber warfare to the chaos of Russian influence operations tearing apart western democracies.

He flicked through the first two pages. How on earth has our world come to this he wondered? He had long felt that the political uncertainties of 2019 were likely to lead to a deep decline in western democracy, and it wasn't far off a mammoth implosion that no-one had yet predicted. But he had. And what he was reading was beginning to confirm it. The darkest days of Great Britain being faced by the gravest threat this century. It was a *black swan* moment as he often told his wife who was sat quietly reading her novel in the lounge next door. The *black swan* that no-one had predicted. But it would come. He knew Britain's security service needed some skin in the game to get ahead of an impending hybrid war.

'Iran is mobilising,' he muttered to himself as he read the INTSUM that D had personally provided to him earlier that day. The intelligence summary was pithy and to the point. The Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security affairs, the MOIS, was active in Europe and had identified targets for terrorist strikes and assassinations. The MOIS posed a massive threat. He read the third page that provided some history to the Iranian threat.

'During ancient times, the dagger was the weapon of choice by Shia Nizari's to carry out assassinations against those who were out to persecute them. A weapon which is still the preferred tool of choice by today's MOIS assassins, often grotesquely mutilating the body of their victim to strike fear into the hearts of their enemies, reminding them of what lies in store if they cross the Iranian regime.'

Today, another way an MOIS agent strikes fear into those he is tracking, is to sometimes play mind games with the target. This is all about escalating the victim's sense of fear, just as in days of old, when Nizari assassins would leave a dagger under a targets pillow, as a threat to intimidate them.'

The Nizari's were skilled in infiltration; they would setup long term sleeper cells, to allow their operatives to observe enemy strengths and positions, which they would report back to their masters, to give an indication of how the enemy operated.

Methods that are still used today by MOIS agents.

Jack read the entire document which intimated that Iranian sleeper agents had been awoken and were now mobilised on the British mainland. He shivered at the thought not knowing that the very next morning he would be faced with a mission of mammoth proportions - one that would lead to him crafting a devious espionage plan that might, just might, work.

'Good morning Jack,' the tall suited man said as he entered and closed the door to the vehicle in a single flowing movement, intent on making an entry of strength. 'I'm Detective Superintendent Alan Toombs. Come on, I'll show you around, but I warn you it's not very pretty.'

Jack watched the superintendent open the visitor book, scribble something inside, and asked him to sign it. Jack wrote his name as Jack H and nothing else.

'Just a couple of points before we go in,' Jack said handing his business card to the SIO. 'This is your primacy as a criminal investigation, but my Director General has asked me to make sure we get full disclosure on any evidence retrieved from these murders.'

The SIO looked down on Jack whose five foot-eight frame was dwarfed by the surly Scotsman. A purposeful and lingering stare followed. 'This is a police matter, not MI5,' came the rebuttal. 'If we find anything that relates these murders to terrorism, I'll let you know. I'm not sure why my boss even said you should attend.'

Jack shrugged. 'Very good. Now what have we got exactly?'

'Two dead. Husband and wife. All knife wounds from a frenzied, brutal attack. They broke in from the rear and it's unlikely to be terrorism I'd say.'

'If it's an assassination, it's very much terrorism and I'll let you know when I decide that,' Jack agitated.

The SIO grunted. 'It hardly looks like a clean professional hit to me. Just a messy set of gruesome murders. What on earth makes you think it's a professional assassination other than they are Jews?'

'I read a lot. Let me have a look?'

The superintendent pointed to a stack of sterile white suits, gloves and boots on the table. 'Changing room is the tent outside, I'll meet you inside the house.'

'Thanks. By the way. Have you recovered any of the weapons at all?'

'None so far. Come and have a look when you're changed, the scene is still pristine.'

What Jack saw of the crime scene haunted him immediately.

Elise Van Der Lule, who had suffered a frenzied attack to the stomach with a knife and had been decapitated, was sprawled across her sofa, while her husband lay nearby, his clothing blood-sopped and in tatters from the savage knife attack against him. According to the SIO, the couple had both been sprayed in the face with an unknown substance, and the attackers appeared to have entered through a basement level window that was smashed.

The couple had been fighting for years to establish political leverage against anti-Semitism and were the most prominent of British Jews who were continuously outspoken against the Republic of Iran. That in itself had probably elevated them up the target list of the MOIS Jack thought and the focus of Iranian surveillance. No matter how much this looked like a savage murder by intruders only a state sponsored capability could have pulled this off defeating

their close protection teams, high-tech alarms, and the regular police attendance and patrols around their home.

Jack stood and surveyed the scene closely. Scanning. He searched with his eyes to try and find anything that might confirm his supposition. They must have suffered horribly he thought as he looked at Elise's body whose slash wounds were ferocious. One or two attackers he wondered? He spotted the broken spectacles of Jonathon Van Der Lule next to a large glass table that was sodden with blood and a few small links of what looked like a gold chain, ripped from his neck perhaps to suggest a violent burglary. But Jack's gut instinct was that it was not. That this was an assassination of an intensity and brutality he had never seen before.

He realised that the moment he declared it a terrorist murder, panic would seep into central government. He imagined the flurry of activity in the chief of staff's office at number 10 Downing street and the furore amongst the political staffers who would end up working in overdrive to get their media messages woven. A high profile Jewish assassination in the heart of central London. Would they try and dampen the Iranian threat if he declared it? Quite probably. Would they try and avoid the connotations of a state sponsored assassination right in the middle of a political maelstrom surrounding the ever-increasing anti-Semitism within the UK? Definitely. This was a professional hit with a message. Talented investigative journalists would be all over it and would soon begin to stitch together the developing trends of Iranian activity across the UK and Europe. Activity Jack had known about for some time but only read in specific detail the night before. He'd had already been planning his moves before this hit. Predicting. Staying a few moves ahead of everyone else including the politicians.

The arrests ten days ago of two Iranian academics at the University College London may have seemed innocuous to most.

But Jack had foreseen a trend emerging. The UCL academics had been arrested for undertaking surveillance activity on London synagogues as well as photographing prominent Jewish families. And then there was the secret intelligence, not known by the wider world and the media, of a very small cache of military grade explosives found in a garage in Battersea. MI6 had received this intelligence from officers in Bahrain who had cultivated human sources linked to three Iranian caches that were found there in 2017. The investigation included a case where Bahraini security forces had discovered a large bomb-making factory in Nuweidrat - and arrested several suspects linked to the IRGC - the Islamic Republic Guard Corps and its infamous killing machine known as Al Quds. Authorities said the facility contained more than a tonne of high-grade explosives, making it one of the biggest finds in middle east linked to Iranian state sponsored terrorism. Now small caches were being found in south London and the forensics linked them to Bahrain and an ongoing investigation in Istanbul.

Jack knelt down next to Jonathon Van De Lule. His eyes were open, yet faraway. Thick red blood had congealed on the slash wound on the side of his neck and a gaping hole in his cheek had ruptured his inner bone. His mouth was pursed, and the acrid smell of body fluids breached Jack's forensic mask.

Jack cast his mind back to the eighties and the nineties when Iranian state sponsored assassinations were at their apex - a series of slayings dubbed the 'chain murders' took place across America with the victims including political activists, writers, poets, translators, and ordinary Iranian citizens. The MOIS assassins' modus operandi varied greatly between each murder, some were slain in staged robberies, many were stabbed to death in their beds or on the rooftop of their homes, one doctor was killed by an assailant posing as a patient, others died in car crashes, and ingenious of all, some were injected with potassium to simulate cardiac arrest.

'Can you come this way Jack, there's something I want you to look at,' the superintendent asked. Jack followed him into a large bedroom with open plan closets and a marble floor. The clothes were immaculately hung and a small corridor that led to the bathroom was the delineation between the male and female wardrobes. A suited and booted forensic officer was searching the bathroom but had been ordered not to move or touch anything until Jack had arrived on site. Unbeknown to them, the Metropolitan Commissioner had given an order on the advice of the Director General of MI5 who had recommended that the Executive Liaison Group would need to meet if Jack determined it necessary once he had assessed the murder scene.

The Executive Liaison Group is unique to major terrorism investigations and allows decisions to be made between the Police who have primacy for obtaining arrests and public safety, whilst MI5 retain the lead for collecting, assessing and exploiting intelligence. The Executive Liaison Group allow MI5 to safely share secret and raw intelligence with the police to decide how best to gather evidence and prosecute in the courts. Both organisations work in partnership throughout the investigation but Jack would make the call on how this would pan out for intelligence collection that could lead to finding wider terrorist cells.

Jack entered the bathroom where the smell of perfumed soaps and lavender lingered and a circular bath dominated the room. He walked across and peered into the white Villeroy and Boch crucible. Inside the bath were fourteen prominent dots painted in blood and precisely drawn in a shape that Jack immediately recognised. Four of the dots were connected by thick lines of blood. Presumably from the De Lule's.

'A calling card?' the SIO said questioningly.

'An assassin calling card.'

'What exactly does it represent? Any ideas.'

'I do. I know exactly what it is. It's the star constellation of Scorpio with fourteen stars four of which represent the deaths at the hand of the assassin. The rest are his target list.'

'Or hers?'

'Could be. Quite rare though. Most Nizari assassins are male.'

'Nizari?'

'Persian murderers. My guess is we have a Nizari assassin on the loose and he or she has only just begun.'

'How do you know it's not just a serial killer leaving a calling card? A signature killing.'

'Oh, it's definitely a Nizari calling card,' Jack said nonchalantly before turning to walk back into the bedroom. 'Like any serial killer, it's figurative. A signature to make sure investigators know its them. And to taunt us. It also shows the modus operandi and how much he took enjoyment in it.'

'Or she,' the SIO ventured again.

'I'm not convinced. Anyway, let's see if he or she is playing any mind games with us. Have a look under the pillows.'

Jack watched the SIO walk around the king-sized bed, so he was facing the photographer. Jack nodded and the SIO carefully lifted the first pillow nearest to the bedroom window.

Sure enough, under the pillow was a curved Persian dagger covered in the blood of the De Lule's.

Chapter 3

Westminster

Jack immediately made his way to D's office to brief him on what he had seen at Sloane Gardens. D had instructed him to rendezvous at the covert offices of *The Court* located in the heart of London's legal chambers set back from the Strand.

Jack was certainly no lawyer, and often shunned the advice he was given by them as the Director of Counter Terrorist Operations. Far too risk averse and too trapped in their world of legalese to make a real difference in the world he existed in to plot and catch terrorists and spies. Although if there was one thing he had noticed in the cultural change of MI5, there were now more lawyers in the corridors of the intelligence services than any other time in history - such was the microscope being placed on them in these heady days of ensuring transparency.

Jack did however look like a lawyer which was part of the reason he chose the Strand for the covert offices of *The Court* operations.

Jack was the archetypal grey man. A person that would never stand out in the crowd. Most often dressed in blue Marks and Spencer suits, a crisp white shirt accompanied by a drab tie, and always with a foundation of black brogue shoes. Despite being in his fifties, he looked ten years younger sporting nothing more than a few strands of grey in his short back and sides. His only vice was the occasional pint of beer at his local pub in the village of Denham in Buckinghamshire and the occasional red wine with dinner at home.

As Jack stepped out of the tube at Charing Cross station, few would imagine this was a man who had interrogated the toughest of Al Qaeda commanders in Afghanistan nor known of his citation for bravery in Beirut when he shot a suicide bomber who had breached the inner cordon of a British family housing compound. On that occasion he took a set of red hot ball bearings into a leg for his trouble. Jack was not just a loyal Crown servant, but a spy who operated best in the deserts of the Middle East, the mountains of Central Asia or with the dark gangs of the Balkans, where he made his name as an MI6 interrogator.

Now the most senior counter terrorist spy in MI5, his expertise was plotting traps. And lures for traps. His mind was deep in such a plot when he arrived at a passageway on the Strand. A passageway that starts off narrow and rubbish filled, but soon opened up into a much wider passage with grand buildings looming overhead inside Devereux Court. A court named after a traitor. Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex was once a favourite of Queen Elizabeth I, but he tried to lead a coup against the Queen, leading a small force from this location to the City. Forced to retreat, he was surrounded on the land that Jack's offices were now built on, and he surrendered. The layout of Devereux Court dates from around that time, and today the passageway leads from the Strand into the heart of legal London and is lined with the sorts of legal chambers you'd expect in the ancient streets of London. One of the chambers had a brass plaque with the name D Winship and K Fenton Chambers. A secret court within a court. *Home of The Court.*

Jack flashed his key fob across the console and punched a six-digit key code to open the door which led to a second door behind which were a narrow set of dust ridden stairs. He opened the second door with a key and made his way up the

creaking steps to a series of offices that had been retained in its 1970's décor and style. It was how D liked it.

The offices were small. Four rooms on the first floor and a large expansive room on the second which was situated in the loft. The secret facility had a secure storeroom, a small briefing room with a table and eight antique wooden chairs, a reception and a central office. Jack stepped onto the landing where he turned right into the outer reception office that was manned twenty four-hours a day by highly vetted ex-Military signals staff. He walked around the wooden veneer counter placing his briefcase next to the coat stand and knocked on D's office door.

The court was D's very own cabal of handpicked officers who ran the office, the HQ, and its much larger intelligence fusion centre located out of the city, with a set of core staff who ran what D called his own *active measures* campaigns around the globe. It employed a mixture of freelance ex intelligence officers to call on in the UK, as well as veteran special forces operators and a mix of former MI6 and MI5 specialists, all highly vetted and sworn to keep *The Court* operations fully secret.

'Jack, good to see you. Sit down my boy. Did you put the old bill straight on all this?' D asked standing behind a 1970's vintage President Desk that was empty except for a large ink blotter and two pens stood to attention in a wooden stand. His half-moon glasses sat at the edge of the curved desk with a light blue swivel chair contributing nicely to the vibrant colours of the room.

Jack sat on a pale green seat opposite the desk. A battered and beaten high back chair, its arms now decaying from D's guests gripping them and fiddling with its textile.

'What have we got then?'

'A vicious attack. Definitely Iranian and a professional hit.'

'Jesus Christ,' D remarked slumping into his seat giving the underside of his desk a fierce kick. 'The Home Secretary's going to be chuffed to bollocks with all this happening on our patch. It's bad enough with the Russians running riot. Now this.'

Jack sat forward to show D a photograph on his phone which he placed on the desk. 'I think its Department 15 that's been activated. What I saw today had all the hallmarks of an MOIS assassination with a bit of Nizari ideology thrown in.'

D grabbed his glasses and took a look. 'By fuck Jack. This is brutal. Nizari's you say?'

Jack took a few moments to explain that Department 15 of the Iranian MOIS were a team of brutal regime enforcers who, like the ancient Nizaris, carry out assassinations abroad. He explained that victims of MOIS assassins tend to be Iranian dissidents who pose a threat to the regime or key opponents of the regime. The murders carried out are brutal, designed to instil fear into the hearts of any dissenter brave enough to speak out against the regime, and some of the victims of these hit squads had died in the most barbaric way.

D tutted and ran a hand across his chin. 'Iranian assassins. Sleepers waking. Russian chemical attacks and cyber-attacks. All on my bloody turf Jack. Now a missing diplomat to boot as well.' A pause while D pinched his nose before bloating his suited posture like a kangaroo puffing its chest. 'Bloody hell Jack. We're in the shit here you know.'

Jack knew the signal well. A signal that was asking him what to do about all this chaos.

'I know sir. Deep shit I'm afraid.'

Jack placed both hands on the seats arms and adjusted his tie so it sat perfectly in the middle of his shirt. A deep-seated habit of his. 'We are entering a new dimension with the Russians and Iranians now hitting us time and time again. The intelligence is sporadic at best, and the chatter is rumour

more than fact, but it looks like this is just the start of a massive campaign. Nasty stuff ahead I'm afraid Sir. The Iranians have gone dark and we're in the dark.' Jack took a moment and reached for his phone - hardly having to look to see D's irritation. 'I don't know what the big plan is right now, but it looks like sleeper agents are being tasked with more assassinations and quite probably acts of substantial sabotage too.'

'You're damn right as normal Jack. All because of the Americans impatience and their geopolitical folly. Anyway, let's get to the important stuff.' D pulled out a note from his jacket and laid it on the desk. 'I need you to master this Iranian threat Jack. I need that magnificent mind of yours to plot away and give us a winning formula here. Let's get on the offensive before it's too late. I need someone right inside their crucible of terror.'

Jack fidgeted making himself more comfortable in the chair. He found himself fiddling with the yarns again. 'I have a few ideas and I've already set a few trains in motion if you're happy I proceed sir.'

'Damned right Jack. You're the man to make things work here. I'll have to deal with those wretched ministers as they go into orbit over this. They won't know how to handle this at all you know. Bloody useless the lot of them.'

Jack was fond of his mentor. On nearly every occasion that they met, D would use the opportunity to coach him. And Jack enjoyed the man's wisdom. It had served them both well as they entered their later years in HM Crown Service. Though D looked much paler than normal.

'Your operations are like a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma,' D struck up. 'Get me a new enigma Jack. We're forever being hamstrung by our own people and the Russians have been getting away with murder over the years with their hybrid warfare.'

Jack threw a cursory smile watching D rise before walking to the window placing a hand on an oak mantelpiece where an antique wooden clock took pride of place. Underneath the mantelpiece was a black 1950's safe cemented deep into the thick wall.

'You know what Jack? I think we've found our true fold with *The Court*. Our real mission is grasping opportunity in today's world of disinformation, cyber-espionage, and the mayhem of Trump, the Russians, and the political elite not knowing how to lead our countries anymore. The communists are coming back as we both know. Marxists even. Today we need to be bolder, and more innovative than ever before. And I need you to conjure up some miraculous operation that can save this country from its own downfall, and that of its own dismissive hand. Where exactly are we right now?'

Jack fiddled with his tie again lining it up with his shirt buttons. 'My staff are hard at work trying to track down any Iranian sleeper agents we may have on our soil and I've come up with an idea on how we can mount a wider operation using *The Court*. We know of one assassin so far, probably one or two sleeper agents, but there will be more being tasked. How far would you like me to go?'

'Go far and wide Jack. Use everything we have at our disposal now. This is the beginning of a war, and whilst we're witnessing some skirmishes right now, it will come to the boil in time and my fear is that the lid will be blown out of the hemisphere.'

Jack watched D clench his fist, walk sharply to his desk, and grab his note. 'Coffee or Gin?' he inquired.

Jack hated the coffee in the office feeling a stiff drink might help the immensity of the drama ahead. 'A small gin please sir.'

'Good man,' D said already pouring it. 'You know, one day soon we must go for a few beers Jack. We've never done that. A good old-fashioned pub, what do you say?'

Jack wondered if D was softening after all these years. He was a battle-hardened grafter as much as a master spy. D had risen to the top of his game the hard way. He wasn't one for the apparatchiks, or the ever-increasing legal brigades of lawyers distorting the service, nor the new breed of officers who had been coached never to take too much risk.

'Be aware Jack, that these killers may have been trained by the Russians you know. A little-known fact is that the Russian SVR trained a number of Iranian assassins and I'm guessing the GRU have probably done the same.'

While Britain was still feeling the aftershocks of Russian military intelligence trying to assassinate Sergei Skripal in 2018, their GRU officers were not all as incompetent as the media made out. D was one of the country's foremost experts on the Russian foreign intelligence service, the SVR, and its Military Intelligence arm, the GRU. One of his best friends was a source he had recruited in East Germany during the cold war who had provided astonishing intelligence on how the Russian intelligence services operated at a deep level. D had been warning ministers of the threat from the GRU and SVR for some years and was mightily irritated that not enough had been done to reign them in. Political bollocks Jack had often heard him say.

D reached inside a folder on the desk and passed Jack a small black and white photograph.

'Edmund Duff. Kidnapped. I'm not sure if it's the Russians or the Iranians but I want you to look at this too,' D said pausing to lift his glasses. 'The PM is getting a lot of grief about what's happened to this missing diplomat and wants to know what the hell I'm doing about it. I'm briefing her later this morning and I think his kidnapping might be linked to

what's been happening with the Iranian activity we've seen of late. My fear is that the Russians are involved too. They're bloody good at using proxies and this has all the hallmarks of a Russian deception plan to send us in the wrong direction. What do you think?'

'Hard to say at this stage until we've looked at it a bit more. Tell her we have our best agents on this and we're looking into Duff's background and accomplices too. Might be nothing, might be extortion, or he might have been talking too much. He might even have been recruited as an agent. He was one of the FCO middle east experts you know, travelled a lot there and could easily have been tapped.'

D took a hit of gin before patting the clock trying to get it to work again. He hit it one more time then turned to pace the room. 'Jack. The problem we face is most grave. The Russian influence operations have crippled our politicians with fear. Fear of not knowing what to do. Of not knowing how this game of disinformation and influence is being played. To an extent, the long arm of Russian active measures has neutered our political class - and they don't have the competency to deal with it. A breed of politician that know little of how Putin has changed the game - forever. Do you understand?'

Jack felt himself nodding and feeling similar dismay.

Despite the long speech and the context that he had just heard, Jack fully understood this was his boss giving him his intent. 'Leave this with me Sir. I've got a team investigating the Iranians and the missing diplomat and we'll see if they're linked. I'm going to bring in Sean Richardson for this job too - its right up his street.'

'Very good Jack. A fine operator. Do as you need.' D kicked the black safe with a toe punt. 'Now, you remember when I asked you chaps to re-locate this safe from Millbank offices when we set this little place up?'

'I do. We've all had bets on what's inside.'

D roared with a deep laugh and banged the clock again. 'Well I can tell you the secret of that Jack. Up until last week nothing existed inside it. I have never ever put anything in there. It has remained empty during my tenure for many years, until that is, last Tuesday.'

'Go on.' Jack uttered knowing he was being prompted to ask.

'It now holds some information from the cold war that has only recently come to light. East Berlin to be precise. It came from an old friend of mine in Prague. A small snuff box that I'm personally investigating which relates to an incident in Friedrichshain in 1988.'

'Do you need some help?'

'No Jack. Not just yet. You see I have a quite serious heart condition which might need you to step in should I pass away.'

Jack watched him wave his right hand to immediately cull any sympathy Jack may have voiced. Jack remained silent, but a little shocked. He could see D was teasing him up and it had become clear to Jack that his boss was not infallible to the vagaries of health. D was in his mid-sixties now and a life of hard graft, immense stress, and the never-ending political battles would inevitably take its toll.

'I won't give you the key my boy, but you absolutely have my permission to blow the bloody door off if I pass off this mortal world.' D laughed again banging the desk with his hand. 'Hard to think that my legacy revolves around a snuff box eh? But be assured, only you know of this and I'll ensure that any of my findings over the months are also put in there. I really don't know where it'll lead but I have an inkling it refers to some historical foul play and some equally evil bastards. I have a few more interviews to conduct to find out what happened behind the iron curtain back on that day.'

Jack felt honoured. Proud in fact. His lifetime coach and mentor telling him that the last days of his life were coming and that he alone would have the authority to take whatever legacy he left forward.

D indicated it was time to close. He summarised and collected his brolly from the brass case of a Second World War shell sat next to the door.

They walked together down the strand then turned right at Admiralty arch to walk through St James Park. The rain started to fall as they walked across horse guard's parade and into the small courtyard where the Coldstream guards stood fastidiously on parade.

D stopped and pointed with his umbrella to a small doorway under the arch. 'Fond memories of that door Jack,' he said standing to attention, his umbrella regimentally placed by his side. 'That was the door I passed through many years ago to hand in my military ID card. A fine summers day as I remember.'

Jack stood silently listening to a man he held in high regard. He was not just a senior civil servant but the first ever military officer since the second world war to become the Director General of MI5. A highly decorated one at that. He watched D turn and begin to march off down Whitehall.

'Oh, by the way Jack, what about this blood in the bath? What's it all about?'

'Most likely the assassin is showing us their mission. A blood list of his or her targets and the numbers. I'll do some thinking on why, but star constellations and zodiac signs play a big role in Islamic scripture and even in the Quran. They were superb astronomers and mathematicians you know.'

'Keep me updated Jack, I'm just popping in here for a short while to keep them all calm.'

Jack nodded glancing across to Downing Street hoping that his tactics would be up to the mark for the coming weeks and months.

Chapter 4

South of France

Sean Richardson stood on his bedroom veranda wondering what had hit him the night before. He groaned as he walked gingerly past his artist easel to gaze out at the early morning views of the Provence region of southern France. The views beyond the swimming pool gave rise to glorious spring blooms and the distant forested hills of the Préalpes national Park a few dozen kilometres from the Cote D'Azur. The magnificent scenery had all been perfectly captured on his latest canvas.

Sean was a life maker. A man who thrived living right on the edge. Full of energy with a penchant for risk taking he wasn't the type to be glum nor solemn. He just got on with life no matter what it threw at him. A life that had bared his soul on many an occasion and thrown a whole heap of shit at him over the years. It was a life he had only just got back after several years of forced retirement from HM Intelligence Services which included a stint in an Afghan Gaol following a journey that almost plundered him into self-destruction. To his closest friends, he'd sum up his most recent past as being sacked from HM service for having a fling with an Iranian spy, getting banged up overseas for being an innocent weapons smuggler, and being a fugitive on the run from a bunch of Russian thugs who had a price on his head. Luckily, Jack and *The Court* had agreed the maverick nature of Sean warranted a second chance at serving the crown but very much tucked away from the niceties of formal service.

Sean peered over the balcony to the swimming pool terrace to see his girlfriend, Melissa, sat at a table quietly reading the Le Monde and taking a light breakfast in the warming French sun. Tucked away on the fourth page was a small piece hinting at Hezbollah involvement in a murder of a prominent Jewish couple in London. It suggested that the De Lule's might have been assassinated on the orders of Iran due to their anti-Iranian rhetoric at numerous rally's, and that their murders plus the recent outpourings of anti-Semitism in Britain were beginning to seriously embarrass the British government. The police had released very little detail, but the paper intimated the intelligence services were on a high footing for further attacks.

'Meutre en Londres,' Melissa shouted out lifting her sunglasses momentarily to see the state of her lover.

'D'Acord. Excusez moi mademoiselle - temps pour un bonnet de douche,' Sean shouted back sarcastically.

Sean had always had a tinge of jealousy that Melissa could speak and read French so well and was struggling to keep up with her vast language skills. To counter that he'd often make silly phrases up. Her superb grasp of the French language was one of the reasons the location was suggested to them by MI5 when they were both safely re-located with new lives and new identities in recent years.

Sean pulled both hands through his greying hair to tie it in a ponytail and walked back into the bedroom moaning at his hangover. He was half shaven and bleary eyed as the memory of the previous night in downtown Nice began to surface. He was sure that Melissa had managed to coax him into a taxi following a raucous night at the Meridian Hotel where Melissa was amongst her peers for the annual journalism awards. But he cursed that he couldn't remember the journey home. There had been lavish cuisine, long speeches and vibrant dancing in the ballroom. Trays of champagne. God that was good. Stella and

French wine, not too bad he thought. Followed by hours lingering at the casino tables amongst some of their new friends and colleagues. Then there were the shots. Christ. The shots. Sean grumbled as he remembered all of them. He sat on the bed, reached for his shirt and started to look for his phone. After a few minutes searching he found it under his DJ suit which was sprawled across the carpet in front of the large king size bed.

There were several unread texts and one message on his TextSecure application. This intrigued him as it had been set up two months ago as the primary means of letting him know of any tasks that MI5 wanted him to conduct. He had wondered how long it would be before Jack would contact him and a wry smile glided across his face as he opened the message. Jack had given him a few clandestine roles in the south of France since he'd been relocated two years ago, but in truth, for Sean, it was just simple agent work. Developing contacts across France was another form of Art that Sean enjoyed and one as equally good as his steady hand with oil paints. He'd been tasked with finding out who was susceptible to being recruited, who in Melissa's world of journalism was also a spy. Crafting contacts, having dinner and drinks with potential sources who might give an insight into French espionage operations. Where in the world they might be focussing their intelligence efforts. To be fair, Sean had recruited a couple of human sources before formally handing them over, but he always wanted more. Something meaty rather than base level intelligence officer work in a covert life with no formal diplomatic cover. He wanted a mission that would take him to the edge. Give him the thrills he so badly missed. Little did he know it was coming. And it was coming in a package that Jack would personally deliver.

'*Arnie Arnison.*' was all the text said. The codename Sean had chosen in memory of a friend and legend from the

Intelligence Services who had died suddenly some years ago. He knew immediately that this was the code for a tasking that *The Court* would leave in a data file on their remote communications portal held on the dark web. Sean had been held on their books as a deniable resource to be used on missions that MI5 required through their highly secretive cabal with veteran officers going operational only for the most discreet of special projects missions.

It gave him some solace that Jack, who led the operational aspects of *The Court*, had seen it fit to break Sean out of the Afghan Gaol and provide him the means to become a free man again - but only after he had tracked and traced a dead whistle-blower resulting in a grapple with the Russian secret services before finally exposing a couple of sleeper moles deep within the British Establishment. Sean wasn't very pleased that such a result meant an entire lifetime now being on the run from the Russian SVR - The Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, who happily laid out a contract on his life after he exposed and nearly killed their best female spy who had operated for years within the British parliamentary system.

Sean fought with his trousers, swaying as he tried to get the second leg in, then, once successful, made his way downstairs into the living room. He fired up the computer then dived into the kitchen to make some tea and toast with a large dollop of marmite to kick his body back into shape. Once the laptop was up and running he entered the dark web via a TOR browser and entered the link to take him into a database. Whilst the dark web was fully secure to prying eyes and provided good protection against state intelligence apparatus trying to track and trace Sean, it still had a few backdoor holes that needed some precaution. If they were able to find this secret file location, they would simply see thousands of academic databases. Rows upon rows of spreadsheets with raw IT

metadata - only one specific file held the data that both parties could transmit messages through.

Sean opened the file and was disappointed to see only a very short message. He was eager for more.

'Make your way to the safe location. Something has happened here, and we need your help.'

Sean added a new row to the spreadsheet and answered.

'Roger. Will make headway now - estimated arrival tomorrow morning. Will send details when I'm at St Francis.'

Sean then deleted the first message in the spreadsheet row before logging off and making his way outside with his mug of tea, a wedge of marmite toast delicately balanced in his mouth. He slipped his sunglasses on, as much to hide his reddened eyes from Melissa, as to shield them from the fierce southern French sun.

'Morning,' he said mutedly as he smiled at Melissa and took a seat with the toast still in his mouth. Melissa peered over her sunglasses and put her paper down.

'So, the beast awakens,' she said. 'Show me your eyes Casanova.'

'Nope,' he replied.

'Bloody good job you have me to look after you,' she said. 'You were a walking disaster last night - I nearly slotted you.'

Sean laughed. 'Fear not, someone will surely beat you to that with all these bastards after my neck. Looks like I'll be putting myself back out there and amongst the thick of it in hours few.' Sean grinned before sitting back to drink his tea knowing what would come next.

'Well,' she said. 'He's been in touch then?'

'Yep.'

'Good,' she replied. 'Only two things from me then. Make sure you get me involved. As much as I love my French journalism, I need something juicier and more investigative to

get into. And secondly, keep on your toes because once you start moving you'll be leaving a footprint everywhere and those Russian bastards will be onto you like a rash. Only you could go and expose the deepest most regarded female spy in Russian history - and the grand-daughter of a brutal KGB assassin too. Fucking hell.'

Sean grinned knowing how right he was that she'd reply in exactly the manner he expected. Eager as ever, Melissa had convinced Jack to have her 'on the books' for anything that involved deep research, and areas of intelligence gathering that he needed kept from those in the not so secretive corridors of Thames House and Vauxhall cross. Her investigative skills and global connections could be useful Jack had surmised.

'All he's said is that they have a problem and to make my way to the bolthole. He hasn't given me a clue what it's about.'

'Well, I'm sure you'll need somebody looking at this beyond the normal day to day intelligence collection. I'm not sitting here on my arse for weeks on end while you gallivant across the globe.' They both chuckled. 'At least you can test some of the plans that have been set up for us. I look forward to being your investigative source.' She sat back feeling smug knowing she'd get the call.

'I'm sure you'll hear from me, but you have to play to the rules my lady. You bloody well nearly got us both killed last time. Anyway, I'll take the route that we agreed on and set up from there. I'd have thought the Russians have better things to be getting on with without trying to take me out of the game especially as they have all that trouble with that Novochock fiasco in Salisbury.'

'Don't you believe it,' Melissa said. 'Those bastards will always want retribution for Natalie being captured by you.' They grimaced at the explosive journey and mayhem that had

seen them arrive as new people in a new land with new jobs - even if their service to the Crown was only part time.

Jack and *The Court* had provided two new homes in France for them along with new passports, new backstories, new social clubs, credit cards, and a set of communication and escape plans. They had another safe house in Lyon, but their primary safe house, beyond where they were currently living, their bolthole, was based over the border in a small town called Viola in Piedmont, Italy. It would be here that Sean would transit through whenever making foreign journeys, and then onwards to the small and less busy Turin airport which provided safer options for covert travel. The safe house was a remote wooden chalet in the hills above Viola set amongst the dramatic pine forests with restricted approach routes and covert cameras that the pair could monitor remotely for any unwanted visitors. Any surveillance footprint had to lead back to this neat chalet rather than their luxury home on the Cote d'Azur.

Chapter 5

South of France

Sean's journey to the safe house in the cool early hours of the morning was uneventful except for a brief incident involving a small fallow deer rushing out from the conifer woods, before rooting itself to the spot in front of his Peugeot 3008 SUV. The enchanting scene of the young deer gazing into Sean's headlights as dawn broke took on an even more bizarre scene as two young stags began to fight behind her. Fleetinglly, they sparred. Then they were gone, leaving nothing but a burst of dust from the ancient track and the sporadic low-lying fog rising gently across the steep valley road. Sean revved the motor, grappled with the wheel-spin, and thrust the vehicle up the tight track glancing across to the open hillside where the elder stags sat protecting their herd.

Sean's bolt hole was a wooden chalet set deep in the high alpine hills above Viola located in the upper Val Mongia near the delightful foothills of Monte Bric Mindino. Known by its codeword, *St Francis*, the sanctuary was a place of respite and pleasure for Sean where he'd often take time alone to continue his passion for drawing and painting. His favourite haunts for setting up his easel were in the village square as well as the magnificent Chapel of San Giovanni and the Rocca Dei Corvi or Sfinge, a natural rocky tower some ninety metres high, that was topped off with a Sphynx-like head.

Sean took the right-hand branch of the only fork on the kilometre-long track and headed to a promontory that provided

a good view down the hillside to the chalet. He started his ritual of checking the security of *St Francis* and its immediate area before he would venture any closer. He scanned the area through his binoculars before walking through the woods and completing a full circuit around the chalet which was perched on a small hillock deep in a conifer forest. He checked the vulnerable points and avenues of approach to the chalet before checking for any signs of ground disturbance and any unusual vehicle tracks.

Next, he took out his phone and punched in a password to a CCTV and security application to check for any alerts on the detection measures that he'd installed in and around the chalet. He checked the CCTV coverage from cameras that were placed high in the trees covering the two inward routes, then he spent some time checking for any alerts that would have alarmed from the pressure mats he had placed inside the bolthole. Any intruder stepping on them would have triggered a silent alarm and produced a camera shot of anyone placing a foot on the key vulnerable points that he had guarded with sensors and active infra-red beams. These would then send a secure text message alert to his phone.

There were no alerts. No intrusions since he had last been here. He set off on a final walk around the chalet before entering via the back door located on a veranda overlooking the valley basin below.

Within five minutes he'd booted up his laptop, logged on to the dark web, and sent Jack a message.

'At saint Francis - what's next?'

He had travelled light. Just his mobile phone, a laptop and a spare burner phone, a small rucksack with enough kit to see him through a few days, and two thousand Euros along with a French passport in the name of James Le Roux. He was poised but guarded. The treacherous world of espionage had caught him out too often to be too blasé to anything anymore. He trusted

no one, not even Jack. But he trusted him just enough to dip a toe in the water to see what might come at him.

A few transmissions later and all was set for a rendezvous with Jack at the top of a pine hill at 2pm in a felled clearing offering staggering views of the distant Alps.

It was 1.45pm in a warming sun. Sean sat on his rucksack and waited. He took a drink of water from his flask, hummed a tune and fiddled with his lighter trying desperately not to spark up a cigarette. But he did anyway. He thrived on his work but needed a nicotine hit to keep his edge just at the right level. Without it he was snarky. With it he felt he could deal with anything at any time. He put his lighter in his top pocket, checked his watch, then a few moments later heard the familiar sound of a distant helicopter where he found himself trying to figure out which direction it was coming from. After years of operating with helicopter insertions and extractions, he still cursed himself that he could never quite work out the incoming direction until it was too late. Same again. Before he knew it, the Italian forestry commission helicopter had risen above the hillside from the valley and Sean, before he knew it, was cowering for protection as the rotors caught the loose wood shavings and small branches blasting them fiercely across the high knoll.

Sean dropped to one knee putting his hand across his face to shield his eyes before peering through his fingers to see Jack open the door and exit the helicopter. He watched Jack run towards him, bent over in a deep crouch, before giving a thumb up to the pilot indicating he could engage his gears and take off.

'You really didn't need to wear a suit you know Jack,' Sean said sardonically before shaking Jack's hand. He watched the helicopter glide off towards the distant Gran Paradiso mountain.

Jack laughed. 'I only have a few hours here, then it's off to a rather boring meeting in Rome.'

'I'm beginning to believe you don't have any other clothes than suits for god's sake. Here, put this on just in case any loggers see us down below.' Sean threw his north face waterproof to Jack before firing up the quad bike. 'Hold tight, time for a bit of fun.'

'What's the job then?' Sean asked, grabbing a couple of beers from the fridge then placing them on the rustic wooden table in the lounge. 'You flying in means there's something big on the boil eh?'

Jack poured a beer into a small glass looking pretty unphased as normal. Sean watched Jack pull out three pieces of paper from his inside jacket pocket and place them on the table, each folded in thirds. Sean sat opposite Jack pushing a small jar of olives as if to say your move first. He watched Jack take a long drink of his beer and leant forward - poised.

'It's as bad as we ever thought,' Jack began. 'The Iranian's have pretty much mobilised and we don't know what's coming next.'

'Mobilised what?' Sean asked, his curiosity piqued.

'Their sleeper agents, and quite probably their hybrid warfare plans.'

'Christ, for a moment I thought you meant their entire Military forces, tanks, air force, the lot.'

'Well, this mobilisation is probably worse, there's no doubting we can deal with them on a battlefield, but this is a mobilisation of their terrorist and sabotage arm, backed up with offensive cyber capability - it really isn't looking good at all.'

'How do you know? Is this all the fallout from the President killing off the Iran Nuclear deal?'

'Exactly right,' Jack said downing his beer. 'I couldn't have some water, could I?'

Sean sensed the stress levels in Jack despite knowing that he rarely showed it. He grabbed a carafe of water and poured some water into two glasses. 'Go on Jack - I can see the worry right there in your eyes.'

Jack smirked. 'Put it this way, if I didn't have a meeting later trying to scrape around for more intelligence I'd be staying and drinking plenty of red wine with you. It's as high an alert as I've ever known in my entire career and D is demanding we go into overdrive and gather as much human intelligence as possible on their plans.'

'Imminent strikes then?' Sean suggested with a sigh. 'What's your thinking then? A cyber strike on critical infrastructure or sabotage?'

'I have no idea. Lots of people in the intelligence services thought it was all a myth that the Iranians had sleeper agents in the UK, but in *The Court*, we have collateral that they do. D is worried about that. Especially as the Russians may have coached them in this, and we're not quite sure how much support they are giving to them. Now we have a number of incidents showing us that Department 15 is active in the UK too.'

'Department 15? Who are they?'

'Part of their Ministry of Intelligence and Security trained by Al Quds and Speznaz operators who could create havoc on European soil. Their specialism is assassination and terrorist attacks which we think have been a few already.'

'Hence the three pieces of paper Jack?'

'Close Sean, but no cigar I'm afraid.'

'OK, let's get to the nub of this then Jack. What do you want me to do?'

'Do you remember the Iranian lady you had a fling with?'

Sean sat bolt upright and looked behind him throwing his head back in despair. 'Jesus Christ Jack is there nothing you don't know about me?'

'Very little Sean. But hey, treat this as it is. You are most probably the single best person within the entire UK Intelligence service to get right in amongst what is happening right now. You never knew it at the time, but she is a high grade MOIS intelligent agent, and a bloody dangerous woman.'

'You can say that again Jack. Staggeringly dangerous. She messed with my mind and drove me insane.'

It was when Sean was at his most vulnerable, still a serving Intelligence officer, that a stunning looking Iranian woman had sat next to him on the Eurostar from Paris to London. A plant by the MOIS. And Sean was her target. Sean had been through hell with the death of his wife, Katy, the year before he was sat on that train and he was tumbling into deep hopelessness. The fling he had with an Iranian woman named Nadège was the launchpad to him being sacked from the service. A cold chill came over him as he remembered the wild parties, the crazy sex, and the manipulation she had over him at a dire time of his life. Deadly he thought.

'I need you to find her Sean. And I want you to turn her.'

'You really are taking the piss now Jack. She fucked with my mind and nearly killed me with off, never mind getting me sacked from the service. It was a short fling. I never even thought she'd been a spy. She was a model for fucks sake and I got properly suckered in by it all.'

'Well if it's any consolation, we didn't know until recently how high grade she is in the Iranian MOIS either. I have a Russian GRU source who has been running her as a double agent. Up to now we simply thought she was a lowly agent provocateur. But I've received verifiable information that she's probably behind most of the British operations and a high-grade assassin too.'

'What do you mean?'

'There was a murder in Bosnia last month. A former Mayor of Sarajevo. His best friend was a paid agent of ours and he told us how the mayor was assassinated by Nadège and another woman. Both stunning females. Lulled to his death by beauty.'

'OK. But where's the link to the here and now. What's the link to the Iranian threat?'

Jack pointed to the pieces of paper.

Sean unfolded the first piece of paper that Jack had passed him. It showed two photos of Nadège and a few paragraphs on her background. Sean read it in detail before glancing up to see Jack casually sitting back in his chair with his arms folded. Sean looked into Jack's eyes irritated by it all.

'You really are taking the piss here Jack. What makes you think I can get her to turn? She's an out and out murderer, has been for a while by the looks of it, and is motivated by her own narcissistic lifestyle I'd say. Wealthy, powerful, and living the circuit with Britain's elite.'

'That's what we all thought too. But I've been told by my source that she's been making mistakes and might be ripe for turning. I don't know, but I want you to find out as much as you can about the current operations she's running and get close to her. It could give us the intelligence we need to help stop the carnage that is being primed across Europe. My hunch is that only you can get close enough and it might take a while. But in the meantime, you need to latch onto her and find out what she's up to. Bring your team in as you need.'

'She certainly seems to have kept a low profile for all these years and only just come to your attention then?'

'Yes, and we need to know more about her work. My source doesn't have the full picture of what's going on with her, but her direct connection to the Russians is worry enough for me. A lot of the information my source has given us has come

second hand. You know, GRU and SVR gossip and the like. Enough for snippets of information but not detailed intelligence - just broad information. I need you to get the detail. Hunt her down, connect again with her, use your skills and team to find out what she's up to. And see if she might turn.'

'For fucks sake Jack. This is a nonstarter,' Sean said annoyed with what seemed like a ludicrous mission. He scratched his unshaven jaw furiously. 'It's a suicide mission. She'll know from the start who I am and what you've tasked me to do. Not a fucking hope mate. It'll all go pear shaped from the off.'

'You'll think of something Sean, I know you will. You always do. You had a connection with her. I seriously think she might turn if you play the right moves.'

'Very fucking funny Jack.'

Sean was annoyed but studied Jack's face quizzically. How the hell does he always know everything about my life? Sean stood up and walked to the back door leading to the veranda. He waved an arm and asked Jack to follow grabbing a bottle of his finest red wine from the rack on the wall. Jack brought the glasses.

The view from the deck was stunning. A small trestle table with two canvas chairs gave a perfect line of sight straight down the Mongia valley with coniferous forests looming large in the sky. Kestrels flew high above circling for their prey. Another ruse Sean thought casually. He was dipping his toe and didn't like what was coming at him.

Sean popped the bottle of wine knowing Jack couldn't resist a good red and that his inner stress levels were so highly primed now that he surely wouldn't refuse. The sound of silence with the occasional twitter of the birds was inspiring. They sat and drank. Saying nothing for a good five minutes. Taking a moment in time. A lull before an impending storm. Both sensed the gravity of what was about to come.

'I suppose,' Sean began. 'I suppose you have more than you're telling me. What's the hidden part? Whilst I trust you to a small degree Jack, you lot are a bunch of treacherous bastards and I need to make sure I'm not being set up for a fall again.'

'Nothing hidden at all,' Jack replied pushing the second piece of paper on the table. 'I don't know enough myself to plot this one out yet. I need you to get me more. I haven't got a clue on the extent of the sleeper threat. That's why I need you to get me actionable intelligence that's far clearer than I have right now - and something I can move on.'

'What's this then?' Sean asked picking up the second piece of paper. 'Another demon from the past?'

'An incident from two days ago. The results of a professional Iranian assassin.'

'Nadège?'

'Could be, not sure yet.'

Sean read the details of the murder of two Jews in Sloane Gardens. Jews who were critical of the Iranian mullahs and were now the victims of a vicious double murder. 'May I?' Sean asked indicating the third piece of paper. Jack nodded.

Sean opened the third piece of paper. It provided the simple details of Edmund Duff being kidnapped outside Quaglinio's in Saint James London and the details of his close protection officer, an ex-Royal Marine, being shot in the neck at a nearby car park.

Sean placed the paper on the table before taking a sip of wine. 'Intriguing, but this bloke is a British FCO diplomat. Why him? Extortion? Bribery? Or what?'

'A noble question and one I can't answer. Other than we need to investigate his disappearance in detail to see if there are any links. This case could be a high-level trigger for other major plays. I've no idea. What I do know from some cursory research is that he was heavily connected to some key

American players - Neo Cons. The type that want to take Iran down, not just by subterfuge, but direct military action. They don't care and they're an impatient lot.'

'What about this ex-CIA chief he was dining with? Anything on him?'

Not sure at the moment. Fletcher Barrington is a former CIA station chief now working in the Pentagon. A neo-con that's for sure, but we need to look at all of Duff's acquaintances in detail. See where it leads.'

'What's the focus Jack?'

'Slow time, and long burn, get Melissa onto Duff and his associates including Barrington. She can do that remotely and I don't have enough investigators right now. But for you, the focus is Nadège.'

Sean picked up the piece of paper related to Nadège which provided a snapshot of intelligence on her background, her role, and her most recent whereabouts - Istanbul.

-End of Extract-

