

Canuck

Book 1

“The babysitting routine”

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The babysitting routine

1

Martin Colette eased back in his chair, taking a break from his computer screen, a glance at his secretary as she busied herself behind her own computer.

After twelve years with the service, Colette was now the Operations Manager for Department P2 within SIS – Britain’s overseas intelligence agency, formerly known as MI6. P2, responsible for the Club-Med countries of Europe, was a low priority department that had always been at the bottom of the pile of interesting departments to work for. It wasn’t as bad as Research, but it wasn’t far off.

At the end of the Cold War the Russian Section – where the career people traditionally worked on interesting cases – had lost direction for a while. But, thanks to the rise of al-Qa’eda, the Russian Section’s best and brightest had something new to get into, and many switched to the Middle East section. Those who had learnt Russian and German were hurriedly retrained and those who spoke Arabic suddenly found themselves much needed – and in high regard.

Colette spoke French and Spanish, so would forever be assigned to P2 and the Club-Med countries. But, with the rise of al-Qa’eda and the problem of illegal immigrants from Afghanistan landing in Greece and Italy, his department had gained a little extra work, and a little extra respect around the canteen.

When his phone went, it was his boss. ‘Martin, got a minute?’

‘I’ll be right down, sir.’

Colette placed down the phone and stood. ‘Boss wants me,’ he told his secretary. ‘I’ll be in with him if you need me.’ She hadn’t even looked up from her screen.

Stepping out of his office on the fourth floor of the MOD building, central London, he headed along a bland internal corridor, fifty yards and to the last door, the small sign at eye-level declaring: "Dept. P2. Chambers, D.K." Knocking, then turning the handle, he opened the door just enough to show his face. Chambers was on the phone, finishing a call, but waved Colette in and to a seat.

Placing down the phone, Chambers said, 'Have a job for you, small job, but turning over rocks sometimes shows up a gem.' He handed over a file. 'You're familiar with Mohammad Sayeed?'

Colette's brow knitted. 'Yes, sir: Pakistani nuclear scientist who assisted the Iranians with their programme. Not our department...?'

'He has a brother, who's been to Europe before, and who's booked on a flight tomorrow to Malta, via Rome. Put a watcher on him, discreet surveillance, see if something turns up.'

Colette had already scanned the first page within the file. 'He's clean, sir, according to this.'

'Indeed, but was suspected of being a message gofer. It's probably a waste of time, but ... well, put tail on him.' Chambers face was already in a file. 'Thanks, Martin.'

Back in his office, Colette requested a courier for Malta. Thirty minutes later a lady appeared; mid forties, plump, glasses.

'This file, hand delivery tomorrow, secure hand-over to our man only,' Colette listed off. 'His mobile number is on the Post-It note so call him when you arrive there, I'll brief the agent now. Oh, have you met Canuck before? I did ask for someone who had.'

'Twice, sir. Michael J. Canuck, pronounced Can-ook. He dropped out of Oxford University after two years, he dropped out of the Guards after two years, he dropped out of Interpol after just under two years, joined us and ... dropped out after little more than two years.'

Colette eased back, regarding the courier coolly.

She continued, 'He's now a freelancer who likes to be called Mick because it makes him sound Irish and working class, when he's anything but that. Canadian diplomat father, English mother, Russian grandmother; speaks Russian, Arabic, and German fluently. And ... he holds the record for the most disciplinary hearings in a single year.'

Colette resisted a smile. 'And a good field agent, despite what people say.'

'They say he's a bit unstable, sir.'

'Unstable?' Colette took off his glasses and made a face. 'Now, how could someone who gets paid a modest fee to risk his life - or a lifetime of incarceration in a foreign hellhole - be called unstable?' He put his glasses back on and attended a file. 'Thank you. Off you go.'

* * *

'Mick, it's me,' Colette said into his mobile. 'Can you talk?'

'Sure, just sat in a café surrounded by people within earshot. But at least it's sunny.'

'Where are you?'

'Somewhere warm, in a café. How about yourself?'

'The sky is as grey as my office wall. Listen, got a job for you: it's a simple surveillance job for a week or two, courier heading to Malta tomorrow morning, Wednesday. She'll call you when she gets there. Money and details with the courier.'

'And the job's particulars?'

'Low grade tail, a clean suspect with an interesting brother. He might be a message gofer of some sort.'

'I'll pack my case, clean my teeth and shine my shoes. What's the courier like?'

'I wouldn't, so you definitely wouldn't. Call me after you get the file.'

Colette's secretary was staring across as he ended the call.

‘What?’ he asked with a shrug. ‘When dealing with ... *the boys*, you have to be ... *one of the boys*, you know ... talk in their language.’

Her expression hadn’t altered.

2

At Malta’s Luqa Airport, the courier stepped out to the busy taxi rank and into the sun, placing on her sunglasses. She dialled the number.

‘Universal Exports,’ Mick answered.

‘Ha bloody ha,’ the courier said. ‘Where are you?’

‘Get a taxi to the Hilton Hotel, St. Julian’s Bay.’

‘I know it.’

‘Don’t go in, go into the marina next door, down the steps all the way and meander around to the left till you can meander no more due to the ocean being in the way. It’s a lovely day so ... take your time.’

‘See you soon.’ She grabbed the next taxi, her bag over her shoulder, and joined the traffic heading towards St. Julian’s Bay, just a few miles southeast of the airport. Paying the driver outside the Hilton Hotel, she walked away from the hotel, its reception at the end of a cul-de-sac, and found the steps leading down to the marina on the left.

‘Very nice,’ she said as she stepped down to the first landing, glancing at the upmarket open-air restaurants positioned either side of the steps, the establishments currently closed, the marina seemingly devoid of tourists at the moment. She checked menus posted to a board. ‘And suitably expensive.’

She negotiated steep concrete steps till she drew level with the pontoons and boats, stood in a small half-circle marina dominated by a cliff-like arrangement of apartments behind her, the apartments blocking the sun in this part of the marina. She scanned the beautiful, yet oddly quiet marina, the boats all

similar white cruisers with blue cloth covers. They varied in size, but hardly varied in design as they bobbed gently.

Turning left, she noted the closed offices of a marine engineering company that had seen better days, the Hilton Hotel now above her head. A wooden bridge presented itself, a way for pedestrians to cross a small offshoot of the marina that didn't seem to go anywhere. Walking over, she stepped into the sun and warmed immediately, following the path around to the left.

She emerged onto a square dock that had obviously been a functional part of the local port at some point in history, now full of boats awaiting some attention from their rich and absent owners. The marina was currently devoid of people, leaving her wondering if this was the right place.

A pleasant hundred-yard stroll took her past a scuba diving centre, the centre now closed, and brought her to the far side of the marina. She was now facing the way she had come, suddenly realising that it would have been impossible for anyone to follow her, and that that was probably the reason for her being here. The gentle roar of the ocean called to her from the other side of a breakwater, but she couldn't see over it, a little sea spray registering on her cheeks. Her phone trilled.

'Yes?'

'Enjoying the stroll?'

'It's lovely here, so you take your time.'

'I figured you could use a walk after the flight. Double back, up the stairs, cross the road and down, straight ahead and up the hill into Paceville, find a restaurant and have a cold drink. I'll be ten minutes.' The line went dead.

The courier slowly retraced her steps, ambling back around the dock in no particular hurry and staring down into the clear and inviting turquoise water. Back at the top of the steps she crossed the cul-de-sac, the Hilton's entrance on the right, noticing now steps leading down to a road running almost parallel, the other side of a tall tower. Reaching that road, she

headed up the hill at a gentle pace till the shops and cafes began, choosing one with a large green awning.

‘Hello,’ the waitress offered.

‘Large orange juice, please, with ice. Oh, and do you have a sandwich?’

‘Cheese, tuna –’

‘Tuna. Thanks.’

With the drink and sandwich placed down she tucked in, watching the street and trying to remember what Canuck looked like. Six foot, athletic build, collar length medium brown hair, and not bad looking.

He suddenly pulled out a chair and sat beside her, placing down a half drunk beer. She glanced over her shoulder, Canuck having come from inside the café, her contact now wearing a baseball cap and sunglasses.

‘Nice day for it,’ he offered.

‘How did you know I’d choose this café?’

‘It’s the first suitable café up that road. So, you have something for me?’

She opened her bag on her lap. ‘One thousand five hundred Euros. Count and sign, please.’

Under the table, Mick flicked a thumb across the wad of Euros, placing it in a shoulder bag of his own. The courier presented a yellow pad, Mick signing and dating, stating the amount in words underneath. Next came a thin file, handed over without inspection and also placed into his bag, a second page of the pad signed and dated.

‘All done?’ he asked.

‘All done - *Mick*,’ she confirmed, a glint in her eye.

‘It’s been a pleasure,’ he said with a grin. Scraping back his chair, he stood and entered the café. Unknown to the courier, he exited via a door in the toilets. She slowly finished her drink and sandwich, but he didn’t reappear.

* * *

Twenty minutes later, Mick stepped into a quiet back-street bar in St. Paul's Bay, populated now by just two old men sat drinking. He tossed a set of car keys to the barman, a stocky white-haired man in his sixties with a ruddy complexion.

'My car still in one piece?' the barman asked.

'Jim, that car is worth more as scrap. Pour a damn beer.'

'Did you ... get the job?'

'Yep,' Mick said as he sat in the corner and opened his shoulder bag.

The pint of beer was brought over, placed down as Jim sat. 'Any ... work for me?' Jim risked.

'This job is a babysitting routine, mate; the guy's clean, but his in-laws are dirty.'

'Hah! If the family is dirty, he's dirty,' Jim countered. 'Didn't I teach you anything?'

Mick sipped his beer. Placing down the glass, he said, 'The guy arrives on the three o'clock flight from Rome.' He checked his watch. 'Fancy closing up early?'

Jim took in the two old men near the door. 'This time of year the place is dead.' Loudly, he called, 'Time gentlemen, please!'

The pensioners glanced around, checking watches and wall clocks, before attempting to finish their drinks quickly in numerous small sips.

'Am I ... getting paid for this taxi service?' Jim nudged.

Mick handed over a crisp fifty Euro note. 'How do you manage to survive here anyway?'

'It's all paid for – no mortgage, the bills are low, and the summer is good enough to make up for the quiet winters. I go fishing a lot.'

'How long now since ... you know?'

Jim turned away, watching his two customers shuffle out, alone with his thoughts for a moment. 'She'll be gone five years in May.'

'Your kids?'

‘Paul was out here with his wife and the grandkids a few months back – first time in three years, and Susan’s ... she’s not one for flying. I have to go to her.’

Mick took in the run-down Irish theme bar, a bar that could be found in a thousand locations around the Med, run by a thousand retired Brits. ‘Is all of your retirement money tied up in this dump?’

Jim made a face. ‘Selling it now would lose money, but I might move on. The summer is a killer, being open from eleven in the morning till gone one at night. And I can’t afford the staff.’

Mick flicked through the notes on Sayeed. ‘I always fancied my own bar, but – you know – somewhere with a bit of a buzz, girls in bikinis.’

‘Yeah, well I’m a bit beyond all that.’ Jim gestured towards the file. ‘Anything interesting?’

‘Fifty-two year old Pakistani on a tour of Europe.’

‘Just wait outside the brothels for him,’ Jim scoffed.

‘He’ll have a hard time finding one of those around here,’ Mick pointed out as he flicked through pages. ‘You have lap dancers that aren’t allowed to be naked, and a street of curb crawlers that would turn the stomach of hardened sailors with one eye - after a long voyage. And drunk!’

‘Should see the hotels in winter, especially Christmas. An ambulance turns up each day to take a pensioner away. More fly home in coffins than on the damn planes.’

Mick took in the empty bar before facing his old mentor in SIS. Jim’s forehead was pink and sunburnt, his hair thin, his eyebrows a wild mess of white hair, his cheeks reddened, his Adam’s Apple covered in white hair, more white hair again escaping the top of his shirt. He took a moment. ‘I’ll give you a couple days work *if* ... there’s work to be had. I can’t say more than that.’

‘Appreciate it, Mick. The last divorce case we did helped.’

Mick sighed. ‘Yeah, could do with a few more like that.’

‘Do they ... give you enough work?’ Jim delicately broached.

‘All or nothing; flat out busy for a month, three thousand Euros a month plus costs, then nothing for a month. But ... I have other paymasters.’

‘Be careful, Mick. Do they ... know?’

‘They think I do divorce work, which ... technically ... is true. Divorce, counter-espionage, it’s all the same – people trying catch the other side out.’

‘You ... got some money tucked away for a rainy day?’

Mick pursed his lips and nodded, returning to the file.

On the job

1

The 3pm flight from Rome touched down five minutes early. Mick stood just inside the main doors of the small airport, holding up an A4 sign saying 'WILSON'; bold black letters on a white background. Opposite him stood a local taxi driver with a sign saying 'HOFFMAN.' Mick wore a baseball cap and sunglasses as before, and now leant on a stainless steel railing awaiting the mark, secure in the knowledge that no one would pay him any attention at all.

Twenty minutes later Sayeed walked past, a quick glance at the name signs. Mick straightened, took out his mobile and dialled the last number, cutting the call after two seconds and quickly pocketing the phone. He rolled up the sign as he stepped out, turning the baseball cap around. Jim pulled up in a dusty and beaten-up old white Fiat Punto, being tooted at since he was not a taxi.

Mick jumped into the back. 'Follow that taxi,' he theatrically announced, pointing forwards. 'But I got its number in case you frigging lose him, *old man*.'

Jim accelerated, soon positioning himself to be one car behind the taxi, Mick hiding behind Jim's head and shoulders, but focused on Sayeed. Jim said, 'Looks like he's heading for St. Julian's Bay, Mick. Is this guy a big spender?'

'Apparently not.'

Mick opened a knapsack on the back seat. Taking off his cap, he gelled his hair back with a colouring gel, combing it straight as they sped along. Wiping his hands in a cloth, he placed on clear glasses. Hanging off the front passenger seat was a white cotton jacket that needed ironing. Mick grabbed it, struggling to get it on in the back seat, taking out a German passport and placing it into his shirt's breast pocket.

‘The mark is definitely heading to St. Julian’s,’ Jim said from up front as they left a dual carriageway and joined the traffic.

‘Are they ever going to fix these fucking roads?’ Mick complained as they crawled along dusty potholed streets.

‘I’ve been coming here thirty years, and trust me – this *is* better.’

‘If it looks like it is the Hilton, then drop me in the next street - by the steps, don’t pull up next to him in this.’

‘What, don’t you think this’ll pass for a new Mercedes taxi?’ Jim protested.

Five minutes later, Jim said, ‘It *is* the Hilton!’ He screeched to a halt at the base of the steps, the steps that the courier had ambled down earlier.

Mick jumped out, grabbing an abnormally light suitcase from the boot and rushing up the steps, the suitcase light due to its limited contents. At the top of the steps he extended the suitcase handle and walked calmly along the cul-de-sac, Sayeed now having his own case placed down by his taxi driver.

In reception, Mick drew alongside Sayeed. ‘Speak ... Deutsche?’ he asked the lady receptionist. She called over a man in his late forties.

‘Kann ich ihnen helfen?’

In German, Mick said, ‘I haven’t made a reservation, I’m off a boat. Do you have a room, please?’

‘A single room, sir?’

‘Please.’

Sayeed filled in his booking card, a glance at the tall and well-built German next to him.

‘Room 310, sir,’ the receptionist informed Sayeed. ‘Up two floors.’ She placed his key card in a small cardboard wallet and handed it over with a second page of detail. ‘Meal times, sir. Three days with breakfast, restaurant is downstairs, sauna and spa two floors down.’

‘Thank you,’ Sayeed offered. He turned to grab his case, but took a long ten seconds to scan the street through the glass

doors, that action now noticed by Mick. Walking off dragging his suitcase, Sayeed carefully studied guests sat in the foyer before turning towards the lifts.

‘Your key, sir,’ brought Mick back to the man attending him. The receptionist swiped Mick’s Santander Bank credit card, handing it back as he typed into a computer. ‘Room 317. Three days, bed and breakfast.’

‘Danke.’

Mick caught the next lift car after Sayeed, carefully watching the floor that the mark had gone to, the sixth floor according to the display. The hotel’s reception sat at street level, but was actually on the third floor due to the hill that the hotel was built into. Exiting the lift, Mick could see Sayeed enter a room, the suitcase dragged. Hunting for his own room, he found it almost opposite Sayeed’s, a little closer to the lift.

Inside the room, he called Jim. ‘You still there?’

‘Round the corner. How’d it go?’

‘Fine, but the mark is nervous.’

‘Told you he was dirty.’

‘You’re on a retainer till tomorrow midnight, usual rates. Park up, go sit in the main square with a paper and look for a Pakistani in a smart suit, short black hair, about five ten tall, bit of a pot belly. Call me if I miss him.’

‘I’m on it.’

Mick selected a number. ‘Colette, it’s Mick.’

‘Got him?’

‘I’m in the room opposite his at the Hilton.’

‘Expensive?’

‘Single room is a hundred and ten Euros a night with breakfast; it’s low season. Anyway, our boy is nervous.’

‘Yes?’

‘Either he’s not as clean as we think, or he thinks we’ll follow him because of his brother. But if he thinks we’ll follow him anyway - then why does he care, and why’s he checking over his shoulder?’

‘Given who his brother is he’s bound to be a bit paranoid. Got to go.’ Colette hung up.

Mick heard a door slam and rushed to his own door, his palms flat, his eye flush against the peephole. Sayeed. Mick lifted his mobile and selected the last number called. ‘Jim, he’s moving,’ he whispered. ‘Cover the end of the cul-de-sac, I’ll be three minutes behind.’

Mick tore off his jacket and threw it onto the bed. Opening his case he pulled out a blue shirt, placing it over his white short-sleeved shirt, fastening just three buttons. Grabbing a blue baseball cap and his sunglasses, he tapped his pockets before finally opening the door.

Sayeed was not visible in the foyer, but Mick did not wish to be seen to be looking around the plush seated area below reception. He stepped outside and into the bright afternoon sun, Sayeed visible at the top of the steps, but seemingly halting. Mick knelt next to a green and yellow Mercedes taxi, the driver winding down the powered window.

‘Sorry, my English ... not good,’ Mick said. ‘To go to the Gozzo Island, it is ... aeroplane?’

‘No, no. Taxi or bus to ferry, and boat.’

‘Ah, boat, yes.’ Sayeed disappeared from view. ‘Thank you.’

Straightening, Mick walked around the cul-de-sac and across the entrance of the tall tower, soon stood observing Sayeed from above, and now being shaded by a large bush in a concrete base. Sayeed stopped to ask directions, crossed the road and asked a second time, soon heading left and towards the main square.

Mick raised his mobile. ‘Coming your way, light grey jacket. Give me his direction, then get the car, we’ll swap.’

‘Moving.’

Mick walked casually down the steps, a deliberately slow pace. Not following Sayeed’s path, he walked one block over and turned left, crossing over and closing in on the square. Sayeed eventually came into view, no sign of Jim yet.

Mick's phone trilled a minute later. 'He's heading down the coast road,' Jim said.

'I'll take him. Get the car and wait over the other side of the bay.'

Darting through the traffic, Mick jogged across to the busy main square, populated with bored taxi drivers sat waiting some trade, and slowed right down, ambling along in the late afternoon sun, pigeons moving aside. Sayeed's jacket stood out amongst the tourists, but his direction was being fixed for him by the layout of the bay.

Ducking into a café to read their menu, Mick could see that Sayeed would soon be on an exposed stretch of busy road, the harbour on one side and hard for a tail not to be spotted. He lifted his phone. 'Double back, pick me up.'

'Give me a minute.'

Mick crossed the road, flagging Jim down thirty seconds later, Jim being tooted at by angry Maltese drivers. 'Drive up and around, plenty of time, and back to where you were.'

Jim turned in the square, being tooted at again, and sped down the hill and onto the bay road, turning left up a hill and a sharp right at the top. Noticing a vacant parking place, Jim ducked in and screeched to a halt. He pointed to the road ahead. 'Down this road, it's easy to follow someone in a car.'

'Yep,' Mick agreed, adjusting the car's mirrors.

Ten minutes later, Jim said. 'Here he comes.'

'Pull forward to the next curve in the road.'

They moved a hundred yards along the road and found a vacant parking place.

'Still coming,' Jim confirmed.

They waited.

'He's crossed over,' Jim noted. 'Obviously not wanting to take in the nice sea view like a normal tourist.'

Mick swivelled around, an arm on the seat back. 'Fuck, he's just gone into that hotel! What hotel is that?'

Jim craned his neck around. 'That's ... the Metropole.'

'Quick, go book in, make up a story. Got a passport?'

‘What the hell would I carry it for? I live here!’

‘ID of some sort?’ Mick pressed.

‘Yeah.’

‘Go tell them you’re a resident, but have relatives in your flat, or a burst pipe. Book two days!’

Jim eased out and crossed the road.

After five minutes of observing the hotel in the car’s mirrors, and pedestrians out strolling, Mick stepped out and stretched, partly hidden from a direct line of sight of the hotel’s front by numerous small concession stands. Turning, he walked to the nearest of the stands. A couple were stood at the stand, but did not seem to be being served.

‘Got a large bottle of water, love?’ Mick asked the lady inside. He grabbed two chocolate bars. She handed over the water bottle, Mick paying four Euros.

‘He’s inside the hotel. Do we go in?’ came a whisper, uttered by the woman to Mick’s side. But in Russian.

Mick turned away and carried his purchases back towards the car, every step taken in slow motion, his eyes everywhere. He immediately noticed two suspicious men sat in a white hire car. Beyond them, he noticed a moped rider in black leathers, stopped and facing the hotel. Finally he noticed two local police officers strolling towards Jim’s car.

Mick tossed the chocolates onto the back seat, cracking open the bottle’s top. Pouring water on the windscreen, some on the rear window, he knew that he was in plain view of the two men in the car, as well as the Russian couple. He sipped some of the water, noting that the police officers were getting close.

Placing the bottle in the back of the car, he turned to face the officers. ‘Sorry to trouble you. I live here – retired from Interpol, but I was trying to get a license for a boat mooring - not in the marina, but a small fishing boat.’

‘You mean, the red ball on the water, like that?’ the first officer asked with an accent.

‘Yes, like that, for a little fishing boat.’

‘Officially, they don’t make new ones, you have to buy it from an existing owner, and then pay to have it recognised. Thirty Euro. But many people make their own if it’s a quiet area.’

‘So ... I have to find someone with one first, because I haven’t seen them advertised.’

‘You won’t, they are always kept and passed down – the good ones.’

‘You said you were Interpol?’ the second officer asked, the older of the two men.

‘Yes, Berlin, nine years. I had enough and came down here.’

‘I worked in Interpol, Brussels, for a two year exchange.’

‘Oh, excellent,’ Mick said with a smile. He pulled out his wallet and showed the man a photograph taken at Interpol Headquarters, a group of graduates posing.’

‘You did the course?’

‘Yeah, that was interesting enough. But chasing Russians smuggling BMWs to the east was boring. I came down here a lot for scuba diving, I’m an instructor -’

‘You know the Paradise Bay dive centre?’

‘Up by the ferry, yes. Dived off the wall on the left many times, out to the wreck, especially at night.’

‘Next month I do my Divemaster exam there.’

‘Studying hard?’

‘When I can.’

‘Say, tell me, what is it with Maltese airline pilots? Are they all women?’

The officers smiled widely. ‘We have many lady pilots, but don’t go upsetting them. As the aircraft captain they can remove you.’

Mick laughed, taking back the photograph. ‘I dive up at the ferry often; if I see you I’ll buy you a beer afterwards. Thanks for the advice on the moorings.’ He extended a hand and shook with both officers, waving them off, all smiles, before sitting in the car, certain now that the officers appeared more as friends to a local resident than anything else.

Jim appeared a few minutes later. Mick jumped out. 'What the hell was that?' Mick barked.

Jim stopped dead. 'What?'

'You were only supposed to look at the vending machine, not stop for a sleep.'

'Ah...'

Jim let out. He opened the car door. 'Do it your fucking self next time,' he shouted before getting in, Mick easing back into the car. 'We got company?'

'There are more watchers on this street than you could poke a stick at.'

Jim pulled away.

'Did he meet someone in there?' Mick asked.

'No, he booked in.'

'He booked in?'

'Yep. Room 127, sea view, thirty-five Euros a night.'

'Do you smell that, Jim?' Mick asked, staring out at the ocean.

'I smell a giant rat,' Jim said. 'There was a dodgy looking guy sat in reception and eyeing Sayeed. And did you see the moped?'

'I did.' Mick dialled Colette as they drove. 'Got a minute, boss?'

'Shoot.'

'You want to tell me what the fuck's going on?' Mick loudly asked.

'Meaning?'

'Meaning ... that Malta is hosting a spy convention, guest of honour and chief mark being Sayeed.'

'He has a tail?' Colette puzzled.

'We've been on him less than an hour, and we've counted five fucking tails! Not only that, he's booked himself into two separate hotels.'

'I'll call you back in ten.'

Colette knocked on Chambers' door. Poking his head in, Chambers peered over the rims of his glasses.

‘Come in.’

Colette stepped in and closed the door. ‘Slight ... hiccup, sir, with Sayeed.’ He sat.

‘Did he arrive?’

‘Yes, and our man followed him to the Hilton Hotel. But then our man noticed that Sayeed was twitchy.’

‘Twitchy?’

‘Looking over his shoulder ... twitchy.’

‘So, he may be a gofer,’ Chambers realised.

Colette’s expression suggested trouble.

‘Something?’ Chambers asked.

‘First, Sayeed booked himself into two separate hotels, and second ... there are half a dozen different tails on him.’

‘Ah...’ Chambers took his glasses off and eased back, deep in thought for a moment, his chest rising and falling. ‘I *do not* ... wish us to be stepping on anyone’s toes – we don’t need an incident. Tell your man he has twenty-four hours. Then, if he can’t tail him without rubbing shoulders, I want him pulled off. Follow Sayeed in the computer.’

‘And if Sayeed is up to something?’

‘Then he won’t get very far with his plans, not with that many bedfellows.’

‘I checked the computer again, spoke to the French and Italians. No one’s interested in Sayeed, no one has an active file, Interpol has no interest – and the Maltese obviously don’t care.’

Chambers made a face. ‘Any clues as to who the other teams belonged to?’

‘If I may, sir.’ Colette dialled Mick. ‘It’s me. Any nationality on the other teams?’

‘Russian.’

‘Thanks.’ He hung up, carefully pronouncing, ‘Russians.’

‘Russians? Tailing Sayeed on our turf? Oh, no, no, no ... that is *most definitely* not allowed. Tell your man to track the Russians; put some extra bodies on it. If the Russians are interested in Sayeed then I’m damn well interested as well.’

Mick answered his phone to Colette as Jim drove around in circles through the town. ‘Mick, we’re very interested in the Russians, and what they’re after.’

‘No problem. I’ve got old Jim with me, you remember Jim Turvil?’

‘Yes, I forgot he retired to Malta.’

‘Can we find him a week’s pay as a driver?’

‘Yes, definitely. And try and identify the other parties for me.’

‘Will do, boss.’ Mick hung up and faced Jim. ‘You got a week’s work.’

‘Excellent.’

‘Head back around, we’ll sniff out the Russians.’

They spotted Sayeed walking back around the bay, and possibly back to the Hilton. Behind him the couple strolled hand in hand.

‘That’s them,’ Mick said, glancing over his shoulder as they drove past. ‘Park near the square, I’ll jump out. When the happy couple wander past, nudge them from behind.’

‘Nudge them?’

‘Enough to shake them up; I’ll be the helpful bystander.’

‘I could do without trouble from the local police,’ Jim firmly requested. ‘I have to live here!’

‘Just a nudge. Besides, they won’t want anything to do with the local police; they’re probably on fake passports. Relax, I’ve never steered you wrong.’

Jim shot Mick a look of clenched teeth and curled lips.

‘OK, OK, just a gentle nudge for the happy couple,’ Mick nudged.

Mick ran to the road as the thud of two pedestrians impacting a car registered with bystanders, the bored taxi drivers stepping forwards at the chance of some excitement. Jim had hit the

couple from behind – harder than he had meant to, and now stepped out, loudly proclaiming his apologies.

‘I saw it, they just stepped out,’ Mick stated as he knelt. ‘Are you OK?’

The man was dazed, the woman clutching her elbow.

‘Are you OK?’ Mick loudly asked as he relieved the man of his wallet, tossing it under the car and next to a wheel. He lifted the man up and handed him to Jim, who then helped the injured man to lean against the car as Mick tended the lady, a crowd starting to gather. ‘To the bench,’ Mick told Jim, and assisted the lady towards the seats vacated by the taxi drivers.

Easing the lady down, Mick allowed a Maltese woman to assist, soon finding a police motorbike in front of Jim’s car. Mick approached the officer as the man took off his gloves and helmet. ‘I saw it all; they just stepped out and were hit from behind by this car. They don’t seem hurt, just a bit bruised.’

With the officer approaching the injured party, Mick retrieved the wallet, pretending to look for damage to the car, everyone now focused on the couple. Back at the edge of the crowd, he could now see two officers on foot approaching, the same two officers Mick had spoken to outside the Metropole.

‘Shit,’ Mick whispered, turning and circling away from the officers. With his head low he walked off, jumping into the first taxi on the rank. ‘Silema, please.’

In Silema shopping centre, Mick paid the driver, walked through the bustling shopping streets, ducked around the corner and flagged down a second taxi, soon back at the Hilton and in his room. Sitting on the bed, he opened the wallet.

‘Oleg Djubornov, a ... Ukrainian from ... Kiev. No you’re not my friend, not with that accent.’

The wallet gave up two hundred US Dollars, fifty Euros, a train ticket stub from Kiev to Odessa, a Ukrainian driving license, and a folded piece of paper. Mick opened it and read the Cyrillic script letters: Sayeed, Malta, Hotel Metropole.

‘Well that’s naughty, Oleg, because I wasn’t told what hotel he’d be staying at. So how come you knew the hotel, my friend. And you got a nice lady assistant to work with.’

Mick’s phone chirped. ‘Yeah?’

‘Where the hell did you get to?’ Jim loudly asked.

‘Two local police officers I spoke to earlier approached, I had to be gone. What happened?’

‘The police took our details, but the Russians didn’t want to make a complaint. They stormed off. The Russians I mean.’

‘I got the guy’s wallet. Listen, grab a quick bite to eat, stock up the car with food and drink and meet me behind the Metropole in an hour. And don’t forget, you’re being paid, so be punctual.’ Mick could hear cursing as he hung up.

* * *

Colette answered his mobile with ‘Hello?’

‘It’s Mick. Got a paper and pen?’

‘Fire away.’

Mick read out the driver’s license details. ‘Have a nose on the computer, I think they’re Russians posing as Ukrainians.’

‘And you got this information...?’

‘The guy dropped his wallet. But I will return it.’

‘Sayeed?’

‘Back here for now.’

‘Good work on the Russians – and quick work. I’ll call you back.’

* * *

With a sandwich ordered from room service, an expensive sandwich at twelve Euros, Mick sat on a chair next to the door. Several door slams signalled false starts, regular hotel guests glimpsed walking past, their images distorted by the fish-eye lens of the door’s spy hole. Finally, Sayeed was moving.

Mick checked his watch. 7pm. ‘Evening meal, but not in the hotel.’

Listening intently, he opened the door a crack and waited for the ‘ping’ of the lift. With the lift door closed, Mick stepped out, grey jacket, clear glasses, dark trousers, fake goatee beard in pocket. It would not hold up to scrutiny, but from across the road it served its purpose, especially at night.

He dialled Jim as he approached the lift. ‘He’s on his way, so drive over to the square. Oh, and Jim – drive carefully, eh.’

Sayed wasn’t visible in the foyer, but the Russian couple were sat in the plush area below reception. And – oddly enough, from where they sat they would have had little chance of seeing Sayeed leave. Through the hotel’s automatic glass doors, Sayeed could be seen heading for the steps.

Stepping out, and lifting his welcome note as he walked, Mick dialled the number of the Hilton. ‘Ah, I wonder if you can help me. Could you page Oleg Djubornov for me, he should be waiting in reception. That’s Oleg Djubornov. Thanks.’

Stood next to the tower, Mick could see Sayeed heading up the hill towards Paceville. He moved slowly towards the steps with the phone still to his ear. ‘No response? Try his business: Oleg from the SVR. Thanks,’ Mick said as he negotiated the steps. Smiling widely, he hung up and dialled Jim. ‘Jim, he’s heading up into Paceville. Park up and see if you can pick him up at the start of the bars.’

‘On it.’

* * *

‘He’s just sat there stuffing his face, his back to the crowd,’ Jim noted an hour later. ‘Anyone could just walk by and stab him. In that crowd, no one would notice!’

‘He does seem to be ... a bit obvious,’ Mick commented, sat with a beer in hand. ‘And he must have seen the tails earlier.’ He moved his chair in as people squeezed past and to the next

table, the bar they were in busy, the pedestrian thoroughfare outside bustling.

Jim tipped his head to the left. ‘Aye, aye.’

Mick could see the Russian couple taking a table at a bar, the opposite side of the busy thoroughfare to Sayeed, and the next bar down to his own. The steps between the bars were packed, mostly with locals, the music from several bars competing to be heard.

‘I haven’t been up here for ages,’ Jim noted.

‘It is a bit loud,’ Mick agreed, taking out his phone. Squinting towards the sign on the next bar, Mick carefully entered the establishment’s number into his phone and checked it. He pressed the green button and put a finger in his other ear.

‘Hello, er ... I wonder if you can help me. I was due to meet my friends in your bar. Can you look for a man and woman, Russian, about thirty, the man wearing a blue shirt and blue jeans, the woman in a red top. His name is Oleg. Can you tell him its Mister Putin. Thanks.’

‘What the hell are you doing?’ Jim whispered.

Mick leant forwards, across the table. ‘They were in the Hilton foyer earlier, so I paged them using his real name – from the wallet. A professional would have left the country by now; this guy don’t know when to quit.’

They both turned, observing as a waitress approached the Russian couple, Mick hitting the red button and hanging up as the waitress asked the Russians if they were the couple in question. Heads shaking, Oleg and his companion got up and walked off.

Jim laughed, shaking his own head as Mick put his phone away. Two tall men, dressed all in black, squeezed past and took the next table, a corner table with a clear view of Sayeed.

Mick suddenly adopted a louder voice, and a crude tone. ‘So what’s ‘em lap dance bars like, you reckon they’re any good? Are they as good as Spain?’

Jim had been squinting back, but quickly got into character. 'Guy in my hotel says that the girls here - they don't take their clothes off.'

'They don't take their clothes off?' Mick repeated.

'No,' Jim confirmed. 'They have clothes on, and they strip down to a bikini and ... and that's it. And they can't dance in front of you or touch!'

'How's that lap dancing?' Mick asked.

The first of the two men had been listening, and now turned towards Mick and Jim. In an accented voice, he said, 'Sorry. You say here ... lap dance with clothes?'

Jim nodded. 'Really strange it is, but cheap – like ten Euros.'

'Ten Euros. But ... you can do nothing?'

The second man turned inward, but in sight of Sayeed.

'Nothing,' Jim confirmed. 'But there is a street ... you know, of ladies. But apparently they are ... you know, not worth going to.'

'It's not like Europe,' the first man noted, Mick considering the man's accent as possibly Czech.

'You down here for a drinking holiday?' Mick asked.

'Drinking ... holiday? Ah, no. Diving.'

'Diving, underwater diving?' Mick asked, the man nodding. 'You wouldn't see me with that equipment on. Swimming in the sea, fine, but under ... nah.'

'You are ... drink holiday?'

Mick nodded. 'It's cheap, very cheap down here in the winter. Only old people you see.'

The men nodded. 'Let us get you a drink.'

'Never say no, very kind of you. Where you from?'

They exchanged a quick look. 'Germany.'

'You Germans are all big strong lads,' Jim said, tapping the nearest man's broad shoulders.

Three beers later, everyone was merry, the two "Germans" quite relaxed, but secure in their position observing Sayeed, Mick and Jim coming across as stupid British drunks on

holiday. When Sayeed finally decided he'd had enough of the loud music, the two "Germans" stood.

'Off now?' Mick asked.

'Yah, our woman ... in hotel.'

'Well good luck with the ... you know, diving stuff.' They were waved off.

Jim eased closer. 'Christ, Mick; there're more people watching our mark than there are in this bar. And I'm sure I saw a pistol grip.'

Mick's features changed. 'You sure?'

Jim nodded, a stern expression offered.

Mick stood. 'C'mon then, let's spoil their fucking night.'

At the top of the busy thoroughfare, Mick caught sight of the two "Germans", easy enough to spot the men since they were tall, well built and dressed in black. Quickening his pace, he closed in to within ten yards of the men, the crowds thickening, the pedestrians being weaved around. Where the steps met the road, two police officers in blue stood next to a patrol car. Mick rushed over.

'Officer, these two men, big German men in black,' Mick said pointing. 'We saw a gun in their belt, a pistol.'

The police in the car were soon out, one officer on his radio, the first two officers weaving through the crowds. Jim caught up with Mick, now taken by the arm and down a side street. They stopped on a corner and looked back, the police pointing guns at the "Germans".

'Go take a closer look,' Mick said. 'Not too close!'

Five minutes later, Jim returned. 'Pistols,' he carefully mouthed, not looking happy.

Mick took a moment, staring at his old friend. 'Let's circle around to the car.' He dialled Colette as they walked along quiet and dark side streets, the air full of the sound of sirens.

'Mick?' Colette asked.

'Yeah, got a problem.'

'What's happened?'

‘We just spotted two goons following Sayeed, muscle bound idiots that sounded like they were Czech. And Colette, they were armed.’

‘Armed?’

‘We just tipped off the police, who grabbed them, pistols recovered. Mister Colette ... you know better than anyone how difficult it is to get weapons onto the island. These two idiots were not very good, but their paymaster is not half bad.’

‘That Ukrainian drivers license is fake.’

‘No shit. Mister Colette, is there something we should know?’

‘You already know more than I do.’

‘That’s not very inspiring, boss. Listen, we’re unarmed and tailing someone with no record – supposedly; you said nothing about a shooting war.’

‘I’ll get the details of the men who were arrested in the morning. In the meantime, pull back.’ He ended the call.

‘We’ve been ordered to ease off,’ Mick commented as they neared the car, left by Jim in a quiet side street.

‘Do we still get paid for the week?’ Jim queried.

Mick shrugged. ‘You OK to drive?’

Jim nodded. ‘I had Shandy.’

At the first junction, Mick said, ‘Fuck it. You need the money, and I can take these amateurs.’ He faced Jim and waited.

‘Well, if you think we’ll get paid...’

‘You want to quit?’

Jim took a moment. ‘No.’

Mick faced the empty junction, and the quiet street beyond. ‘We carry on then.’

Jim pointed. ‘Is that Sayeed?’

Mick peered through the window. ‘Yep. Taking a very slow and roundabout way back to the Hilton.’

‘Don’t look left,’ Jim said. ‘Scooter. It’s the same guy.’

‘Don’t pull off yet.’

Jim checked his mirror. ‘Nothing behind us.’

The scooter pulled forwards and turned, obviously watching Sayeed.

‘Now, does that guy work with the Russians, or the other two?’ Mick thought out loud. ‘Jim, how’s your driving?’

Jim sighed. ‘Not very good, not today.’

‘So it can’t get any worse then. Go.’

They glanced left and right before pulling off the empty junction, taking the corner on the wrong side and swiping the scooter side on and into the back of a van with a thud. Jim hit the brakes, Mick’s door open before the car had stopped. Running around the van, the street dark and quiet, Mick found the rider sat on the road. A powerful kick to the front of the helmet knocked the rider backwards.

Mick placed the man’s foot on the curb, stamping down with all his weight and strength, a muffled cry coming from within the black helmet. Mick tore at the man’s trousers, finding a wallet. Back in the car, Mick said, ‘Go!’

Jim pulled off with a screech, reaching a brightly lit main junction at the end of the road.

‘Metropole,’ Mick said as he opened the wallet, Jim turning right at the junction. ‘Ah, bollocks.’

‘What?’

‘Interpol. Special Investigations Division.’

‘Interpol? We knocked down an Interpol officer? Jesus, Mick.’

‘Relax, the guy didn’t see our car. He felt it, but he didn’t see it.’ He wound down his window as they crossed the bay, throwing the wallet out hard and into the water. Winding the window up, Mick said, ‘Here, four hundred Euros for you - he won’t be needing it. He won’t be doing any figure skating for a while either.’

‘Jesus, Mick.’

‘Look, if these shits are all over Sayeed we don’t get the job. And tomorrow morning I want to report to Colette that the teams have gone.’

‘Gone? Been *done over* gone!’

They pulled up near the Metropole hotel.

‘C’mon, Jim, they were rank amateurs; look how easily we played them. This is *not* ... a high stakes game.’ They clambered out. ‘You got your room key?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I want you to zero the guy you saw earlier, and then leave him to me. OK?’

Jim reluctantly nodded as they crossed the road.

‘And tell me you don’t miss this.’

Jim tried, and failed, not to smile. ‘I must be mad.’

‘No, retiring down here to open that crappy fucking bar - that was mad!’

They reached the hotel entrance. ‘OK, stupid drunk Brits on holiday, quiet but wobbly.’

In the bar, Jim ordered them both drinks, Mick’s eyes closing, a hand on Jim’s shoulder for support; the act had begun. Drinks in hands, and crisp packets gripped by fingers, they sat, Jim deliberately sitting near the mark, a man in his fifties with a thin face and an intense stare.

Mick placed down his beer, unsteady on his feet, and plonked down. Opening the crisps, some ending up on the floor, he dunked them into his beer before eating. It elicited a disgusted look from the mark, the old ladies sat opposite not too pleased either.

‘Safer in here, ladies,’ Mick told them. ‘We were up the Paceville just now, and some guy was shot.’

‘Shot?’ the old ladies queried.

‘Aye, some Pakistani fella,’ Jim put in.

The mark looked like he had been prodded with a hot iron. ‘You say ... someone was shot?’ he asked Mick in a heavily accented voice.

Mick put an unlit cigarette on his lip.

‘It’s no smoking in here,’ the ladies pointed out.

‘I don’t smoke,’ Mick told them. ‘I just ... you know ... so I don’t smoke.’

‘The man who was shot, you saw it?’ the mark asked.

‘We walked by after; fella in the road, blood everywhere,’ Mick said, slurring his words. ‘Police said he was a Pakistani tourist. Only arrived today, poor fella.’

‘Terrible business,’ Jim commented, eating his crisps. ‘First day on holiday and all.’

The mark got up and left the bar, heading towards the hotel foyer.

Mick stood. ‘Where’s the bog, ladies?’

They shot him disapproving looks, but pointed towards the foyer. Mick stepped out.

The mark reached the second corner before a fist robbed him of further thought on the reported shooting. Mick rolled him into the gutter, shielded from the road by parked cars and from behind by a closed concession. With a wallet retrieved, Mick put the man’s foot on the curb, and for the second time inside the hour broke an ankle.

Back in the bar, Mick collected Jim. ‘C’mon, you look like you’ve had enough.’ He lifted Jim up, said goodnight to the ladies, and headed to the lift. With the lift doors closed, Mick said, ‘Make the bed in your room look slept in, muck up the bathroom, towels on the floor and a bit damp.’ Jim nodded as Mick produced the wallet. ‘The guy was Austrian.’

‘And when will he wake up?’ Jim knowingly asked.

‘Waking up won’t be the problem, figure skating will be the problem. OK ... we have Steffan G. Marzt of Vienna, aged fifty-eight, no sign of employment.’

In Jim’s room, Mick tossed three hundred Euros onto the bed. ‘You’re having a good day so far, Jim.’

Jim pulled back the covers and sheets, and hit the pillows. ‘You worry me, Mick.’

‘What’s wrong with this picture?’ Mick softly asked, a heavy frown taking hold.

‘Something?’

‘At first glance, and to anyone outside of Austria, this would seem normal. But his driving license is a year out of date, he has a voting card for the Zurich canton of Switzerland, a medic

alert card for a home address in Karlsbad, a key pass to a few Austrian slopes that would kill me - let alone that old twat. No, this has been cobbled together to make our friend appear Austrian.'

'Why?'

'Well, this wouldn't stand up to police scrutiny. It may fool the old ladies downstairs, but not someone looking hard. So, it's not there to fool the pro's.'

'Why fool others?' Jim thought out loud. 'Wouldn't achieve anything.'

'I'd say our friend here was a scam artist. You sure he was interested in Sayeed?'

'I clocked him in the reflection of the glass case down there. And you saw his reaction downstairs; he wanted to see the body!'

Mick stood, pocketing the wallet. 'Let's go. We both need some kip.'

'We're not going to do a round-the-clock job?'

'Tonight, of all nights, we don't need to attract the police by sitting in a car in the dark. Besides, I'm not sure just who's out there.' In a quieter voice, Mick added, 'Or what the fuck is going on.'

* * *

Thirty minutes later they sat in Jim's Irish bar, closed to the public, fresh beers pulled.

'It don't make sense, Jim.'

'Then there's more going on here than you were told. You trust Colette?'

'Yeah, yeah; guy's backed me up a few times.'

'Then what's really going on?'

Mick took a moment. 'Sayeed's brother is a big fish, but Sayeed himself is of no interest; he has a clean record. He flies into Rome then down here. So ... why not stay in Rome, it's lovely this time of year? But then he books into two different

hotels, the other watchers already knowing that he's booked into the Metropole, and not the Hilton.'

'No, no,' Jim said, shaking his head. 'When I booked in he had no reservation.'

'No?'

Jim adamantly shook his head. 'They never heard of him.'

'But the Russian had a note, saying that Sayeed was at the Metropole.'

'Did he ... get the note after Sayeed booked in?' Jim wondered.

'How? He was outside on the street when Sayeed booked in.'

'Maybe he wrote down the name of the hotel afterwards, to stop him forgetting it.'

'Jim, who the fuck would put a note like that in their fucking wallet? May as well wear a t-shirt that says "spy" for fuck's sake.'

'He wasn't the sharpest tool in the box though, was he?'

'Well, in fairness ... no. Neither were the two goons, or your Austria friend. The only thing that makes sense is the lone Interpol agent, keeping an eye on Sayeed; that fits perfectly. The rest of the odd bunch, they don't fit at all.'

Jim rubbed the sweat off his face.

'You OK?' Mick asked.

Jim blew out. 'Yeah.' He smiled, shaking his head. 'Bloody hell, Mick. We tailed the mark, found his bolt holes, took out the competition – and collected our petrol money!'

'Tell me you didn't love it.'

'It's not something I'd want to do every day.'

'Rubbish, you're wasted here. You were one of the best field agents they produced.'

'That was twenty years ago, and I feel like I've aged fifty!'

'Not active enough - not using your brain, that's why.'

'So, what's on the agenda for tomorrow?' Jim asked.

‘I have a feeling that we’ll be pulled off it,’ Mick reluctantly informed his old friend. ‘I’ll call Colette in the morning, then ... well, we’ll see.’

Jim took a moment. ‘What happened, Mick? What was it that gave you the short fuse?’

Mick didn’t answer.

Jim continued, ‘You could have got a first at Oxford, you pissed through officer college, and you were top dog in Interpol. Being with SIS ... this is the longest job you’ve held down.’

‘Seven years, almost,’ Mick said without looking up.

‘So what went wrong in the wiring, Mick?’

‘Who says there’s anything wrong with me?’ Mick countered with a grin.

‘You’re not exactly in a steady job,’ Jim carefully stated.

Mick sipped his beer. ‘Maybe I found my calling, and this is it.’ He took another sip. ‘I like it. And most of the time I like it a lot. I get time off to do whatever the fuck I want, I travel –’

‘You drink, you fuck prostitutes, and you live out of a suitcase...’

‘Don’t over-glamorise it too much. Besides, you told me it was a good career when I joined.’

‘It is – for the rest of them,’ Jim pointed out. ‘They sit behind computers, fill in forms, and have families. And they live to collect Civil Service pensions; we’ve not lost an officer killed in the line of duty forty years!’

‘Yeah, well ... that wasn’t enough, obviously. With all due respect, Jim, I don’t want to end up like you.’

‘I haven’t done too badly out of it. I have this place, some cash, and the pension. And if ... if she hadn’t passed then we’d be in Cyprus and ... happy.’

Mick made firm eye contact. ‘But that’s it, isn’t it: best laid plans...’

‘You can’t go through life expecting the worst.’

‘It’s my life to screw up, and so far I’ve done a very good job of screwing it up,’ Mick countered. He sighed. ‘You were

my mentor, Jim, but you've become a symbol of what might be – what I might become after twenty-two years of pension qualifying time on the job. I love you to bits, Jim, but I don't want follow in your footsteps.'

Jim took in the bar. 'When Jill went I ... I thought about ending it.' Mick looked across, Jim adding, 'It was just me, fifty-six years old, bit of money, grown family, and the big wide world. And to tell you truth ... I was terrified.'

'Why did you settle here?'

'I went to Cyprus as planned, but everything there reminded me of her; we'd been holidaying there for thirty years. I tried a little golf, and I sat on the porch a lot. If I'd stayed ... well, I would have ended it.

'When you're by yourself in an apartment ... it's always clean, nothing to do. You use just the same plate every day, sit and watch TV. No, if I'm honest, this place has kept me so busy - and so damned annoyed a lot of the time, that it's helped.'

'There's other work I could get you, Jim. But you'd have to ... get your hands dirty.'

Jim took a moment. 'Not sure I'd want to end my days in a cell somewhere, Mick.'

'When I get the safe work I think of you.'

'And I appreciate it, I do.'

Mick eased back. 'Tell me, Jim, how do I compare to the best field agents you've seen?'

'To be a good field agent you need to be comfortable doing it. And if you can enjoy it and not be afraid, then you're there. Agents need to be cheeky, and you have that in abundance. And what you did today ... Jesus. You thought on your feet, you saw the opportunities and you went for them. And paging that Russian in the hotel – that's the kind of attitude we'd like to instil in new recruits, but you can't teach that. They either have it or they don't.'

'I learnt from the best,' Mick offered.

'No, we just brought it out of you. That first survival course – you had a girl pick you up the other side of the hill, and spent

the week with her. When we found you, you were in the same clothes and stinking – but we tracked your credit card to a nice restaurant in the local town.’

Mick laughed. ‘Good days, Jim. Good days.’

‘The rest of your intake sat in the bushes for a week feeling cold and hungry, no fucking initiative at all.’

Mick finished his beer. ‘C’mon, let’s at least try and do a respectable job of it in the morning.’

Out of retirement

1

Colette stopped Chambers in the corridor, requesting a return to Chambers' office.

'Problem?' Chambers asked as he took to his desk.

Colette opened a file. 'First, Sayeed was twitchy, and then he goes and books into a second hotel. We spotted the Russians, and now others, our man lifting the Russian's wallet without being noticed.'

'Good work,' Chambers commended.

'Then our people spotted two oversized East European goons, and armed!'

'Armed? In Malta?'

Colette nodded. 'And watching Sayeed. Our people tipped off the local police, the men being picked up. Then our people ... well, they lifted the wallet of a third watcher, this guy with a fake Austrian ID.'

Colette turned a page. 'The two goons were Hungarian, and on Interpol's watch list – so no idea how they managed to board a flight to Malta. They have links to known Russian gangs, some nasty people.'

Chambers eased forwards, resting his arms on the desk. 'If they went to the trouble to get the goons into Malta, and the weapons, then the weapons were meant to be used, presumably on Sayeed. Could the Russians have thought that Sayeed was the other brother?'

Colette shrugged. 'Hard to say. But I doubt the SVR would use these goons, they're better than that. And the Russian couple? Rank amateurs, not SVR in my opinion. So there's a link between Sayeed and Russian gangs involved in weapons smuggling.'

'But are they angry at Sayeed for doing something, or for not doing something?' Chambers posed.

‘Only other possibility ... is that the goons were there to keep people off Sayeed. The amateur couple, staying close, could have been there to spot the tail, and then the goons ... well.’

‘I hope you’re wrong,’ Chambers stated. ‘Because that would mean Sayeed was meeting someone to work a deal for his brother, and that deal is inside Europe’s borders!’

‘The Russian gang in question supply small arms, often to Africa. Sanction busting.’

Chambers nodded. ‘Put a big red flag on Sayeed, put a researcher on it, and keep your people on him. I want regular updates, and use what resources you need.’

‘Sir, am I stepping on anyone’s toes by running this operation? Our Russian Section -’

Chambers offered Colette a flat palm. ‘Until we have more, I won’t involve others. And ... it’s on our turf. You run it for now.’

2

‘Mick, it’s Colette. Anything new?’

‘He’s had breakfast in the Hilton, now wandering around the shops in Silema.’

‘And the tails?’

‘Just us, not a soul to be seen showing any interest, not even any interest in the expensive jeans on sale.’

‘They’re looking for their wallets!’

‘They paid for our fuel.’

‘I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that. Update me later.’

Mick put his phone away.

‘Well?’ Jim expectantly asked.

‘We’re still in a job, for now.’

‘The others have gone, so it’s just babysitting,’ Jim enthusiastically suggested as they weaved through the shoppers.

‘Tomorrow should see some reinforcements arrive,’ Mick cautioned. ‘Theirs, not ours.’

‘Well, we’re a few quid better off anyway, thanks to your pilfering ways. Tell me, Mick, honestly: that vase you recovered.’

Mick took a moment. ‘I got it out of Russia, all the way to Vienna and to a fence, dropped it and smashed it.’

‘You dropped ... two million pounds worth of vase?’

Mick shrugged. ‘I took the pieces back to the rightful owner, who had it identified. Turns out their insurance paid for damage.’

‘And?’

Mick grinned. ‘I’ve got a few quid tucked away.’

‘And I’m guessing that neither Colette, nor the taxman, knows about it.’

Mick smiled widely, balancing an unlit cigarette on his lip.

Half an hour later they were sat at a busy café eating lunch. Jim noted, ‘He’s not exactly trying to keep a low profile. He’s sat in the street, plain view, back to the road.’

‘It’s as if he wants to be followed,’ Mick commented.

‘Why would anyone *want* to be followed?’

‘Distract us from something else.’

‘Hey, we’re the bottom of the barrel. Distracting us pair will achieve nothing.’

‘Our boy’s done eating,’ Mick said. ‘I’ll go first.’ He placed a cap on and stood. ‘Pay for the meal with our ill-gotten gains.’

* * *

At 4pm, Sayeed was back in his room, Mick tired after the very lengthy meandering stroll around Malta’s shops. Sat next to the door, he folded his arms and closed his eyes. At 7.30pm a door slamming alerted Mick, who jumped up in time to see Sayeed on the move. As the mark left the Hilton, Jim was sat in the car at the base of the steps.

‘Got him,’ Jim reported a few minutes later. ‘Heading back up to the bars. I’m going on foot, next road over.’

Sayed claimed the same seat in the same restaurant as the night before, Mick and Jim again at the same bar they used the night before.

‘Take a bit of a wander if you like,’ Mick suggested. ‘See if you can spot anyone familiar.’

Fifteen minutes later they swapped, Mick soon seated again. ‘It’s quiet,’ Mick noted. ‘Well, is rammed and loud, but I can’t see anyone watching Sayeed; no static positions.’

Jim gently shook his head. ‘It is odd behaviour; he’s presenting himself like a peacock in heat. But why? And if he’s on holiday, why is he just wandering around? He hasn’t been near a lap dance bar.’

‘Maybe he’s a good Muslim boy that doesn’t do that kind of thing when alone in Europe,’ Mick lightly suggested.

‘Yeah, right.’

They watched the mix of locals and tourists wander up and down the sloping thoroughfare, listening to the latest pop songs, but unfortunately several at the same time. The smell of cooking kept them hungry, burgers eventually ordered from the bar and washed down with beer.

‘Very healthy,’ Jim complained. ‘Burger and beer.’

‘It’s genetics,’ Mick said with his mouth full.

‘What is?’

‘Your fat belly is. I eat this crap all the time, I live out of a suitcase in hotels, and look at me.’

‘It’ll catch up with you, that’s how cholesterol works; it hides away for years and then multiplies like a rampant virus when you least expect it. This time last year ... I looked like you.’

Mick laughed, coughing up a little cheeseburger. ‘So, this time last year, were you any better looking?’

Ten minutes later, and with the cheeseburgers washed down, the rubbish cleared away, two attractive ladies in their thirties took the next table, blocking the view to Sayeed, the first lady smiling nicely at Mick when she sat.

Mick turned back to Jim. 'So, do you reckon you might get an apartment down here some day?'

'Apartment?' Jim puzzled.

'You know, instead of a hotel each winter. Get a little apartment, home from home; live in that instead of hotels.'

Jim caught up. 'It's an idea, but I was looking at Cyprus.'

'Cheaper here, much cheaper,' Mick encouraged. He balanced a cigarette on his lip. The first lady leant across and offered to light it, smiling nicely. 'No, thanks, I've given up. Again. I just hold them and chew them.'

'Ah. I tried that, but it didn't work for me,' she said with an accent.

'I can't place your accent,' Mick told her, even though he could.

'Deutsche.'

Mick switched to German. 'I work for Interpol.'

The lady's eyes betrayed her reaction, but just for a second. 'Sounds glamorous.'

'No, I just sit behind a computer checking car number plates all day. Very dull.' He gestured towards Jim. 'This is Old Jim, I'm Michael.' That earned a glare from "Old Jim".

Old Jim greeted the ladies in German. 'I used to be his boss in Interpol, Brussels, but I retired a few years ago. Mick hurt his back, he's been off work for a year.'

'They don't need to know that,' Mick gently scolded. 'I could dance the night away.'

'You are here on holiday?' the lady asked, lighting her own cigarette and switching back to English.

'Yes, scuba diving,' Mick replied. 'This is the second day, and I've been catching up with Jim. He's in the Metropole, I'm in the Hilton. How about yourself?'

'We are at the St. George, but we don't like it. Is the Hilton nice?'

'Very,' Mick answered. 'And not expensive; hundred and ten Euros a night with breakfast.'

'I think we'll move, we made a mistake.'

‘Can’t let a bad hotel spoil your holiday,’ Mick suggested. ‘You here a week?’

‘Five days; a short break away from the cold weather. I’m Gird, this is Suzy.’ The second woman nodded and smiled.

‘First time here?’ Mick enquired.

They nodded. ‘You?’

‘No, we’ve been down here many times for the diving, sometimes in the winter, but it’s never really cold here.’

Jim put in, ‘I usually come down for two months in the winter, nice and cheap, warm as well.’

‘Could you show us around?’ Gird asked.

‘Sure,’ Mick quickly answered. ‘We’ve hired a car. It’s OK, but a bit beaten up.’ Jim glanced at Mick from under his eyebrows.

‘All the cars here are like this, and covered in dust,’ Suzy noted.

Mick wrote his number inside a beer mat that he had torn open, and handed it over. Gird took out her mobile and entered the number, but placed the beer mat in her bag anyway, Mick noticing that Sayeed had now stood up.

‘I have to call home,’ Suzy told Gird. ‘From the hotel, a clear line.’ She stood, Mick and Jim following them up.

‘We’ll be around here somewhere, dancing the night away,’ Mick informed the ladies. ‘And call in the morning if you want a look around the island.’

As Sayeed walked past he glanced their way, simply seeing two men and two women stood chatting. He plodded on. With the ladies gone, Mick and Jim sat.

‘You’ve got to be kidding me,’ Jim said, staring wide-eyed at Mick.

‘They’re as fake as plastic tits, and right now they’re following *our mark* up the road and wondering why we’re not.’

‘How the hell do we follow Sayeed without that pair seeing us? We’ll be tripping over each other.’

‘That would have happened with or without us making friends, but this way at least I’ll get to identify them. And, for

starters they're not German; they're Swiss. And ... they're onto us.'

'They're onto us?' Jim asked in a whisper.

Mick nodded, looking disappointed. 'They must have made us this afternoon.'

'So why are they snuggling up?'

'Come on, Jim, you taught me that.'

'Honey trap?' he asked in a strained whisper, lifting his eyebrows.

'Do you think you could ... you know ... keep Suzy busy for a few days?'

Jim's eyes widened. 'You mean ... you know?'

Mick burst out laughing, then shook his head. 'No, so don't get your hopes up. A move on you would be too obvious. As well as a cruel and unusual punishment for Suzy.'

'She wouldn't have to ask twice.'

Mick forced a breath, and took in the busy street. 'Jim, let's stay focused, and not wake up dead, huh; their boyfriends are probably the two goons with guns. Tonight: check the car, put some scuba gear in it, a map, some tourist crap. Stay the night at the Metropole, but jam the door with a chair, chain lock on, lock the windows. I'll stay at the Hilton, because the ladies *will* check. And, when Sayeed is tucked up in his room, they'll be back for us.'

Mick lifted his phone and dialled Colette. 'It's Mick. Can you talk?'

'Hang on ... OK, go ahead.'

'Jim and I just pulled.'

'Pulled...?'

'*Honey trap* pulled, a pair of lookers pretending to be German. They're actually Swiss.'

'They made you?'

'Somehow. And we were careful.'

'What'll you do?'

‘Bore them to death, and convince them that we’re not who they think we are. Or, at the very least, convince them we’re who we want them to think we are.’

‘And Sayeed?’

Mick put a finger in his other ear, trying to hear Colette. ‘Is not going anywhere, doing anything, or even meeting anyone; he’s wandering around with a sign on his head.’

‘Same routine?’

‘Like clockwork.’

‘Those two goons the Maltese police nabbed, they were charged and released for a minor offence in Switzerland five years ago, damage in a hotel, a drunken fight.’

‘That’s hardly a link to Switzerland, but at least there is a link. I’ll call you tomorrow.’

‘So what now?’ Jim asked, sounding worried. ‘We ... still on the job?’

Mick nodded. ‘Check your wallet and pockets. Anything that doesn’t back up the tourist story?’

Jim checked. He had his key to the hotel, a receipt for beer deliveries at the bar - which he threw away, and in his wallet a few other receipts that suggested he lived here.

Mick checked the wallet when Jim was satisfied. ‘Good.’ He handed it back. ‘I’ve got my old Interpol ID, an Interpol parking voucher, and an Interpol photograph, Hilton hotel bits and pieces, and my boarding pass stub. But, hidden behind my driver’s license is an American Department of Defence ID, and that will confuse the ladies *no end* ... if they find it.’

‘Where did you get that?’ Jim asked, adopting a disapproving and suspicious look.

‘From a nice lady forger in Amsterdam. She got me an Air Marshal’s ID and badge as well, which got a few free rides.’

‘Jesus, Mick. They don’t take stuff like that lightly.’

‘What was it you told me last night – about good field agents?’

‘Be cheeky.’

Mick smiled widely. ‘I haven’t been caught yet.’

Jim offered Mick a puzzled frown. ‘You were caught in Germany last year.’

‘That doesn’t count; I was in character. The character was caught, not me.’

‘Ah, right. I see. The character.’

‘Hey, I was dressed like the character, using the character’s ID, and meeting a contact that was a sting – as the character would have done.’

‘You play the role to the very end.’

‘Let’s talk about Serbia, huh,’ Mick challenged. ‘You tailed the wrong guy for six weeks, tying up an entire six man team!’

‘We got the wrong intel, not our fault.’

‘Of course,’ Mick agreed with a false smile.

3

Forty minutes later Gird called, enquiring as to where their eligible bachelors were located, the ladies soon walking back to the same bar. And both ladies were now booked into the Hilton, they reported.

As a foursome, they sat chatting for an hour in the busy bar, the pounding music of the nearby nightclub shaking the table, Mick going up to the bar to order doubles for the ladies when they asked for singles. Jim made his excuses at 11.30pm, suggesting he’d get a taxi to the Metropole. Gird then suggested they walk down the hill together, to the main square, where they and Mick could turn left to the Hilton, Jim getting a taxi for the very short ride to his hotel.

Leaving the bar, the four of them slowly negotiated the crowds moving up and down the bustling thoroughfare before turning down a side street. At the first corner, Mick saw the same two local police officers, the officers now in their path – and no avoiding them.

Approaching, he said, ‘Back on duty again?’ and extended a hand. They shook. ‘Bit of excitement here last night I heard.’

Jim and the ladies drew level, stopping on the curb about six feet away and waiting.

‘Yes, we had more problems last night than in the last year. Two Hungarian gangsters were stopped, up in the square, just here.’

Mick gestured towards the ladies. ‘I have visitors and lady friends.’ He stepped away. Turning back, he said, ‘If you need any help, don’t call Interpol; you do a better of it job yourselves.’

The police officers waved goodbye, smiling, Gird and Suzy looking a little puzzled.

‘You know them?’ Gird asked.

‘Yes, met them scuba diving a few times,’ Mick said as they progressed down the hill. ‘The one guy used to be Interpol, but not in my section.’

At the square, Jim peeled off and headed for a taxi. Out of sight of the ladies, he walked around the bay, not least because no taxi on the rank would have given up its valuable slot for such a short journey.

Mick led the ladies along the cul-de-sac and into the Hilton, noticing now the man who had first booked him in. In German, he asked of the ladies, ‘Coffee in the bar?’

The receptionist offered, in German, ‘The bar has stopped serving coffee, sir, but you can order room service.’

‘Danke,’ Mick offered, leading the ladies to the bar.

Suzy made her excuses, and headed up to their room with the girl’s only room key, Mick ordering drinks for two at the hotel bar. As they sat in the quiet bar, just one other couple present, Sayeed walked down the steps and across to the bar, ordering a drink whilst glancing around. Mick had been sat side-on to Sayeed, and had ignored him totally. After sitting by himself for ten minutes, Sayeed climbed the steps again, Mick never having glanced around.

Gird, on the other hand, was a bit worse for wear, and had glanced casually towards Sayeed twice. ‘So, you can teach me some diving?’

‘I can show you how to go down on an old wreck, certainly.’

Gird lifted an eyebrow, and tried to suppress an amused grin. ‘You’ll hold my hand underwater?’

Mick reached across and held her hand. ‘I won’t let go. And if any big sharks come, I’ll put myself in the way.’

‘A real hero.’

‘Only for a pretty girl.’

‘Ah, but now I’m thirty-five, not so pretty.’

‘You’re doing OK, and you look younger than thirty-five.’

‘Can I have my hand back?’

‘No. There’s a rule in this hotel: if you buy a pretty lady a drink, she has to hold your hand till midnight.’

‘Ten minutes to go. And then, do you turn into a pumpkin?’ she toyed.

‘No, I’ll always be prince charming.’

‘So, you’re one of the good guys, yes?’

‘And good guys always finish last, especially after a few beers.’

She cocked an eyebrow. ‘What floor are you on?’

‘Six, up two from here.’

‘We are the same, but no view of the water.’

‘Ah, well I have a nice view of the marina if you want to see it.’

‘And you can order room service. I’m hungry.’ They eased up.

Still holding hands, the happy couple walked to the lift, taking it up just two floors, hardly time to enjoy the pleasant music. Mick turned left, and led her along to his room, fumbling for the key card. The little green light came on, the door clicking open. Pushing the door, he allowed her in first.

Once inside, the door slamming shut, Mick opened the curtains and the balcony door, fresh air entering. ‘Have a look.’

She stepped past him, rubbing her breasts past his elbow, and onto the balcony, soon peering down at the boats, the pontoons lit from below. ‘Beautiful.’

Mick closed in behind her, his arms enclosing her. Sniffing her hair, he put his hands on top of hers as she gripped the top of the balcony wall.

‘I think you are hungry too,’ she muttered.

Mick slid his right hand to her waist, slowly under her cardigan and up to her right breast. She didn’t react at first, but Mick soon felt a hand on his groin.

‘No money in there, I keep it around the back,’ Mick whispered.

‘I don’t expect payment if the job is done well.’

Mick cupped her other breast with his left hand, rubbing his cheek against hers. Turning, she knelt down, undoing Mick’s belt

A light flicked on, the next balcony. ‘Do you mind!’ an old British man called. Gird dived into the room and stood, a hand to her mouth.

‘Not English ... German,’ Mick told the man.

‘Bloody typical.’

With his dick hanging out, and firm, Mick closed the balcony door and swished the curtain, Gird laughing hard, but silently. ‘Where were we?’ He pushed her onto the bed and kicked off his shoes. Dropping his trousers, he took out his wallet and placed it on the bedside table, Gird pulling her cardigan over her head.

Forty minutes later, Mick headed to the shower. Stood under the water, he sang out of tune for ten minutes, long enough for Gird to rifle through his wallet. His suitcase was an issue, in that the contents could not be explained, but it was secure and locked.

Out of the shower, a towel around his midsection, Mick ordered sandwiches and coffee, two sandwiches and two coffees, thirty-six Euros worth.

‘You are a considerate man,’ Gird noted, lying in bed on her side, a hand supporting her head.

‘Only for pretty girls.’

‘And the ugly girls?’

‘They don’t get a sandwich afterwards, I sneak out before they wake.’

‘Where is your name from?’

‘Canuck? My father was Canadian, but since they’re all immigrants anyway – I have no idea. But I did come across it in Sweden, so maybe my ancestors came from Sweden.’

‘They are alive, your parents?’

Mick sat on the bed. ‘My mother is still alive, but I haven’t seen my father since I was five. Depending on who you talk to in the family, either he was hit by a car and killed, or ran away back to Canada with his secretary.’

When the sandwiches had been finished, Mick collected the rubbish, opened the balcony door quietly and dropped it onto the next balcony.

When back inside, Gird puzzled, ‘Did you throw it in the water?’

‘No, onto the old man’s balcony.’

She smiled and shook her head. ‘Come, it’s late. Some sleep.’

A bright new day

1

At 7am, Gird woke to a penis trying to find a happy home. She moaned as it found its way in.

‘The morning alarm cock,’ she muttered.

‘Alarm cock?’ Mick whispered.

‘Not to be woken by the alarm *clock*, but by the alarm *cock*.’

‘Ah.’ Mick rolled her face down. ‘I’ve woken a few girls that way.’

‘Why bother to wake them at all,’ Gird said into the pillow, Mick thrusting from behind.

‘I’ll have you know I’ve given some of my best performances while the girl was still asleep.’

* * *

Going down for some breakfast, they met Suzy sat alone and joined her, Gird a little worse for wear, Mick awake and alert. Suzy avoided any direct questions as to where her friend had stayed the night, and buttered her toast.

‘So, what do you do today?’ Gird asked Mick.

‘We can show you around the north of the island if you like, have lunch out, sit in the sun.’

‘Sounds good,’ Gird approved. ‘I’ll get some clothes from my room, and a bag.’

Jim arrived at 9am, different clothes to the day before, so Mick figured he’d been back to the bar. Everyone dumped their bags in the boot, moving aside wetsuits and masks.

‘This ... is a hire car?’ Suzy questioned, stood with her arms folded as she studied it.

‘Yes, it ... er ... was cheap,’ Jim explained.

‘It is safe?’ she queried, taking in the damaged panels.

‘Oh, yes. But most cars around here have a few dents.’

‘Is that blood?’ Suzy asked, bent double and peering at the top of the bonnet.

‘I ... er ... hit a bird, big bird, a sea bird,’ Jim explained.

They set off through the congested roads of Paceville, soon on the dual carriage and ultimately joining the coast road north, a pleasant view of the inviting ocean on the right as they progressed.

Passing St. Paul’s Bay, Jim said, ‘This is where I normally stay each winter, hotels around here, very cheap.’

Beyond St. Paul’s Bay they stopped briefly at an inlet and admired the numerous small boats, locals fishing off the sea wall, before driving up a steep hill, descending into Mellieha Bay. Today, a few local surfers were trying to make the most of modest waves, the local sailing school out in force. Jim pulled up.

Piling out, Mick commented, ‘This is the best beach, rammed in summer. The only other decent beach is Golden Sands, but that gets packed in summer.’

After walking across the sand to the water’s edge, the ladies removed their sandals and paddled for ten minutes - whilst whispering comments. Jim reversed course to a pizza restaurant below a hotel; it was time for some lunch. When both of the ladies went to the toilet, one of their bags remained on the table, Mick pointing a finger towards it.

Jim focused on the bag, glancing over his shoulder. ‘You’re ... a fast mover,’ he told Mick.

‘Nice girl, might have a few days together. Better than diving.’

‘Well, why not. You’ve been a bit down since you hurt your back. When do you reckon they’ll return you to normal service?’

‘I’ve got a medical in two months, and then we’ll see. You ... er ... you not unhappy that I’ve hitched up.’

‘Oh, hell no – you enjoy yourself. I’m beyond all that.’

‘She’s great in bed, but when she was asleep she farted a lot.’

Jim resisted laughing out loud. ‘Some girls are like that after a drink. You know, bubbles in the beer,’ he said towards the bag.

‘You never know, they might like each other,’ Mick suggested. ‘Maybe a threesome. I could get a video camera.’

After a meal of late-arriving and already cooling pizzas, they again set off north and to the ferry terminal, boats leaving for the Island of Gozo. Approaching the sea wall on the left, they sat with bottled drinks and observed divers entering the water from the rocks. The day remained warm, but with a cool wind off the sea, a few clouds threatening to spoil their excursion.

When the ladies went to the toilet together, bags taken this time, Jim said, ‘Should we ... be watching Sayeed?’

‘No, because *he* ... is not the main event here. He’s the honey, but it’s the flies we should be more interested in. And I’ll bet you anything he just wanders around again like yesterday.’

‘So what the hell is he up to?’

‘He’s here to see who comes out to play,’ Mick suggested. ‘But so far, I can’t figure out why, or how anyone would benefit. If the other brother wants to waste our time – he’s doing that. But what good is that to him? Besides, I was asked to check out the Russians. But, since they’re just amateurs, I really can’t be arsed. They’re not SVR anyway.’

‘So who sent them?’

‘That, my friend, is why I’m here with the ladies; because maybe they know, and maybe they’ll throw us a clue. I know she went through my wallet last night when I was singing badly in the shower, so she saw the fake Interpol ID and the American ID underneath.’

‘What if they’re from a friendly agency?’ Jim cautioned.

‘Then they would have run the Interpol ID already, and the American ID, and now they’d be right confused as to who I am. But they haven’t, not yet, because Colette would get the note to say my name went through Interpol.’

‘Why give her your real name?’ Jim puzzled.

‘Because I use it the least. I have ID cards and passports in many other names, and I use those so often I sometimes forget my real name. If she runs my real name, then she’ll think I haven’t set foot outside the UK in six years, that I have no credit cards, not even a driver’s license – and then she’ll be even more confused.’

‘White hire car,’ Jim suddenly said.

‘I see them.’

‘How’d they know we were here? The girls?’

‘Or ... it could be because it’s a small island with just a few roads. Or ... they lost us earlier and just found us. I doubt it’s linked to the girls. What do they need a tail for, they’re with us?’

‘Could they be more interested in the girls ... than us,’ Jim posed.

They exchanged looks.

The girls reappeared, walking over chatting. ‘So, what is next?’ Gird asked.

‘Silema? Shopping?’ Mick asked.

‘Yes, sounds good.’

As a group they casually walked back to the car, a tourist bus of pensioners hissing to a stop, the bus providing an effective barrier between them and the tail. Jim started the car, but Mick asked he wait a moment, flicking through old text messages, suggesting there may be something from a friend. Two minutes later, two men stepped to the ferry-side café and sat, their table affording them a view of Jim’s car.

‘OK,’ Mick said. ‘All good. Let’s go.’

Jim pulled around in a tight circle, throwing up dust and stones, and sped off south down the coast road. At St. Paul’s Bay, Mick said, ‘Take the road towards the airport, it’ll be quicker.’

Jim shot him a look, knowing the road was a nightmare. Five minutes later they were in heavy traffic, buses tooting.

‘These houses, they are very dirty,’ Gird noted.

‘Some are nice,’ Mick commented, glancing out.

‘Always the yellow sandstone walls,’ Gird observed.

‘Local quarry stone,’ Mick informed her as they stop-started through heavy traffic, Mick certain no one could follow them, not least because there were a dozen cars on this road that were also dusty white Puntos.

Finally reaching Silema, they took a place in a multi-storey car park, a very short walk to the start of the shops. Gird and Suzy turned into shopping mode as the group strolled, Malta’s select shopping district consisting of little more than three small streets, the shops climbing up steep side streets. Thirty minutes later, and the girls were asking if this was all Malta had to offer, just a handful of boutiques. It was.

Re-claiming the car, they risked heavy traffic to reach Valetta, halting at the dockside near Barrakka, the docks a natural canyon covered in climbing fortifications from a thousand years of occupation, the walls again local yellow sandstone.

Suzy suddenly decided she was tired, and asked if they could go back to the hotel, the group arriving back at the Hilton twenty minutes later, at 3pm.

Jim said, ‘If you’re tied up, Mick, I have some apartments to go look at.’

‘No, no, I’ll come with you,’ Mick quickly offered. ‘Gird?’

‘No, I need a small sleep.’

‘Sure. Call me if you ... want anything.’

They waved goodbye to each other, Jim pulling off. At the main square he said, ‘Tail’s behind us again.’

‘Then let’s go somewhere where I can ... mix it up a bit. Head back to the docks.’

‘They have the registration of this car, and it’s in my name, Mick.’

Mick took a moment. ‘What address is it registered at?’

‘Ah, the flat next door to the bar; I was living there first. Still, it’s close.’

‘If they’re from a regular agency then they’ll check out that flat, which is fine, because we’ll be waiting.’

‘Am I going to have to leave the island?’ Jim asked as they negotiated heavy traffic.

‘Do you want to leave the island?’ Mick quickly countered.

‘It was getting that way, if I’m honest.’

‘Then maybe all you needed was a nudge, and this is it.’

‘I figured I’d pack up and go, not in cuffs, or in a box!’

‘Relax. What could go wrong?’ Mick said, hiding a grin.

At Valetta docks, Mick directed Jim to a road leading around the waterfront, halting near a set of steps that cut into an almost sheer cliff face, the wall shading them from the sun.

‘They’re halfway back,’ Jim said. ‘Ducked in behind that small building.’

‘Stay here,’ Mick said as he jumped out. He stood peering at a large grey naval vessel, docked across the water, a cigarette balanced on his lip. After a minute, and certain that he had been seen, he turned and crossed the road, soon bounding up a steep flight of steps, out of breath at the top.

Turning away from Jim’s car, but following the line of the waterfront, Mick jogged along a road that ran parallel to their own, soon seeing the tail car sat behind a small building built into the rock face.

Leaning over the wall and staring down twenty metres, a group of giggling youths said, ‘Hey, mister, don’t jump.’

Mick stepped across to them. ‘You want to make two hundred Euros?’

‘For what?’ they asked, closing in, the youths aged twelve to sixteen.

‘See that white car below us.’ They peered over. ‘The man inside is following me, because I fuck his wife.’ They giggled, Mick producing a hundred Euros. ‘A hundred now, a hundred after you drop that metal bin on the car.’

‘OK,’ the tallest youth agreed, a small argument breaking out as to whose deal it was. ‘Wait till I get back down to my car, and I’ll meet you at the end of this road.’ Mick flashed the second hundred Euros before turning to run.

Getting in the car, panting, he said, ‘Turn, quickly. Go.’

Jim turned the small car around. Just past the tail car they heard an almighty bang, Jim almost crashing his car.

‘Keep going!’ Mick urged. ‘Faster!’

Looking through his rear view mirror, Jim could see a metal bin embedded in the roof of the car, the windows smashed. ‘Jesus, Mick, that could have killed them!’

‘Dangerous game, spy work.’

At the top of the road, the youths were running down to meet Jim’s car.

‘Stop here, hard left.’

Mick handed over the hundred Euros. Pointing at a girl in the group of errant youths, he handed over a twenty Euro note. ‘Walk down to that car, nice and slow, speak to them, ask them if they’re alright, find out what country they’re from.’ She trotted off. ‘You lot, scatter before the police get here.’

With their money in their hands, still arguing about whose deal it was, the youths ran off.

They waited, Jim breathing hard and shaking his head.

The girl returned ten minutes later. ‘They are from the France country. They have blood on their faces.’ She held up a wallet. ‘What money?’

Mick produced a twenty Euro note, exchanging it for the wallet. Shaking his head again, Jim started the car and pulled off, soon in heavy traffic and crawling along.

‘What do we have here then? A ... French private detective, a resident of ... Paris. Driver’s license ... genuine, credit cards ... look OK, they match the driver’s license. A metro stub from ... two weeks ago, a cinema stub from ... three weeks ago, photograph of the wife and kids, three hundred Euros.’ He handed the Euros to Jim. ‘ID card for some ... association of detective agencies. Credit card receipt from ...’ Mick laughed. ‘From the favourite haunt of officers from Interpol’s Paris office.’

‘They’re Interpol?’

‘No.’

‘No?’

‘Favourite trick of the French DGSE is to make themselves appear to be Interpol agents in hiding. You peel back the layers and think you’ve discovered that they’re not private detectives but Interpol, when they’re really DGSE.’

‘Their tailing skills need work,’ Jim scoffed.

‘No, they did alright. They’re off their patch, they don’t know the roads, and they didn’t have a team – it’s just them. So they did what they could, not expecting trouble. I was watching them in the mirror and I thought they were OK. And they hired a dusty white car to blend in.’

‘And now they’ll be in the local hospital with the others.’

‘Do you think we should send flowers, drop in some grapes,’ Mick asked, still studying the wallet.

‘You should ask Colette to contact their bosses,’ Jim suggested.

‘That would mean Colette having to rattle the cages of those a few pay grades higher, and he’s not about to do that.’

They pulled up in Paceville, in a side street, and took seats in a corner café, cold drinks ordered – and much needed.

‘So why are the French interested in us?’ Jim posed.

‘It’s possible that the guy on the bike wasn’t Interpol, but one of theirs. It would be normal to send someone else down to investigate the incident.’

‘So how did they pick us up, that biker didn’t see anything?’

‘No, he didn’t,’ Mick pondered, easing back with his beer. ‘But our ladies could be DGSE.’

‘If they are, then they would have reported that you’re more interested in shagging - and drives to the beach - than tailing Sayeed!’

‘Which was the idea – to throw them. They must be certain by now that we’re not the bad guys, and if they think we work for Her Majesty’s Government, well ... they’re not going to be aggressive.’

‘Not till they get out of hospital, no,’ Jim quipped.

Mick sipped his beer. ‘Heads up. Top of that road.’

‘It’s Sayeed, wandering again. Do we follow?’

‘Not if the French are on his tail. And I’m still waiting for Colette to get a kick from above, asking us to pull back.’

‘Moped.’

‘I see him,’ Mick confirmed.

They sat and observed the street as Sayeed wandered past on the opposite side of the road. Checking behind Sayeed, they could see no one obvious.

Mick’s phone trilled. ‘Here we go; it’s Colette.’ He answered the phone. ‘Right, boss?’

‘What’s happening your end?’

‘Quiet day, we spent it with the girls, but they quit an hour ago.’

‘And Sayeed?’

‘Just walked past, still walking around in circles, moped following him.’

‘And the girls?’

‘They say they’re German, but they sound Swiss. They followed Sayeed last night, so we sat on our arses, and today we took them up the coast instead of tailing Sayeed and tried to bore them to death. Anyone searching my name or aliases?’

‘No, nothing, I just looked.’

‘No?’

‘Not so far, and Sayeed is booked onto a flight to Malaga, Spain, day after tomorrow.’

‘Are we still on the job?’ Mick asked.

‘Yes. But Martin Davies from the Russian Section will be with you shortly.’

‘Did you get a nudge from above?’ Mick teased.

‘He’s interested in the Russians. Be nice.’

‘Always, boss. Always.’ He hung up.

‘You know Martin Davies, Russian Section?’ Mick asked Jim.

‘Sounds familiar.’

‘He’ll be here shortly. We’ll have a professional in our midst, so I might take notes. Anyway, pack a bag tonight, we’re off to Spain tomorrow.’

‘Spain? You want me...?’

‘Why not? Sayeed is moving on, and Colette has sanctioned the money for you. And once Sayeed moves, the rest of this lot will move as well. Malta will go back to being a quiet backwater.’

‘I’d have to close the bar,’ Jim noted.

‘And how much revenue would you lose?’

‘Well ... about ten Euros a day.’

‘You’ve made that already, and there could be a bonus. C’mon, it’ll be fun.’

‘If the French see us there...?’

‘The only people who can eyeball us won’t be there, unless they send the girls. And as soon as the girls see us they’ll bug out.’

‘I’d be using my own ID to fly.’

Mick shook his head. ‘Remember the ID I had made up for you?’

‘That was just a driver’s license.’

‘No, I had a passport made up as well.’

‘Jesus, Mick.’ Jim shook his head.

‘Use your own ID into Heathrow, switch when we buy tickets for Malaga.’

Jim sighed and nodded.

Ten minutes later, Mick’s phone went, an unknown number. ‘Hello.’

‘Canuck, it’s Davies. I just booked into the St. Georges hotel.’

‘We’re sat in Paceville, one road down from the main drag, café with a yellow awning.’

‘Ten minutes.’

Mick put his phone away. ‘The professionals are here,’ he carefully mouthed.

When Davies finally arrived he sat without saying anything, scanning the street. The waitress stepped out, Davies ordering a Fanta orange. He appeared to Jim to be in his late forties, a slim

and fit looking man with greying hair. He wore a light beige jacket and beige slacks.

Taking off his sunglasses, Davies said, 'So, what's new?'

'Our boy just wandered past, moped tailing him,' Mick reported.

'And the Russians?'

'No sign of them since yesterday,' Mick answered.

'The details you gave us led nowhere, other than to the conclusion that they were good fakes, and expensive.'

'That couple were Laurel and Hardy,' Jim baulked. 'No way in hell they were SVR – unless standards have dropped a hell of a lot!'

Davies took a moment to study Jim. 'The two gunmen are not talking, as expected, but their weapons were traced back to Bulgaria – so they came in by boat, the weapons that is. The two men had fake passports with Shengen visas, again – good fakes and expensive. But there is a tenuous link between the fake IDs and the gunmen; both seem to have holidayed in Marmaris, Turkey, at the exact same time.'

Jim eased closer to Davies. 'The two gunmen were six foot five, dressed in black, wearing boots, and their pistols were noticed. I bring your attention back to the aforementioned Laurel and Hardy.'

'He's right,' Mick put in. 'Good fakes, expensive, yet the hired help were crap. The paymaster knows what he's doing, but his hiring skills are sadly lacking.'

Davies regarded Mick coolly, almost arrogantly. 'It's a work in progress.'

Mick turned to Jim. 'Go back to the bar, but check the area first. Sort yourself, pack, eat; you can handle the nightshift tonight – so get four hours kip.'

Jim nodded and eased up. To Davies he said, 'See you later?'

'I'll be around.'

Mick paid for the drinks. ‘Why don’t we walk, I need to check the area anyway.’ They stood. ‘Never know, that couple might still be around.’

They turned down the hill, slowly ambling along.

‘Jim seems a little ... *old* for fieldwork,’ Davies delicately mentioned.

‘That’s my call. Besides, people ignore him, especially when he has his blazer on and a walking stick.’

They walked on, and to the next corner. Taking the long way around, they scanned the main square, Mick not noticing anyone of interest.

Entering the start of the cul-de-sac, Mick asked, ‘How’s *your* fitness – for fieldwork, Mister Davies?’

‘I keep myself in shape.’

‘Good. Don’t look around, but we just picked up two goons. Are you good with your fists, Davies, or better with your legs?’

‘It’s a public street, they won’t do anything.’

‘Really. And if the two goons now in prison were behind you, would you like to put their shyness to the test?’

‘I see your point.’

‘I know where we can lose them, and get a good look at them. And, if the Gods are smiling down on me, I’ll get their wallets.’

‘You ... aim to go head to head with them?’ Davies asked, sounding nervous now.

‘That’s what I’m paid to do. Turn down here.’ He led Davies down the steep marina steps. ‘Quickly,’ he whispered.

At the bottom of the steps they turned left and walked quickly to the wooden bridge, over and towards the dock visited by the courier, Mick glancing back as they reached it.

‘Shit, they mean business. Run!’

Mick led Davies along the edge of the square dock, Davies fast on his feet. ‘When we reach that end, quickly up and around!’

At the sea wall, reached a few seconds later, they clambered up steps and hugged the wall as they ran along a wet concrete

path, the waves pounding the rocks to their immediate right. Ten yards in, Mick reached in between two rocks and pulled out a pistol wrapped in a white plastic bag. Turning, he could see a face peeping around the wall. Mick stepped out brazenly, holding the pistol at his side. The face pulled back.

Turning back to Davies, Mick could see Davies studying the pistol in Mick's hand, seemingly more concerned and disapproving of that, than the men following. With a smile, Mick dropped the pistol and stamped on it. 'Plastic. It works well enough at night, and from a distance.'

A dull crack behind Mick caused him to turn, and he saw the two faces peeking around the wall. 'That was cheeky. They fired a round towards us.'

Davies collapsed in a heap, heard before being seen.

'Christ,' Mick let out as he spun around. He tore Davies' jacket off, tearing open his bloodstained shirt. 'Take it easy.'

Davies was in shock. Not through blood loss, just the shock of being shot. Mick glanced over his shoulder, the rocks and the wall now clear.

Turning back to Davies, holding him now with a knee to Davies' back, Mick inspected the wound. 'It's still in there, but it hasn't hit an artery,' he urgently got out. He lay Davies down and placed an ear to his chest. 'Breath as deep as you can, but slowly.'

After Davies had complied with three large breaths, Mick lifted up. 'Your lung hasn't been hit, there's no major bleeding, so you're in no immediate danger.'

Davies had not uttered a sound since being shot, a look of shock and abject terror etched into his face. Mick lifted him to the sitting position, a knee at his back. 'Listen, that wound is going to hurt, but you're not going to die, or lose the use of the arm. You were lucky, real lucky, so just hang in there.'

Mick dialled Colette. 'Colette, it's Mick. Davies has been shot.'

'Shot?'

‘He’s got a slug in his shoulder, fired by two goons following us near the Hilton, but he’s in no immediate danger. I can take him to a hospital, call an ambulance, or you can extract him. But if I take him to a hospital then the authorities here will be all over us, and not at all happy that you didn’t tell them earlier!’

‘Christ!’

‘How long to get a private medical plane with the right paperwork?’

‘Four hours, probably six,’ Colette reported.

‘He’ll make it that long, but I’m not sure I’d like to take the chance, so it’s your arse on the line ... and your call.’

‘I’ll call you back. If he gets worse, or you think he needs it, get him to a hospital.’

Mick dialled Jim. ‘Jim, Davies has been shot. Get a first aid kit, water, towels, and meet me in that little lane between the Hilton and the Dragonarra, we’re on the rocks below the Hilton. And be quick.’

Mick stared out to sea at the surreal scene, a few boats in the distance, a few cruisers heading into Silema, the day warm and pleasant. ‘Take it easy,’ he softly told Davies, checking his pulse. ‘Breath slowly.’

‘It’s gone numb,’ Davies whispered.

‘That’s normal. Look, if you want an ambulance we’ll get one in three minutes. Well, the goons might get to us first, and they’re not shy about shooting in public. When Jim gets here we’ll get you patched up and to the car. If necessary, we’ll drop you at the hospital - you can tell them you were mugged. You got your ID on you?’

Davies nodded.

‘If you want me to take it and hide it I will, then I can drop you around at the hospital. Given the goons with guns they caught the other night ... you won’t have to explain much.’

Mick eased Davies up slowly, placing Davies’ arm around his shoulder before directing him across the bleached white rocks and away from the marina. They expending a good four

minutes negotiating a narrow path above crystal clear water, before reaching a low wall, the other side of which lay a road. Mick peeked over. A few dusty cars sat at the end of the road, but no one was about.

Sat against the wall, checking Davies' pulse intermittently, Mick stared out to sea. 'Need a fucking boat.'

The afternoon was warm, the excitement and the exercise making them both sweat, but the cooling breeze off the sea was most welcome.

'Boat,' Mick repeated a moment later. 'A ruddy great boat.'

He dialled Colette, who now sounded as if he was in a car. 'Colette, it's Mick, I've got an idea. Trust me, I'll have Davies in a surgical ward in no time – and no one will know!' He hung up. 'OK, I need to get you down that street, but first I need to check it. Don't go anywhere, sit and enjoy the view.'

Mick was soon running along the road to the first corner, ducking his head around. It was clear. Returning, he said, 'Right, other side of the wall is a road, easy to get along it. C'mon.'

At the corner, he tidied Davies' appearance as best he could, closing his jacket and doing up two buttons. A car drove past, a single occupant that showed them no interest, Jim pulling up with a screech ten minutes later.

'Christ, Mick, what the hell happened?' Jim got out in a strained whisper as they eased Davies into the back of the car, Mick easing into the back as well.

'More goons with guns,' Mick replied.

'Where to?' Jim asked as he took the wheel.

'Valetta Docks, south side. Quick.'

They sped off. 'Why the docks?' Jim asked.

'HMS Exeter,' Mick said with a grin.

'HMS Exeter? Jim repeated. 'Christ, aye. They have a surgical bay, and they could get him out unseen.'

'You listening, Davies?' Mick asked, Davies sat with his eyes closed.

‘I served ... seven years as ... an officer aboard ... HMS Newcastle.’

‘There we go then,’ Mick encouraged. He dialled Colette.

‘You’re talking him where?’ Colette asked.

‘HMS Exeter. She’s in the dock! Talk later.’

Before they reached the dockside, Mick grabbed Davies’ Military Intelligence ID. At the Maltese police check, on the main gates, Mick handed over that ID.

‘We’re expected by the Captain. We’re ex-navy, but now Military Intelligence.’

The police officer puzzled the ID’s for a moment, but allowed the car through. Fifty yards short of the ship, British Royal Marines diligently stopped the car, their rifles ready.

Mick said, ‘We’re Military Intelligence officers, and I want your duty officer right now, or you’ll be back at Lympstone Base doing press-ups in the mud! Move it, mister!’

The young Marine let them through, using his radio to alert the ship. Halting, Mick faced Davies. ‘I need you to walk up that gangplank without looking like you’ve been shot. Can you do that?’

Davies nodded, looking now like death warmed up. ‘I can do it.’

Between Jim and Mick, they eased Davies out, curiously observed by another young Marine. After a slow climb of the gangplank, a third Marine and a Commander stood waiting.

‘Who the hell are you?’ the Commander demanded.

Mick handed over Davies’ ID. ‘He was a naval officer, now military intelligence. One of our operations down here went badly wrong and he’s been shot in the shoulder. You, Popeye The Sailor, are going to get him to your doctor, patch him up and get him off the island without any fucker noticing, or I’m going to take a very personal interest in your career development. *My boss* ... will call *your boss* ... very soon. Till that time, he’s one of yours, and he’s bleeding all over your nice clean deck.’

‘Inside. Quickly,’ the Commander requested, not looking happy.

Davies was taken one way, Mick and Jim led another way, and to an empty mess hall to wait in, guarded by a vigilant young Marine.

The ship’s Captain turned up a minute later, stepping in and sitting. He gave Mick and Jim a look over. ‘You’ve got a damned cheek bringing your man here.’

‘He’s ex-Navy, so he’s your man as well,’ Mick curtly stated.

‘If the Maltese authorities knew ... there’d be hell to pay!’

‘And if we take him to a hospital ... there’d be hell to pay!’ Mick countered.

‘I have to send this up the line, and they’ll decide what happens.’

‘Fine, go fill in a form,’ Mick said. ‘Just save his life first.’

The Captain took a moment. ‘What the hell happened?’

‘We were tailing the brother of a Pakistani nuclear scientist, but the Russians showed up, plus a few other party-poopers, and some east European goons with guns.’

‘Here, in Malta? Gunmen? That’s outrageous.’

‘We think so too. Want to lend a hand?’

The Captain forced a breath and took a moment. ‘We’ll look after your injured man, we have a surgeon onboard.’

‘Yeah, well our guy is probably going to be happy as fuck to be back on the ocean wave; he served aboard HMS Newcastle.’

‘I’ll arrange some food and drink for you while I wait a response from London.’ He stood.

‘Captain,’ Mick called. ‘There’s an on-going operation out there, and we’re losing it. If you want to be helpful, I have a request, and some rules to bend.’

Colette slowly stood up as he got the detail about Davies. To his secretary he barked, ‘Find Chambers. Quickly!’

A moment later, she said, ‘He’s over in Vauxhall, in a meeting.’

‘Damn. Get me a car, quickly.’ He grabbed his jacket. ‘Call operations and then the Russian Section, tell them Davies has been shot in Malta.’ He rushed out.

In the car, he took the second call from Mick, puzzling what Mick meant about a secure surgical unit.

At SIS headquarters, Vauxhall, the driver showed his ID, followed by Colette. At the main entrance, Colette showed the police his ID, then again at the front desk.

‘Where’s Chambers?’ he asked at the desk.

The staff on duty checked the sign-in book. ‘In a meeting, third floor, C10.’

Colette strode towards the lifts, his future career prospects upper-most in his mind. On the third floor he scanned the signs and arrows, finding C10. Approaching it, he could see a meeting in progress through the room’s tinted glass, the Director himself chairing the meet. At the door, a pale wood, Colette forced a breath, knocked and entered, despite the sign to the contrary.

‘Sorry, sir, gentlemen, but there’s been an incident.’

Chambers looked horrified.

Colette turned to the head of the Russian Section. ‘Your man, Davies, has been shot in Malta.’

‘Shot?’ the Director asked. ‘Dead?’

‘No, sir, alive and quite well according to our people, a lucky hit in the shoulder, no immediate danger.’

‘He only got there an hour ago!’ Chambers put in.

‘Would you ... like a briefing on the operation, sir?’ Colette asked the Director.

‘When one of my officers gets shot, yes I damn well would! But first, what’s happening on the ground? Is Davies on his way to hospital?’

‘No, sir, but our people say they have a secure surgical facility.’

‘Secure ... facility?’ the Director puzzled.

Colette's mobile went. 'Sorry, sir, that might be them. Yes, it is.' When Colette ended the call, he informed the room. 'HMS Exeter is in dock in Malta and ... our people are taking Davies to it.'

The Director lifted a phone on the table. 'Get the Admiralty, duty officer.'

Thirty minutes later, Colette had briefed the managers of the complete situation, using a white board.

'Thank you, Martin,' the Director offered. 'And although that was thorough, we're no further forwards in understanding what's going on. We know what's happened, but are yet to understand objectives, motivations and associates. Opinions, gentlemen?'

'Has Sayeed upset someone in Eastern Europe?' a man asked.

'Sayeed ... is alive and well and wandering around,' the Director pointed out. 'Whilst our people get fired at.'

Chambers put in, 'Any attempt to try and scare us off – would have the exact opposite effect.'

'And why would anyone want Sayeed surrounded by armed and nervous agents or police?' a man asked. 'The most likely outcome would be Sayeed being picked up, or at risk of being shot.'

'And if he was...?' the Director posed.

'The agency responsible would feel the fall out,' another man put in.

'Are we saying ... that someone desires a tussle in public, and the resulting bad publicity?' the Director posed.

'Sayeed's brother has accused The West of harassment, and of threats to kill.'

'And if we increment our interest in his brother he gets a small victory in the press,' Chambers added.

The Director focused on Colette. 'Your men, they're freelancers?'

'Yes, sir.'

‘Have them keep a discreet eye on Sayeed. I want no one else near that man.’

‘Might I ask, sir, if any of the steps I took were ... inappropriate?’

‘No, Mister Colette. Your people found, identified, tracked, and lifted the IDs of the opposition. As for using the Exeter? Well, that was cheekily brilliant; we’ve kept this out of the papers and contained it. As for Davies, there’ll be a formal inquiry, the question one of threat level and briefing. And I for one would never have expected someone to take pot shots at our people in Malta.’

‘Davies was responsible for his own conduct on the island,’ the head of Russian Section admitted. ‘As well as senior to the freelancers. He also knew about the armed men who were arrested.’

‘Keep me informed through Mister Chambers,’ the Director told Colette. ‘Thank you, Martin.’

Back in the car, Colette blew out so loud the driver was worried for him. ‘Tough meeting, sir?’

‘No, it ... it went OK.’

‘You look like you need a beer, sir.’

3

At 9pm, the two gunmen responsible for Davies’ condition ambled along the street that led to the steps, the street affording them plenty of dark corners to wait in, wait in and observe the approaches to the Hilton. From behind, they heard raucous singing, turning to see a gang of young men with flags walking along singing and chanting. The two gunmen eased into a darkened porch and waited the passing of what appeared to be football fans.

From the middle of the gang, Mick said ‘Now!’ the Royal Marines and Navy ratings pummelling the two gunmen with dozens of blows and kicks. When down, the gunmen were stamped on, weapons and wallets removed, hands and feet

bound with plastic ties. The singing started up again, flags waved, and the gang moved off, having stopped for less than twenty seconds.

Around the corner, Mick jumped into Jim's car, two naval officers sat in the rear in civilian clothes. 'As a respectable British tourist, I'd to take this opportunity to complain about the conduct of your drunken ratings.'

'Noted,' came from the men in the rear. 'What have you got?'

'Your lads have two pistols, unloaded and cleared, and I've the wallets belonging to those two gentlemen.' Mick passed back five hundred Euros. 'Beer money for the lads.' He checked the wallets. 'Czeck identity, probably a forgery like the last lot. Oh, for fuck's sake.'

'What?' Jim asked.

'They have a note as to which hotel Sayeed will be at in Spain.'

'How the hell could they know?' Jim puzzled.

'Because *someone* ... told them.' He handed Jim the wallet. 'Call Colette, give him their details.' Mick craned his neck around. 'Ready for some leg work, gents?'

The officers opened the car doors.

In the main square in Paceville, Mick and the two officers navigated through the tourists and locals, the numbers swollen by more than eighty sailors, the sailors mostly ignoring each other. Some were in pairs, others in groups of four, a few waving flags. The area appeared busy, but no one would have ever considered that through the seemingly random crowd a single group of eighty people now worked together.

Two ratings approached. 'Got a couple of likely lads, sir, speaking some language I can't figure. Big lads, padded jackets, in the bar opposite the one you said to check.'

They all faced Mick. 'When I attract their attention, let them follow me to the base of the steps, then we'll have a quiet word – in the best traditions of the Royal Navy.'

The two officers followed Mick a few steps behind, many ratings nearby but invisible in the crowd. At the bar that Mick and Jim had used to observe Sayeed, Mick stopped and stared at the two men for two seconds before moving off. He had their attention, the men up and following.

At the base of the steps, weaving through revellers and bombarded by loud music, Mick stopped and turned at street level, no police visible. The men kept coming, now just two flights of steps away.

‘Run ashore!’ Mick shouted.

The goons were thrust forwards, flying over a set of steps and landing hard, rolling to a stop whilst being kicked repeatedly. Flags went up, ratings closed in, and loud singing broke out, the goons getting a good beating.

A rating walked past and dropped a wallet into Mick’s hand without stopping, a second wallet a few seconds later. A third rating said, ‘Guns in the bag, sir,’ the chanting and flag waving ratings moving off, Mick using them as cover as locals attended the two semi-conscious and bound men.

Back in Jim’s car, Mick turned his head to the two Naval officers, handing over a further five hundred Euros. ‘The lads did well, so be a love and buy them all a few beers on me. Well, on the goons actually.’ He turned back to examine the wallet. ‘And you took four armed men off the streets of the very peaceful island of Malta.’

‘They Czeeck again?’ Jim asked.

‘Yep, carbon copies.’ Mick swivelled around. ‘We’re out of here tomorrow. So, we were never here, you never saw us and ... thanks.’ They shook, the officers jumping out.

With the doors closed, Jim said, ‘I still can’t believe you just did that.’

‘Drop me at the Hilton, I’ll check out. I certainly don’t fancy spending the night in there.’

As Mick passed through the Hilton’s automatic doors, the German-speaking receptionist waved Mick over. In German, he

said, 'We have had a complaint about you, sir, about activities on your balcony.'

'Really? Well my boat's fixed, so I'm sailing tonight, checking out now. Kindly prepare my bill for the dry and expensive sandwiches that were washed down with lukewarm coffee. Thank you.'

Mick checked the foyer and the seating area, not noticing anyone of interest. Outside his room he put an ear to his own door and listened before knocking on his own door. Nothing. He swiped his key, moving inside.

The room was as he left it, the balcony door closed, the bathroom cleaned and no one hiding under the bed. His case was still locked, no sign of being forced.

Having paid for the expensive stale sandwiches, Mick jumped into the car and they left the cul-de-sac, checking every face as they progressed along the road. 'Another day, another hotel room,' Mick sighed. 'Oh, did Colette sound OK when you spoke to him?'

'Yeah, fine; we're still on the case.'

'That's odd.'

'Why?'

'Should be a full-scale sphincter enquiry over Davies getting shot.'

'You think ... you were at fault?'

'Well,' Mick sighed as they stop-started through the traffic. 'Maybe. We could have walked to the hotel, and they could have shot at us later. I led Davies down into the marina so I could jump the two goons, but you won't see that go in any report.'

'And if Davies wants to bury you?' Jim posed.

'Then I'll be ... looking for work. Do you need a barman?'

'Hah.'

Outside Jim's bar they circled the block three times before parking up for ten minutes, finally walking the block both ways. Inside the bar, Jim locked the door, both men checking rooms and cupboards, even the till, finding everything in order.

‘As I left it,’ Jim noted.

They blocked narrow steps from within and claimed the flat above, drawing the curtains before putting on the lights. With cold beers in hand, they sat opposite each other on dated and worn sofas.

‘Listen,’ Mick softly began. ‘If you ... think this is all a bit too much.’

Jim took a moment. ‘The last few days has taught me one thing – how much I loathe this damn bar!’

Mick laughed. ‘You needed someone to shine the light of illumination on the problem.’

Mick’s phone went. ‘Mister Colette, you’re on the job late.’

‘Just wanted to let you know that Davies had an operation to remove the bullet, and he’s doing well. They don’t expect any complications. We have two doctors flying down tomorrow to double check, but it all looks good.’

‘Is he ... going to try and bury me?’

‘His section head has already taken responsibility for Davies’ actions, and Davies is five grades up from you; he knew what he was doing. If anything, you should have been seen as being under *his* guidance.’

‘Fine, stick that in the report. Oh, I know what hotel Sayeed is going to in Spain.’

‘How?’

‘Let’s just say I found a wallet in the street, belonging to a few goons.’

‘They knew ... in advance? About Spain?’

‘Yep, they had his itinerary and his favourite toothpaste.’

‘The Director thought as much.’

Mick sat upright. ‘The Director ... is following this case?’

‘I gave him a full briefing today. We think Sayeed is baiting the service.’

‘And ... I’m not about to have my balls cut off?’

‘No, he’s happy enough.’

‘Oh. Well ... yeah, good.’

‘What’ll you do tomorrow?’ Colette asked.

‘Let you buy me a cup of tea in Heathrow.’

‘Send me the landing time, Mick. Goodnight.’

‘What was that?’ Jim asked after Mick lowered his phone.

Mick made a face. ‘Davies’ section head is taking responsibility for his man’s actions – like standing in the way of a bullet, and Colette briefed the Director about us.’

‘I’ll take a wild guess here, but I think Colette gave them the sanitised version.’

‘I’ve not told Colette half of what we’ve done, so it must have been,’ Mick pointed out.

‘And we’re still on the case?’ Jim puzzled.

‘They think Sayeed is baiting the service – which might be right, so who better than us.’

‘Plausible deniability,’ Jim said.

‘So why *is* Sayeed baiting the service?’ Mick thought out loud. ‘And, more importantly, did my sexual technique impress Gird?’

‘Have the girls called?’

Mick shook his head. ‘I asked at reception, and they checked out five minutes after we dropped them off. Which can only mean they’re not interested in us. And Jim, no one has run my name through the computer.’

Jim’s eyebrows lifted. ‘Then the girls were not Interpol, or French.’

Mick shook his head, looking worried. ‘If they don’t have access to Interpol’s computer, then they’re not working for the good guys. We clocked them, but they were cool and professional.’

‘You figuring any of this out?’ Jim asked.

‘We’re being paid to follow Sayeed. Figuring it out is Colette’s job.’

‘No one in their right mind baits the service. Maybe the Iranians, but certainly not Sayeed. He neither wants, nor needs, the publicity,’ Jim argued.

‘Someone does. Someone wants the agencies to flock around Sayeed like flies around shit, and mix it up whilst they’re at it.’

‘Do you think Sayeed knows?’ Jim posed. ‘Maybe he’s just doing what he was asked to do. He couldn’t have seen any of the incidents.’

‘He’d have to be daft not to have seen the tails on day one,’ Mick scoffed before sipping his beer.

‘Given the goons with guns, I’m starting to think that Sayeed might not be aware of all that’s going on around him. He’d have to be crazy to put himself near Czecks and Bulgarians with guns.’

Mick gently nodded his head. ‘If any goons turn up in Spain I’ll remove them, and they should be getting low on warm bodies by now.’

‘Whoever hired those men must be crapping himself by now!’ Jim loudly pointed out. ‘Two in jail, four in hospital - and with their weapons and IDs taken! The guy must be on the run already.’

Mick shook his head. ‘To get the guns on the island cost money, and took good organisational skills – so the paymaster is not stupid. The goons he sent, however, were crap.’

‘They were set-up to fail?’ Jim questioned.

Mick raised a finger. ‘What would have happened ... if I wasn’t here?’

‘The watcher would have glimpsed Sayeed a few times a day and reported little more than the chosen hotel, restaurants used, time in and out – and would have run a mile from those two ladies! You go over the top.’

‘Therefore...’

‘Therefore ... you took out the watchers, so they sent more, and more aggressive ones?’

‘Do you think ... I upset someone?’ Mick posed.

‘Mick, you’d only need to turn up to do that.’

Mick smiled widely. ‘So was the heavy mob even related to Sayeed, or was it emotional?’

‘You think ... one of the people you took out had a paymaster that took exception to his front man being jumped on?’

‘Can’t be the Interpol guy on the bike, or the fake Austrian, and the two Russians were too stupid to even join the dots.’

‘So which group is pissed at you?’

‘Best bet would be the two fake Ukrainian-Russians, the happy couple you bumped,’ Mick suggested, now yawning. ‘But, the best bet is Spain, to see who turns up. Let’s get some kip, eh. Last night’s shagging session is catching up on me.’

‘You got the couch. And no, I don’t have a balcony.’

Touching base

1

Landing at Heathrow, Mick presented a Russian passport with a correct visa, Jim in the queue for European citizens.

‘Thank you, sir,’ the lady passport controller said as she checked the passport carefully. ‘And the nature of your visit, sir?’

‘Business,’ Mick said with an accent.

‘And the nature of that business?’ she pressed, still checking the passport.

‘Not ... good English.’

‘You won’t get much business done without speaking English, sir,’ she noted without looking up, still studying the passport.

‘My business ... Russian peoples ... London.’

‘What business?’

‘Future gas.’

She looked up. ‘Future ... gas.’

‘Yes. Future gas.’

The lady glanced over her shoulder, two men stepping forwards. ‘Would you mind following these gentlemen, sir.’

They led Mick to a room. Scanning his passport, a Russian speaker was called in, who in turn scanned the passport.

In Russian, the man asked, ‘What’s the nature of your visit to Great Britain, sir?’

In Russian, Mick replied, ‘I’m a futures trader, gas and oil. I have clients here, and I’ve been here many times before.’

‘Don’t they trade futures on the stock exchange, people sat behind computers?’

‘Yes, of course, but some contracts are privately negotiated if they are recurring contracts.’

‘And if your English is not very good, how will you arrange such deals?’

‘They are Russian customers, but based here in London.’

‘And do these Russian customers have large houses to heat with all the gas they buy?’

Mick produced a business card and headed notepaper. ‘Call my boss, or the office here in London, check to your hearts content.’

The man glanced briefly towards Mick, lifting the business card. He asked Mick his name, telephone number and address. ‘If I call this number ... who will I get through to?’

‘To Olga at reception. She’s a big girl ... you know.’ The man stared back for a moment, then returned to the headed notepaper. ‘My boss is Mikhail Lubov. Call.’ Mick checked his watch. ‘Yes, he will still be in work. May I ask, is something wrong with my passport?’

‘No, your passport is in order, but Russian businessmen and gas traders all speak a reasonable amount of English, whilst members of criminal gangs don’t.’

‘I have a letter from my mother that says I am not in a gang.’

The man inspecting the passport glanced at his colleague. In Russian, he said to Mick, ‘I think we may have to look into your background in some detail, sir.’

In English, Mick said, ‘Take your fucking time, Knob Head, just get me a cuppa, I’m drying here.’

The two passport inspectors glanced at each other with peevish looks. ‘Would I be right in assuming that this is a wind-up?’

Mick produced his SIS pass. ‘How was my Russian?’

‘Your Russian was perfect, and this passport...?’

‘Like Pamela Anderson’s tits.’

‘I couldn’t fault it.’

‘You won’t, not unless you visit the eighty-year-old man in Moscow whose identity I pinched, and confirm that I’m not him. Is Dolan on duty?’

The second man stepped out, back three minutes later with Dolan.

‘Mickey!’ Dolan loudly greeted. They shook. He thumbed towards his colleagues. ‘Did they pick you up?’

‘No, but the lady on the desk figured my English was not up to scratch.’

Dolan examined the passport. ‘Good work, real good work, Mick.’ He handed it back. ‘Tell them about the vase.’

‘Ah, not that old story,’ Mick mock complained.

Dolan faced the men. ‘He snuck into Russia, went right across the country, took a priceless stolen vase off an armed gang of fifty men, got it out, all the way to the owner and dropped it.’

The men laughed.

Dolan continued, ‘Turns out the owner’s insurance pays for damage or theft, so Mick pretends he found it *already broken*. They collect the insurance ... and everyone is happy.’ He faced Mick. ‘And did they ... slip you a few quid?’

‘They bought me a beer,’ Mick admitted.

‘That passport...?’ Dolan nudged.

‘Issued in Russia; it’s genuine apart from the fact that I’m not me. Listen, Colette is upstairs if you want a cup of tea.’

‘Martin Colette? Sure. Go grab your bag and I’ll see you at the gate.’

‘Don’t want to shine a torch up my bum?’ Mick teased.

‘Not your bum, no.’

Mick addressed the other two men. ‘Sorry about that, but I like to give your staff a live one every once in a while.’ They shook.

With suitcases retrieved, Jim followed Mick through the gate, Dolan following as they headed for the Costa Coffee shop. Colette was sat waiting.

Standing, he Colette said to Dolan, ‘He didn’t come through on a fake passport, did he?’

They shook. ‘Passport was a brilliant fake, but he wound the guys up.’

Colette shook Jim’s hand, catching up on old times and common friends as Mick and Dolan grabbed trays and bought drinks and food. Twenty minutes later, with Dolan heading off, Colette asked, ‘Anything fresh?’

‘I left the Hilton last night, and we didn’t go back,’ Mick reported. ‘And the honey-trap ladies ... they booked out without so much as a call.’

‘Then they *were* ... who you suspected.’

‘Oh yeah, and very professional with it,’ Mick confirmed. ‘But I think I figured something out.’

‘What’s that?’ Colette asked.

‘I think, I mean I suspect, that after I ... *liberated* the wallet of one of the people around Sayeed, that the paymaster got mad about it. The goons were to teach someone a lesson and return the status quo.’

‘The Russian couple?’ Colette puzzled.

‘They’re the only logical choice,’ Mick said. ‘Nothing else makes sense. And last night we took down four armed goons, so that was six armed goons in total. Some fucker was upset, real upset to send that many.’

‘That’s a serious worry, Mick,’ Colette cautioned.

‘More so for him, because he’s lost six men; the four from last night ending up in custody with the first two idiots. He’s got to be crapping himself right now.’

‘Be careful in Spain, you two,’ Colette urged.

‘I will,’ Jim offered. ‘Don’t know about him.’

‘We’ve alerted other agencies to the fact that Sayeed is trying to bait the security services. You may have a quiet run at it.’

‘The Spanish won’t back off from Sayeed,’ Mick suggested. ‘But, then again, it’ll take ten days for the Spanish paperwork to reach the right people, and even then they won’t give a fuck. Did Interpol get a note?’

‘They did.’

‘And still no searches on me?’

Colette shook his head as he sipped his tea.

Mick faced Jim. ‘Those ladies were definitely not agency then.’

‘Private?’ Jim puzzled.

‘Yes, and a worry, because private individuals don’t mind cutting the balls off sleeping men.’

‘You put your heart and soul into it, Mick,’ Colette quipped. ‘Listen, you’re not authorised to come through here with fake passports. Some day –’

‘I have to practise,’ Mick insisted. ‘Besides, you’ll bail me out.’

‘If Chambers knew...’

‘Look, a few months back you sent me to Libya with fake details, and I flew back in with them!’

‘And they were duly handed in,’ Colette noted. ‘And ... they were for just *that* job. Your other fakes ... God knows where they come from, and I won’t ask.’

‘You ... getting heat about Malta?’ Mick nudged.

‘No, not at all. I even had some praise, I’ll have you know,’ Colette informed them, his nose in the air in a mocking gesture.

Jim put in, ‘What Mick did, was to shake the tree on day one, and damned fast. What we know, we knew early, otherwise we could have tiptoed around for weeks. Something is going on. For someone to send those six goons – armed in Malta? He has money, connections, channels, and a bad temper to go with it.’

‘As I said, be careful in Spain,’ Colette cautioned. ‘First sign of trouble, call.’

‘How will Davies get back?’ Jim asked.

‘They sail for Gibraltar in three days, he’ll fly from there.’

‘Has he ... said anything?’ Jim asked.

‘He spoke to his section chief this morning, who reported him doing well. Why?’

‘Just wondering if he blames us?’ Jim admitted.

‘I ... sent you to do that job, Davies’ section chief sent him, and none of us could have predicted armed idiots running around Malta – it’s unheard of.’

‘C’mon,’ Mick said to Jim. ‘Best collect our tickets. I booked them online this morning, so it’ll be a headache.’

On the flight to Malaga, Mick and Jim ignored each other, sitting apart. Collecting their luggage at Malaga airport they exchanged looks, but kept apart. Safely through passport control and customs, Jim followed Mick as they took a shuttle-bus the short distance to the railway, catching a train down to Fuengirola.

They both checked the people getting on and off at the various stops, the train trundling slowly down the coast and eventually passing under Torremolinos town centre, into the sunshine again at Arroyo, soon in tunnels again before arriving in Fuengirola, halting in an underground station. At street level, Mick grabbed the first taxi, waving Jim over.

‘Where we staying?’ Jim asked as they jumped in, Mick handing the driver an address.

‘With friends,’ Mick enigmatically stated. ‘But we’re booked into a local hotel as well, just in case.’

The taxi followed a main road out of the town, soon climbing a gentle rise, the hills in the distance dotted with houses.

‘This is Mijas,’ Jim noted. ‘I holidayed here once.’

At the small and picturesque mountain town of Mijas, its square the local tourist trap, Mick said to the driver. ‘My friend, first Benalmadena Pueblo, we’ll have a look.’

The taxi driver shrugged. They cornered around steep bends with equally steep drops, arriving at the pueblo five minutes later. Mick directed the taxi past uniform white houses, a fountain, and to a small square.

Handing the taxi driver fifty Euros, Mick said, ‘Wait please.’ He led Jim to a viewpoint.

‘Expensive ride,’ Jim complained.

‘Around here they’re pricey.’ They halted at an iron railing, the chosen spot affording them a panoramic view of coast some two miles below.

‘I remember this view,’ Jim noted. ‘Think we came up here once. You follow that road down to Benalmadena Beach.’

Mick placed a cigarette on his lip and nodded. ‘Yep. Right, let’s go say hello.’ He turned and started down a set of steps.

‘Say hello?’ Jim repeated as he followed, glancing back at the waiting taxi.

They found a small bar built into the cliff, tables and chairs outside, no patrons visible. Stepping in, the barman looked up. The man looked to Jim to be around fifty-five and of Mediterranean appearance, five eleven tall and with a bit of a potbelly, now wearing a purple jumper.

‘Roger, this is Jim. Jim this is Roger.’ They shook. ‘Jim, Roger is a former Interpol officer who doesn’t mind stretching the law. And Roger, Jim is a retired former Circus officer who thinks twice about stretching the law.’

‘Backup,’ Jim realised.

‘Drinks?’ Roger asked.

‘Nope, expensive taxi sat up top. We’ll be up at the villa, I’ll call when we need you.’ Mick led Jim out, and back up the steps to reclaim the taxi.

‘He British?’ Jim asked.

Mick nodded. ‘But can pass for Mediterranean.’

Back in Mijas Square they carried on the way they were facing, along a quiet road and to a villa. Halting at a large wooden gate set in high stone walls, Mick jumped out, pressing a buzzer several times. The gate clicked open, but Mick had to manhandle it aside. With the taxi through, Mick jumped back in and directed the taxi fifty yards down a slope and to a huge and sumptuous villa. A pink villa. A white-haired lady in her seventies stood with small dog in her arms, the strong wooden doors behind her ajar.

‘Flora, you old slapper,’ Mick called.

The taxi driver unloaded the cases as Mick closed in to the lady and kissed her on the cheek.

‘Flora, this is Jim. And no, you can’t bed him, he has more taste than that.’

‘Charming,’ she complained.

‘Hello,’ Jim offered.

With the taxi pulling away, Flora led them inside.

‘Wow!’ Jim quietly let out, a look exchanged with a smirking Mick.

‘Your rooms are upstairs, I put sticky notes on them,’ Flora announced without turning around.

A maid in uniform stood waiting, drink orders taken. With cases left in the hallway, they all sat.

‘Jim, Flora here is an ... old customer –’

‘A friend, Mick. We’re friends,’ she insisted.

‘I ... handled Flora’s divorce.’

She laughed, tipping her head back. Jim shot Mick a puzzled look, a request for further explanation.

‘I ... befriended her late husband, got him drunk, gave him some Viagra, and got him a nice eighteen year old Romanian hooker who...’

‘Gave him a blowjob and a heart attack,’ Flora squealed.

Jim shot Mick a disapproving frown.

‘Flora got the full sixty-eight million quid,’ Mick explained.

‘Bloody hell,’ Jim let out.

‘So Mick’s my favourite man in the whole world,’ Flora added.

‘And a year ago some conmen took Flora for half a million,’ Mick explained as their drinks were placed down. ‘So I ... recovered it.’

‘It wasn’t the money, it was the principle!’ Flora insisted. ‘They conned me, and Mick got it all back when he could have legged it with the money.’

‘He’s good that way,’ Jim mockingly approved. ‘When he finds a wallet in the street he hands it in.’

‘What’s the job, Mick?’ Flora asked.

‘Couple of Russian gentlemen, Flo.’

‘Stay as long as you like, I could do with the company.’

‘Still playing bridge?’

‘No, I gave that up.’

‘Got some work for you if you want it,’ Mick told her, Jim surprised by the offer.

‘I love a bit of intrigue and sneaking about; you just give me an hour’s notice.’

Mick faced Jim. ‘Tomorrow: eye patch, blazer, walking stick – and Flo on your arm. And don’t worry, Flo’s excellent at ad-libbing and watching people. She also spills her drink on people like a pro.’

Jim smiled widely, shaking his head.

* * *

Dinner was cooked by a visiting chef, served by the maid and of five star quality, the wine a hundred pounds a bottle.

After the meal, Jim was both full, and impressed. ‘That was damned good,’ he let out.

‘He comes up twice a week, the chef,’ Flo informed them.

On the patio, the three of them sat watching the twinkling lights of Fuengirola below.

‘So, what’s the game plan?’ Jim asked, easing back and relaxing, sipping a nice red wine.

‘Sayeed will book into the hotel some time after noon, so you two can confirm that. My guess is ... we’ll see watchers in the hotel before he gets there.’

‘What hotel?’ Flora asked.

‘Granada Star.’

‘God, what a dump. Does he travel cheap?’

‘He was in the Hilton in Malta,’ Jim put in.

‘I’ve been there. Didn’t like it much.’

‘What’s the Granada like?’ Jim asked her.

‘It’s on a busy main road, two blocks from the promenade. It’s one of them tall towers, but the rooms look over apartments with TV aerials. Ghastly.’

‘It has the Italian restaurant opposite the main entrance?’ Mick asked with a frown.

‘Yes, that’s it,’ Flora confirmed. ‘But that restaurant closed for a year and then re-opened, back as it was – same people.’

‘It’s easy to watch,’ Mick commented, taking in the view. ‘Pack a small case, Flo, we’ll get you a room there for nap time.’

‘If I catch an hour at 4 o’clock I’m fine,’ she said defensively.

With Flora off to bed, it was just Mick and Jim, under the stars with a good red wine. It was chilly, but not cold.

‘You got this place sewn up,’ Jim noted.

‘Spent a lot of time working down here. And when I make a contact ... I try and keep hold of them.’

‘A gregarious spy,’ Jim idly commented.

‘To do the tail work well you need the structures and the people, the contacts and the places. I can tail people down here from in front and know where they’re going. I can guess where they’ll eat out, and where they’ll shop. And I can tell the difference between a tourist, an ex-pat, an ex-pat gangster, or a mark.’

‘The paymaster worries me.’

‘He worries me as well,’ Mick admitted. ‘But so long as he keeps sending idiots ... well, we’ll see tomorrow.’

‘Should we pick up Sayeed at the airport?’

‘Roger will, it’s a days work for him. And I’d like to see the look on Sayeed’s face when he gets the taxi bill down here.’

‘He may get the train like us. That was two Euros.’

‘Maybe.’

‘And if I spot certain ladies tomorrow?’ Jim posed.

‘Then I’ll have to stay back, and you’ll need the patch and sunglasses. I doubt they’ll recognise you.’

‘If they think we’re tailing Sayeed, they’re bound to think we’ll be here,’ Jim posed before sipping his wine.

‘I’m not so sure. If we we’re of interest to them they’d have stuck with us.’ Mick’s phone trilled. ‘Yeah?’

‘It’s me, can you talk?’ Colette asked.

‘Sure, just sat with a good red wine enjoying the view.’

‘Someone died at the Metropole Hotel in Malta today, and they can’t identify him. Aged around sixty, dark hair. He had a leg in plaster, but fell and broke his neck.’

‘Doesn’t sound like anyone we saw.’

‘Well, I’ll try and get you the details. Night.’

Mick faced Jim, taking a moment. ‘Fake Austrian guy had his neck broken in the Metropole today. Police think it was a fall.’

‘That would be too convenient. So, who pushed him?’

Mick took in the view. ‘Whoever pushed him is private, not an agency. And our dead man was not agency, or they’d know. So, private agency one kills private agency two’s man.’

‘Which makes a complete nonsense of the idea that Sayeed is baiting the security services,’ Jim put in.

‘It does, kind of.’

‘So, tomorrow we can expect a bunch of squabbling kids, all either trying to follow Sayeed - or trying to stop others following him!’

‘You and Flo go static at the hotel tomorrow, I’ll go mobile with Roger.’

3

Wearing a beige eye-patch, glasses and a blue blazer, Jim helped Flora from the taxi and into the hotel foyer, a booking made by phone the night before. With the room checked, cases dumped, they took the lift down and settled in the hotel bar for a coffee, a clear view of the foyer from where they sat.

‘The couple,’ Flora said. ‘Fakes for definite.’

‘Yes?’ Jim studied the couple as best he could. ‘Why?’

‘Why are they sat in here, young couple like that? And she has a wedding ring, but he don’t.’

‘Maybe they’re cheating,’ Jim said with a grin.

‘Then they’d be upstairs and at it, not here. They have one coffee cup each and three dirty coasters, so they’ve been there an hour.’

Jim smiled, shaking his head. 'Mick said you were good.'

'Mick said you lost your wife.'

Jim lost his grin, and took a breath. 'Yes, of thirty years. She ... developed cancer just as I retired and ... before we moved to Cyprus.'

'I had a lot of friends out here when I came. Half I buried, the other half have gone do-lally in the head. Some don't even know their own names anymore.' She sipped her soda water. 'Mick took me on a job a while back, to Nice.'

Jim's eyes widened. 'Mick? Took you ... on a job?'

'Aye. I sat in the hotel, spotted the mark and his buddies - and his slapper, then Mick got their documents or something. It was great fun. And you're not so young either, my lad.'

'Well ... no.'

'If you don't use your body, you lose the use of it. If you don't use your head, you go do-lally like the rest. Make the most of it, Jim. I got all the money in the world, and no one pays me any notice, or any respect. If I sat in that house till I died no perisher would notice.'

Jim focused on the foyer and its reception desk, alone with his own thoughts for a full minute. 'I'll go to the room and call in. You OK there?'

'Fine, I'll watch the watchers.'

In the room, Jim called Mick. 'How we doing?'

'Sayeed is taking the train. Roger is with him because Sayeed has some close company, and I'm not sure if they were in Malta. How's it your end?'

'Flora spotted the watchers before I did; couple in reception chain-drinking coffee.'

'Go passive: no tails and no interest shown. Let's bore them to death, eh?'

'No problem.'

Downstairs, Flora now had a handful of tourist leaflets on the table, Jim picking one up as he sat.

‘I had a word with the watchers,’ Flora discretely mentioned. ‘Asked them to read the small print on this. They’re east European of some sort, broken English.’

‘That fits. Mick has a man on the mark, who’s not alone.’

‘I know Roger; runs the little bar in the pueblo. I used to pop down there for Sunday lunch, but his steps up and down are a bugger on my legs.’

Twenty minutes later, and with sandwiches being nibbled at, Jim whispered, ‘That’s the mark.’

Flora did not react. ‘Car outside, three men in it,’ she said whilst picking bits out of her sandwich.

Two men walked in, through reception and to the bar, sitting behind Flora and Jim. The first man made a call in German.

‘We’re at the hotel, the Granada. He’s booking in. No, nothing so far. Yes, they’re sat in reception, I’ll talk with them soon. OK, I’ll call Muller later.’

Flora lifted a tourist guide. Placing it close to her eye, she lifted her glasses for a better look. Swivelling, she glanced at the first man. ‘Do you speak English, love?’

‘Yes.’

She offered the flyer. ‘Can you see what it says at the bottom?’

The man smiled and took the flyer. ‘Thirty-five Euros each, no refund. Must book one day before.’ He handed it back.

‘Thank you.’ She turned to Jim. ‘Thirty-five for the bus trip.’

Jim put a hand to his ear. ‘What?’

‘Thirty ... five!’

Jim nodded, accepting the flyer.

From behind, he could hear in German, ‘If I ever get like that, fucking shoot me.’

With Sayeed in the lift, the men left the hotel.

‘Did you get any of that?’ Flora asked.

‘Yes, they’re our boys alright. I even got a name, maybe the paymaster.’

‘Sloppy boys. They never respect the old, or think we’re listening.’

‘Let’s walk down to the beach, or we’ll look as suspicious as that couple.’

Jim eased up, a hand for Flora, and hobbled out. At the main entrance, Flora exaggerated her difficulty with the steps before Jim led her towards the promenade, the car’s number plate noted.

At the beach he called Mick. ‘Three goons at the hotel in addition to the couple, and they have a car; I’ve got the plate. They speak German, but I can’t tell regions as well as you. Got a potential name for the paymaster: Muller. And Mick, the amateur couple in reception are part of the team.’

‘Then the amateur Russian couple were with them all along.’

‘And we bumped them, taking the guy’s wallet.’

‘That pissed off someone,’ Mick commented. ‘They probably made the fake Austrian and killed him.’

‘And the honey trap?’ Jim asked.

‘Not part of that group. Anyone there you recognise?’

‘Not so far,’ Jim reported.

‘Anyone with a bruised face?’

‘No,’ Jim said with a grin.

‘Bore them rigid, Jim. Tonight, leave Flo there, meet me at the villa for 8pm.’

Mick put his phone away, lifted his binoculars and focused on the street outside the hotel, and the car in question.

‘Well?’ Roger asked, the two of them now on a high roof, wedged between a lift housing and a large satellite dish.

Mick lowered his glasses and faced Roger. He made a face, taking a moment. ‘If they’re true to form, then they’ll be carrying ... and ready to use them.’

‘So what are they after?’

‘We don’t know. The mark is wandering around Europe, possibly to try and bait the security services for the bad publicity, and this lot ... they follow him around and play at watchers, shooting at people taking an interest in the mark. Some of those that turned up in Malta are behind bars.’

‘Mick, if their buddies are behind bars, then that lot down there either have a death wish ... or they don’t know.’

‘Don’t know?’ Mick queried.

‘Don’t know a fucking thing about Malta.’

Mick took in the view from the roof. ‘Sacrificial lambs?’

‘Mick, if that lot thought for a moment that someone like you was on their case ... they’d fuck off.’

‘They *were* all amateurs in Malta...’ Mick thought out loud. ‘But what does that achieve? We can work around them and still follow the mark; he’s all over the computer and using his own ID.’

‘Why do you think they’re baiting the police?’

‘His brother has a long-running row with the press in various countries, accusations of harassment and death threats,’ Mick explained, focusing the binoculars. ‘If we pull in the mark for nothing ... they get more publicity.’

‘Any publicity from Malta?’

‘Not a thing, I kept it that way.’

‘Mick, could this be about you?’ Roger let float.

Mick faced him with a curious frown. ‘Me?’

‘I can think of a few people that would spend good money on trying to catch up with you,’ Roger warned.

‘No one could have figured I’d get this assignment. And those I’ve fucked off over the years ... they don’t know who I work for.’ Mick re-focused the glasses. ‘Besides, they’d send a pro, not a dozen amateurs. When the time came my head would explode, a high velocity round making a nice hole, and I’d know nothing about it.’

‘Just a thought.’

Mick lowered the binoculars, staring across at Roger for several seconds.

At 8pm, Jim drove past Mick in Roger’s car on the mountain road to the villa, Mick and Roger now parked up and waiting.

They remained a further five minutes, checking the road, before joining Jim.

‘Well?’ Mick asked as he slumped down onto a sofa in the huge lounge, the maid stood waiting.

‘We’re boring them,’ Jim answered as Mick asked the maid for three beers. ‘Sayeed has come and gone, and we saw him sat at a café, back to the road as usual.’

‘Like he’s trying to be followed,’ Roger noted.

‘Thought I spotted someone with a big lens,’ Jim mentioned. ‘If Flora hadn’t been with me I could have been sure.’

‘Could just be Interpol watching Sayeed,’ Roger put in.

Mick held his hands wide. ‘We’re being paid to baby-sit, London requires nothing more.’

‘But...’ Jim nudged.

‘But ... there’s something more going on, and I’d like to know what it is,’ Mick answered. ‘Either that, or we simply baby-sit for five days.’

Roger eased forwards. ‘From what you’ve told me, the paymaster is already twenty or thirty grand out of pocket and down six men. This is a high stakes game, not just to piss-off the police in the press, no matter how much the brother might want to.’

‘I’m tempted to follow this all the way up the tree,’ Mick told Jim. ‘And, if we find a few half-decent professionals on the way, London will pay us. If we catch a big fish, we’ll get a good bounty.’

Roger told Jim, ‘Mick and me, we hunt around the coast when we can. We’ve picked up four individuals, a total bounty of over two hundred grand.’

‘If one of the key players has a bounty on him, we’ll make a few quid,’ Mick told Jim, a gentle encouragement, a bit of carrot dangling.

‘Is that why you took the wallets in Malta?’ Jim asked.

‘Partly - I checked the names, but you won’t catch a big fish playing at being a watcher.’

‘But the paymaster may have a few quid on his head,’ Jim noted. He shrugged. ‘I’m not averse to some extra income. What about Colette? And now that Davies has been shot, London is paying attention.’

‘They don’t care about us looking for bounties, they pay them themselves often enough,’ Roger emphasised.

‘When Sayeed flies home we’re off the case,’ Mick pointed out. ‘Best make use of the time while they’re paying us our costs.’

‘So what’s the plan?’ Jim asked before sipping his beer.

‘We try and get their wallets and mobiles,’ Mick said. ‘That may lead us to the next guy up the chain. The room you have in that hotel, does it face the street?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then we need a few condoms.’

Jim raised a flat palm. ‘Excuse me?’ he loudly asked.

Mick and Roger laughed. Mick explained, ‘Condoms full of paint. You’ll see; it’s a tried and tested routine.’

Green gloss paint

1

Flora picked up the newspapers from the bathroom floor, being careful to get them all into a plastic bag. With the air squeezed out, she put the bag into a second. That was squeezed into a third, placed finally into Flora's suitcase.

Jim slid the window open and peered down, the car five yards to the right. Pulling his head in, he whispered, 'Lights, Flo.'

With the room dark, newspapers laid out on the dresser and Jim wearing plastic gloves, "Operation Condom Paint" began.

Sat in the car in below, three men rested elbows out of open windows, smoking and chatting quietly. The first condom hit the windscreen with a bang, the paint covering a wide area, splattering across the road and pavement. Startled, they jumped out, the second condom hitting the roof and exploding a second later, the men's faces, hair and clothes covered in bright green gloss paint.

Jim closed the window with an elbow, Flora swishing the curtain before knocking on the lights. She held a plastic bag, Jim's plastic gloves carefully taken off and placed inside. Flora squeezed the air out of the bag, placing it in a second, then a third and inside her case as Jim washed his hands, checking everywhere for paint.

With Flora spraying Channel No. 5 around the room, Jim checked his face and hair in the mirror, his shirt, then his hands and arms front and back. Flora looked him over, Jim checking her. The newspapers on the dresser were folded, bagged and placed in the suitcase, the empty tins already inside.

They diligently checked the dresser, rubbing toilet paper across it just in case, Jim dropping to his knees to check the carpet. They were good to go.

In the street, the men stood staring at each other, soaked in sticky gloss paint, people stopping to watch. Reception called the police.

When the police arrived the men were rubbing their hair with clothes and rags from the boot, but succeeding in only making it worse by spreading the sticky paint around. The police were not too keen to approach, the Germans pointing upwards, the police trying to figure where the paint condoms had come from.

With the lead German wanting to drive away, the police were not keen on that idea, the windscreen blocked, even after rubbing newspapers over it. They forbid the men from driving it, leaving them only one option - since no taxi would take them. The men started walking.

2

Roger laughed hard, following a trail of small green dots along the pavement. He pointed, 'I think they went this way.'

'You're good,' Mick commended. 'You could have Red Indian blood in you.'

Four blocks over, the men stood outside a cheap and rundown hotel, the porter not wanting to let the men with green hair and sticky fingers inside the hotel.

'OK, here we go,' Mick said.

Approaching the complaining men, Mick adopted German. 'Guys, what the fuck happened?'

'Someone threw paint.'

'Nail polish remover will help, from the corner shop. Come.'

The Germans willingly followed Mick and Roger towards the beach, and a brightly lit shop on a corner, people stopping to stare. Mick went inside, soon back with several bottles of surgical spirits and household dusting rags, the Germans most grateful.

'The beach,' Mick said, gesturing to the sand across the promenade. They moved off as a group, shuffling down a

smooth and sandy ramp to the sand itself and a low wall to sit on. The wall was lit from the promenade, but the area was quiet and shaded. ‘Sit, sit.’

Mick poured the surgical spirits onto sticky hands, the men rubbing the paint off, rags applied, more praise heaped on Mick and Roger, talk of a financial reward or a few beers.

Next, Mick and Roger tackled the hair. ‘Don’t – whatever you do – get this in your eyes,’ Mick cautioned. With the Germans sat in a line, eyes tightly closed, hair was dabbed with the surgical spirits.

Mick exchanged a look with Roger, the promenade checked at length, both ways. He nodded. With kind words being issued, heads being dabbed, Roger pulled a truncheon out of his jacket.

Mick nodded. With a cloth around his hand, he hit the first man in the jaw, the punch unseen, Roger whacking the end German in the nose, knocking him backwards. The middle German opened his eyes in time to see Mick hit him in the jaw. It was all over, additional blows and kicks added for good measure, sand kicked over the German’s sticky faces. With Mick grabbing wallets and phones, Roger smashed ankles, the two of them across the promenade six seconds later and into a side street.

At the first corner, Roger headed to the main road, Mick to the car, Roger flagging down a police car and reporting a fight on the beach. When Roger eased into the car, Mick pulled off, back at the villa fifteen minutes later.

Jim called. ‘How’d it go?’

‘As expected: taxis don’t take people covered in paint, and hotels don’t like to admit them.’

‘Got what we need?’ Jim nudged.

‘Yes. Clean up, check for paint everywhere, then sit in the bar and see what happens.’

‘On it.’

The maid fetched paint cleaner for Mick and Roger, Flora’s decorators having left some behind. Sticky fingers were cleansed, washed down with soap afterwards.

In the lounge, Mick sat with a beer, calling the duty officer at the MOD. 'It's Michael Canuck, I work for Martin Colette, P2. I need some details taken down and traced. Thanks.'

A full fifteen minutes later, names, driver's license numbers and recently dialled and received numbers were logged.

'They look like genuine German IDs,' Mick commented, handing them over to Roger, an expert on fake IDs.

One of the phones began to play a musical call. Mick picked it up. 'Yah?'

'How goes it?'

'Nothing.'

'Nothing?'

'Nothing.'

'OK.' The line went dead.

'Paymaster?' Roger asked, still studying the IDs.

'Maybe.' Mick made a note of the number on a pad. Recalling the last number dialled, he could see it was not the same number. He asked the maid for a small radio, which she fetched. Turning on the radio, and turning up the volume – the station deliberately off-tune - Mick dialled the number.

'Yah?'

'Heinrick has been shot.'

'Shot?'

'Maybe a sniper.'

'And the police?'

'They have the body, and his pistol.'

'Have you been seen?'

'No.'

'Leave your hotel, go to another.'

'The police will trace the hotel through Heinrick. We are booked in, they have our passports.'

'Ditch the IDs, I will have new identity brought down in a day or two. Sleep on the beach or in the hills if you have to. I will call when we have them.' The line went dead, Mick turning down the radio.

Mick pointed at the IDs. 'Fakes.'

‘Bloody good ones,’ Roger noted. ‘Expensive.’

‘Courier coming down with extra IDs in a day or so; he can tell us where he hails from.’

‘They all have the issuing city as Munich - the driver’s licenses.’

Mick selected another number and turned the radio back up.

‘Hallo?’ came a woman’s voice, a young woman. ‘Klaus?’

‘It’s me.’

‘Are you in a bar?’

‘Yes. Listen, Heinrick has been killed.’

‘My God! I told you not to get involved with them. You’ll end up dead, or in prison!’

‘Muller pays well.’

‘Who is this Muller? Does he work for Lodz?’

‘Yah, he’s the big boss.’

‘Money is no good in prison!’

‘It will be OK, a few days and I’m back.’

‘You sound different.’

‘I have been shot, but not bad.’

‘Klaus!’ she screamed. ‘To hell with Brim Lodz!’

Mick wrote the name down and ended the call, knocking off the radio. ‘Amateurs, hired by a Brim Lodz, no idea who Muller is, but the girlfriend probably doesn’t know.’

The phone went, the same number, but was ignored, the volume turned down. Scanning the text messages of each phone, they found nothing interesting.

‘There’s one common number,’ Mick noted. He turned the radio back up and selected the number. ‘Lodz?’

‘Yah? Hallo?’

‘Heinrick is dead, shot, maybe a sniper. I’m hurt, but not bad.’

‘And Steffan?’

‘I don’t know where he is, he ran.’

‘Idiot!’

‘I just had a call, from a Muller, asking about you.’

‘About me? Muller asked about me? What did he ask?’

‘How much you paid us.’

The line went dead.

Mick knocked off the radio. ‘Lodz works for Muller, and Lodz is afraid of Muller. Lodz is semi-pro, and these three were amateurs with a bit of form. This Muller – he might be a big fish.’

‘If he was pissed before, he’ll be somewhat vexed now,’ Roger cautioned.

‘Let’s get some food. We can try that Italian.’ Mick dialled Jim. ‘Jim, we’re heading to the Italian, so we’ll cover the street. You cover the bar.’

‘No problem.’

‘Oh, and Jim, you come back up here at 11pm, I don’t want you taking advantage of Flo.’

‘Sod off.’

‘How’re the kids?’

‘They legged it in a hurry after receiving a call. Looks like they checked out.’

‘You’ll have a quiet night then.’

3

Three hours in the Italian restaurant produced no sightings, but the food was good, the wine appreciated by Mick, Roger now the designated driver.

Back at the villa, they halted and watched the road for five minutes, no tail visible.

‘How’s Flo?’ Mick asked in the lounge.

‘Fine, she’s loving it.’ Jim reported.

‘And the hotel bar?’ Mick asked, he and Roger now easing down opposite Jim, Roger checking the German’s mobile phones for missed calls, the phones on silent.

‘Just old English couples, not a sign of anyone else,’ Jim reported. ‘Police went through the hotel, even had a look in our room at one point.’

‘And the car with the nice green bird shit on it?’ Mick asked.

‘Towed away,’ Jim reported.

‘Twelve missed calls on this one,’ Roger put in. ‘Same number. Eight on this one, two on the last. Oh, and a text message: go to Villa Los Hermanos, Capalenia.’

‘Capalenia?’ Mick repeated. ‘That’s a mile from your place!’

Roger nodded. ‘Must be a safe house.’

‘Coffees,’ Mick carefully mouthed. ‘We have a visit to make.’

‘Tonight?’ Roger complained. ‘We just sat stuffing our faces for three hours.’

‘Hence the coffees, some water, some fresh air,’ Mick listed off.

‘You’re a slave driver, you know that,’ Roger complained.

‘I’m good to go,’ Jim offered.

‘You can bloody drive then,’ Roger told him.

* * *

Twenty minutes later they wound around tight bends, turning off the main road and descending past a bar, winding around the estate whilst being directed by Roger - who figured he knew where the villa was. Climbing back up the estate, they passed a sign for the villa and kept going, halting behind a large rocky outcrop.

Binoculars in hand, Mick walked back along the road fifty yards, across scrubland and to the rocks. Climbing slowly, and gently, a stiff breeze cooling his face, he reached the edge of the rock and peeked over. The grey moonlight revealed a pair of boots about eight feet further forwards. Whoever was there, they were covered in camouflage netting and holding still. Mick dropped down, climbing slowly back down, inch by inch and as quietly as he could.

At the car he looked back before getting in. ‘Drive, but keep the lights off.’

Jim pulled away up the hill, only putting his lights on when they reached the main road.

‘There’s an OP on that rock, someone under camouflage netting, and professional enough to lie there all damn night long.’

‘Did they see you?’ Jim asked.

‘No, I just popped my head over.’

‘Interpol?’ Roger asked.

‘Not camouflaged like that,’ Mick said, shaking his head. ‘It’s a government agency.’

Back at the villa, Mick picked up one of the German’s phones and dialled the police. ‘Hallo? Polizei? Speak ... German?’

‘Moment.’

‘Hallo?’ came a man’s voice.

In German, Mick said, ‘This is villa Los Hermanos, estate Capalenia, between Mijas and Benalmadena Pueblo. A man came to the door, with blood on his face and hands, a German man saying he had been shot.’

‘Where is he now?’

‘I don’t know, we did not open the door. He looked like he had a pistol.’

‘And you are?’

‘I rent the villa with my wife. I am Brim Lodz.’

‘There will be units with you soon. Don’t go outside.’ The call ended.

‘What will that do?’ Jim asked.

‘If someone at the villa is arrested or questioned, Colette can get the details. It’ll also *seriously* screw with their heads, and give the guy on the rock something to report. Besides that, it’ll make them tired for my dawn visit. Roger, crash here – we’ll need your car in the morning. Jim, set your alarm clock for 5am.’

Mick made a call. ‘Duty officer, please.’

‘Hello?’ came a few seconds later.

‘It’s Michael Canuck, P2 under Colette. Run a check on villa Los Hermanos –’ He spelt it. ‘Capalenia estate, near Mijas. It’s

linked to an armed German gang currently under observation by a professional agency.'

'Which agency?'

'Don't know, we're not on speaking terms, just dark shadows in the night. Mick out.'

After showering, and cleaning his nails at length to remove any signs of green paint, Mick climbed into a sumptuous king size bed and sighed. His phone went. Reaching across, it was a London number. 'Hello?'

'It's the duty officer. What's your interest in that villa?'

'It's linked to the case I'm working on, Mohil Sayeed.'

'How?'

'German gunmen were following Sayeed, who led us to the villa,' Mick explained.

'German? It's owned by a Russian with a red flag.'

'And is this Russian motivated by politics or money?' Mick asked.

'Money. Drugs and guns, nightclubs and brothels.'

'Is that our only interest?' Mick pressed.

'I can't say, but the Russian section head will be getting a note in the morning.'

'Oh dear. And is there a team watching him?'

'I can't say, and you shouldn't even be contacting us directly, you should go through Colette.'

'Yeah, but if I ring him he just rings you. Why wake him at night, eh?'

Professional company

1

At 5am, Jim was awake and dressed, knocking on Mick's door, Roger up and ready, but bleary eyed.

'Forget it,' Mick told them, stood in his pants and yawning. 'I had a call, and the guy in the rocks might be one of ours.'

'Ours?' Jim repeated. 'You sent the Spanish police around!'

'Yeah, well they don't know that, do they. Anyway, give me another hour or two, I'm not fully cooked.'

When Mick was finally 'fully cooked' he accepted fresh pancakes from the maid, sipping a coffee.

'More missed calls on those phones,' Jim reported. 'And Roger's gone back to check his place.'

Mick nodded. When his phone went it was Colette. 'Right, boss?'

'Senior figure on his way down to you today, Mick. What happened last night?'

'We lifted the phones and wallets of three German goons, and they tracked back to a villa. Had a look at the villa and noticed an OP on a rock.'

'Then it wasn't a very good OP.'

'No, in fairness it was, but I snuck up from behind. Is it ours?'

'Yes.'

'Are we in trouble?' Mick asked.

'No, but the two projects are now interlinked, and *other departments* have seniority. I've been asked that you not call directly, and go through channels.'

'I didn't want to wake you, boss.'

'I know. But try and call me in future.'

'My wrist has been slapped.'

'Spanish police arrested three armed German men, beaten and covered in green paint and sand. Do I want to know if you had a hand in that?'

‘No, you don’t want to know. But we now have their boss, and his boss.’

‘Brim Lodz is German, minor offences, ex-military, whereabouts unknown, believed to be in the Czech Republic. The numbers you gave are for women in the Munich area, some of the numbers are pre-pay, so no trace.’

‘And Muller?’

‘Nothing in the computer of anyone by that name being of interest,’ Colette informed Mick.

‘Listen, when the middle boss thought that his men were hurt, he sent them to that villa for help. It’s a definite and strong link between them.’

‘That villa is out of bounds to you. You can brief the people coming down and then ... well, stay with Sayeed.’

‘I hear and obey.’

Mick checked his watch, sending Jim back down to Flora. Jim called back at 1pm, nothing to report, the hotel quiet, Sayeed wandering again.

At 2pm Mick’s phone went. ‘Canuck?’

‘Yes?’

‘Davies works for me.’

‘I understand where you sit in the grand food chain, and the queue in the canteen.’

‘Where are you?’

‘Go to Benalmadena Pueblo, to the viewpoint. Look hard left and down, small and discrete bar. I’ll be there within thirty minutes.’

‘About the same for us.’

Roger picked Mick up ten minutes later. ‘The heavy mob are down,’ Mick explained as they drove away. ‘When they get here, you’re just a barman.’

‘You under investigation?’ Roger asked.

‘No, they’re here to ask questions, and to tell me that villa is out of bounds.’ Mick shook the bag of phones and wallets. ‘I come bearing gifts of appeasement.’

Mick was sat outside Roger's bar, alone and enjoying the view, when two faces he recognised descended the steep steps, one named Tiller. They sat. 'Drinks, gentlemen?'

'Soft drinks,' Tiller requested.

Mick handed over the bag. 'For you if you want them.' He ducked inside and ordered drinks, soft drinks, returning to the table with two orange juices.

'What are these?' Tiller asked, peering into the bag.

'Three large – and armed - German goons were watching Sayeed. I liberated their wallets and phones.'

Tiller stared back at Mick for several seconds. 'Three Germans, who were armed, were arrested down here last night, found beaten senseless and covered in green gloss paint and sand.' He waited.

'I have ... no information about that ... to offer you. I *found* their wallets and phones in the gutter.'

They stared back. 'And the link to that villa?'

'I called some of the recent numbers from the phones, pretending to be the Germans, said that I'd been shot. A text message came back, telling me – the shot German – to go to the villa.'

The men exchanged looks.

'The Russian couple in Malta?' Tiller nudged.

'Ukrainian ID, Russian accents.'

'They're off our radar; they've disappeared,' Tiller admitted. 'Seems they left Malta by boat.'

'Another couple turned up here, possibly Russian speakers. They disappeared quickly after a call, immediately after I faked the call home to the German middle man.'

'And the link between Malta and here?'

'Only Sayeed, no familiar faces hanging around. But when we lifted the wallet of the Bulgarian goons in Malta, they had Sayeed's itinerary; dates, times, hotels ... and the time he likes breakfast.'

Tiller seemed most put out. 'This whole thing with Sayeed ... was planned in advance,' he realised.

The second man said, 'The goons in Malta were all beaten senseless, at least four were. But I'm not seeing marks on your hands.'

'That ... is because I like to abstain from violence. I'm a professional – I keep a low profile.'

They again exchanged looks. Tiller admitted, 'Your ... results are undeniably impressive. We might just want to pinch you away from Colette.'

'I'm a whore at heart; whoever pays best, and treats me best.'

They smiled. 'And the villa OP. How did you spot that?'

'I snuck up on the villa, close enough to smell your guy, who – by the way – did a good job. But I'm also quite good.'

'The police turned up at the villa. Any clues as to why?'

Mick shrugged. 'Maybe the Germans gave it up. You going to tell me about that villa?'

'No,' Tiller quickly said. 'What I will say ... is that the link to Sayeed set-off alarm bells.' He shook the bag. 'And we appreciate this, and the link. All we have to do now is figure the link, and Sayeed's rather odd behaviour.'

'I'm still authorised to follow Sayeed, so please don't put anyone near my mark,' Mick urged.

'Why? Would they get beaten up and covered in green paint?'

'It's always a possibility,' Mick suggested with a firm stare.

'The team watching the villa are ex-SAS, so don't try and beat them up - you'll get a good kicking yourself. Their job ends at the villa walls, so you'll not overlap.'

Mick slowly nodded. 'What happened ... when the police went to the villa?'

'That ... is not your concern. Stay ... away.'

Mick sipped his beer. 'How's Davies doing?'

'Doing well and ... singing your praises, oddly enough. He was not looking forward to a Maltese hospital and a Maltese enquiry, the press all over him. What you did ... was a move

that has the community chatting over coffee, and not one you'd find in the manual.'

'I am resourceful,' Mick quipped. 'And if I turn up anything around Sayeed I'll let you know. But, could I ask a favour?'

'What's that?'

'I'm not allowed to call the duty officer directly, I have to call Colette – even in the middle of the night. Maybe ... you could send a memo?'

They stood. 'Maybe. We'll be here two days.'

Mick followed them up. 'Which would suggest that there's something of more interest to you down here than little old me.'

'If ... it's relevant to you, we'll call. Thanks for the drinks.'

Inside the bar, Roger asked, 'How'd it go?'

'Fine, but they didn't come down just to see little old me. I think they'll move on the villa and see what's in the safe. They have an SAS team on the villa, and they didn't bring the boys down just to sit on a rock and watch lizards.'

'Whoever's in the villa ... is a big fish,' Roger posed.

Mick sighed loudly. 'I know, buddy. And I'm tempted to have a go at the villa, but ... but I'm in their good books for a change, and I don't want to spoil it. I might get the key to executive toilets if this goes off OK.'

'You want back in?' Roger puzzled.

Mick shook his head. 'No, but it can't hurt to have a little back up.' His phone trilled. 'Yeah, Jim?'

'Where are you?' Jim asked.

'Roger's bar.'

'I'll be five minutes.' He hung up.

'Jim?' Roger asked.

Mick nodded as he put his phone away. 'Coming here.'

When Jim arrived, Mick asked about Flora.

Jim rolled his eyes. 'She's befriended another woman, and they've both befriended Sayeed.'

Mick laughed. 'Good old Flo.'

'Yeah, well she's convinced Sayeed that I'm some sort of bounder after her money, and that my eye patch is a fake!'

Mick laughed louder.

‘Sayeed bought them lunch around the corner.’

Mick’s phone went. Still smiling widely, and shaking his head, he stepped out to answer it. ‘Yes, boss?’

‘How’s it going?’ Colette asked.

‘You’ve rung me more on this job than in the last year, you know that.’

‘I have Chambers and others asking every day, twice a day,’ Colette reported, making it sound like a complaint. ‘The Club-Med department has never been so high profile.’

‘I have a watcher on Sayeed, he’s not going anywhere, and no one is tailing him.’

‘He is going somewhere, he’s going to Turkey in three days; Dalaman.’

‘He’ll have to connect,’ Mick noted.

‘He originally booked via London, then changed to Zurich.’

‘At last, the main event,’ Mick loudly exclaimed.

‘Main ... event?’

‘He’s been leading us around by the nose, Malta and here. But this is just the warm up to see who’ll come out to play. How long is his stop-over in Zurich?’

‘What makes you think he has a stop-over?’

‘How long?’ Mick pressed.

‘He flies in at noon, leaves at noon the next day.’

‘He’ll go visit the paymaster and a bank,’ Mick suggested.

‘Why do you say that?’

‘One, because all of the goons were from around central Europe, and two – this has to be more than just a walk in the sun. Sayeed is accepting payment for his brother and stuffing it in a Swiss bank.’

‘Well, there’s little we can do about that. But I have a link between some of the goons. They weren’t just in Turkey at the same time, they were in the same damn hotel. It’s part owned by a Russian with a red flag.’

‘Where is this hotel?’

‘A place near Marmaris called ... Icmeler.’

‘I know it well, lovely spot. Listen, do me a favour: see if our Russian friend owns any other property and get me a list.’

‘I have it here somewhere, I’ll text you the list.’

‘Thanks, boss.’ Mick hung up and entered the bar. To Jim he said, ‘Three days and we’re off to Turkey via Zurich. Sayeed is heading to the main event.’

‘Zurich?’ Roger repeated. ‘You ... need a third wheel?’

Mick regarded Roger for a moment then glanced at Jim. ‘We’re paid for this trip, and expenses. There’s not a budget for you, mate.’

‘Still, there may be a bonus in Switzerland,’ Roger floated.

Mick glanced at Jim again.

‘We have extra money to play with,’ Jim suggested. ‘They’ll stand for hotels, car hire, subsistence for this; that’s at least a thousand. We’ve been staying with Flo and using Roger’s car, so we’re quids in.’

Mick pulled out four hundred Euros and handed it to Roger. ‘From the Germans, one careless owner. Fly to Munich with Jim, hire a car and drive down, book into a shitty hotel in the centre of Zurich.’ Mick took a moment. ‘Guys, the paymaster ... he may throw a net around Sayeed in Zurich.’

Roger and Jim exchanged looks. ‘We’ll be careful,’ Roger reassured Mick, Jim nodding.

‘Pre-book your tickets on to Rhodes from Munich, book into a hotel in Rhodes Town, some crappy little bed and breakfast. That’ll be your base of operation, Turkey will be a day trip, but I’ll have a room there if you need to crash for the night.’

‘Should one of you watch Flo?’ Jim asked.

‘No,’ Mick adamantly stated, grinning. ‘Right now I feel sorry for Sayeed, because he’ll be getting an ear bashing!’ He faced Roger. ‘Close up, we’ll do a drive around then have some lunch.’

Sat at a bar at the top of the Capalenia estate, having lunch, they noted faces and cars, patrons and passing vehicles, Roger well

known to the bar's owner. When Roger explained away Mick and Jim as father and son looking to buy some property, the bar's owner brought out another man.

'You guys interested in property around here?' the new man asked, a portly fifty year old.

'Yes,' Mick agreed. 'Do you have property on the estate?'

'Just down the road, I'll get the map and show you,' the man offered.

With the map held up, Mick could see the villa in question. 'Does it have a view?'

'They all do, more or less. Mine has a great view down to the coast. I could show you around right now if you like.'

'Give us five minutes to finish this –'

'Sure, sure, no hurry. I'll get my car, and we can go in that.'

With the man walking down the hill, Mick said, 'His villa is right below ... *you know what.*'

'Will we be seen by the OP?' Jim whispered.

'They have no idea what we look like,' Mick emphasised. 'And it's all above board and genuine; people looking around a property for sale.'

A Range Rover pulled in a few minutes later. Drinks were downed, the bar tab paid. They piled in, soon winding down the estate a short way to the villa for sale. Jumping down, Mick could see that Los Hermanos itself prevented them from being seen from the OP in rocks above.

The villa owner walked them around the side of the house and onto dark green spongy grass. The view that the villa offered of the coast was very good, and from the far corner of the garden Mick could glimpse the rocks with the OP.

Inside, the owner showed them around the five bedroom two-storey house, decorated to a high standard. At the top of the marble stairs, Mick was last in line and stopped to peer out of the window at Los Hermanos. Hurried activity across the way signalled rapid packing.

'Guys,' Mick called. 'You look around, I just got a text from the wife. Be back in a second.' Mick quickly negotiated the

marble stairs and entered the garden. He called Colette. 'It's me. Get hold of Tiller, urgent, and get him to ring me right now.'

Mick paced up and down the soft grass, holding his phone. A full two minutes later Tiller called, an unknown number showing.

'Canuck?'

'Listen, I'm at a villa below your target villa, pretending to be interested in buying it -'

'You were asked to stay away -'

'Be glad I didn't. They're packing in big hurry.'

'What!'

'They're moving like they're about to be raided, but there's fuck all you can do in daylight.'

'Are you in a position to follow?' Tiller urgently got out.

'Funny you should say that. Call me back later.'

Mick ran into the house. 'Jim, Roger?' They appeared at the top of the stairs. 'She's just landed at the fucking airport! C'mon. Sorry, fella, but we will be back.'

'Oh, no problem. Ask at the bar,' the man offered.

Clattering shoes on marble steps signalled three men descending, the owner slamming the door as he followed behind them. Pulling away in a hurry, the man dropped his three guests back at the bar, Jim's hire car retrieved.

'What's up?' Jim asked as he took the wheel.

'The people in the target villa are packing up like the house is on fire,' Mick explained. 'We've been tasked with following – tasked by Tiller himself. Roger, wait here and see which way they go, they have to come past here. If you can borrow a car, do so. We'll be up the road and parked up, so keep your finger on my number.'

Roger jumped out before Jim pulled off, soon grabbing a set of car keys off the bar's owner. He took charge of a dusty Fiat, and parked it around the corner from the bar, a clear view of the estate's access road. He waited.

Fifteen minutes later a car passed, packed full of cases and boxes. It pulled straight out and headed towards Mijas. Roger had pressed the green button as soon as the car had appeared, and now said, 'Mijas direction. I'm behind in a white Fiat.'

Jim pulled straight off, heading slowly toward Mijas, soon glimpsing the target car in the mirror. He increased his speed a little.

At the junction, Jim said, 'Signalling left.'

'Down the coast,' Mick suggested. 'Stay well ahead, I can see Roger behind them. Ten Euros says it the highway west.'

'Marbella?'

'Could be.'

At the base of the hill, and passing through the inshore and less attractive areas of Fuengirola, Mick asked Jim to speed up and put the car across a roundabout. They halted the other side. The target car, a black Mercedes, joined the highway west, Roger behind but not crowding.

'Go!' Mick urged, Jim pulling around hard to rejoin the roundabout before joining the slip road. He floored it.

'It's OK,' Mick calmly said. 'Be easy for a two car tail on this road. Give him two hundred yards.' He dialled Roger. 'Tuck in behind us.'

Thirty minutes later they approached Marbella.

'Marbella,' Jim wistfully stated. 'More villains live here than you could poke a stick at.'

'He's coming off.' Mick dialled Roger. 'Take over when you can, but don't crowd him.'

Ten minutes north of Marbella they lost the car in a large estate of uniform whitewashed walls and uniform red tiled roofs.

'He ducked in somewhere,' Jim said.

'Yep, and now behind a high stone wall,' Mick said with a sigh. 'Back to the bar we passed, it overlooks a petrol station. Tonight we'll go have a look over a few walls.'

Tiller called. 'Canuck, do you have them?'

‘Yes, in a villa north of Marbella. We’ll have a close look after dark.’

‘Thank you, Canuck, I owe you one.’

‘No problem, I’m happy to help, boss.’ He hung up. ‘Dickhead. We just got his arse out the ringer; fucker didn’t have a tail car ready.’

‘Sloppy,’ Jim noted.

Roger pulled into the bar, the three of them taking a table inside with a window overlooking the petrol station. ‘I think I know where they went,’ Roger reported. ‘I had a nose over two gates, and they have families in, so it was the first large villa on that road back there.’

‘We’ll take a peek after dark,’ Mick said. Only now did he notice a text message from Colette. Opening it, he found a list of properties linked to the Russian who owned the hotel in Turkey. ‘Didn’t happen to get that villa’s name, did you?’

‘Tosher, tosker...’

‘Tishkent?’

‘That’s it,’ Roger confirmed.

Mick smiled widely. ‘It’s owned by the Russian linked to all this, who may just be the paymaster.’ Mick dialled Colette. ‘It’s me. Listen, the villa Tishkent on that list, we’re babysitting it for Tiller, after a lengthy and difficult car chase.’

‘He commandeered you?’ Colette asked, not sounding happy.

‘We volunteered to be helpful little servants of Her Majesty. Besides, we have eyes-on on Sayeed, and this villa is linked in. Tiller won’t give me his fucking number, so ask him to call me.’

When Mick lowered his phone, Jim repeated, ‘Long and difficult car chase?’

‘If we don’t sing our own praises, who the hell will?’ Mick quipped.

They ordered drinks, teas and coffees, but now ignored the petrol station.

Tiller rang. ‘Canuck, you after me?’

‘Villa is called Tishkent, owned by a Russian on your watch list, linked to the Bulgarian goons from Malta.’

‘Good work, our team will have a sniff around it later, pull back. Did they see you?’

‘No, we had a two car system going. We were careful.’

‘Thanks.’ Tiller hung up.

‘We’re to pull back,’ Mick said. ‘Their lads will go over the wall later.’

‘We should get a bonus for this,’ Jim complained. ‘We saved Tiller’s arse!’

‘I’ll be asking for a larger budget, don’t you worry,’ Mick assured them. ‘We’re persona grata right now. Right, after this, Jim – you back to the villa, Roger and me will check on Flo and do a walk-by around the hotel.’

‘My case is in Flo’s room,’ Jim pointed out. ‘It’ll look odd if I don’t return.’

Mick text’d Flora. ‘She has a mobile that she carries it, but – you know – she’s not quite with the technology.’

Five minutes later, Flora came on. ‘That you, Mick?’

‘Yes, how you doing?’

‘Mohil is in his room, I’m in mine.’

‘You on first name terms now?’ Mick joked.

‘Oh, yes, getting on well. And I’m doing a good job at seeming a bit slow.’

‘Has he said anything interesting?’ Mick asked.

‘A lot about Pakistan and their customs and growing up there, but nothing that pricked up my ears. Oh, wait a mo – he has a credit card in another name, I had a quick look. It’s Gander, or something like that. My eyesight is better than he thinks.’

‘You’re a star, you know that.’

‘You keeping my villa clean?’

‘Haven’t been there much, been tailing all day. Listen, what will happen with Sayeed if Jim returns?’

‘Ah, well, I made up a story and got quite carried away -’

‘That’s OK, it was a good story, but what if he returns?’

‘Sayeed might think it a bit odd if I take Jim back, I said a few bad words.’

‘We’ll grab Jim’s case late tonight.’

‘Mohil is always in his room for ten o’clock, evening meal at 7.30pm,’ Flora reported.

‘Jim will pick it up at 8pm then. Be awake, eh.’

‘I’ll be with Mohil at that time.’

‘Then put Jim’s things in reception when you go out, we’ll be watching, you old two-timer. Call me if you need anything.’ Mick hung up with a grin. ‘Jim, you’re dumped. She’s found someone younger, and darker.’

‘Thank god for that,’ Jim quipped.

‘If he’s lucky, she’ll take out her teeth and give him a good blowjob.’

2

At the hotel, Mick strolled past, cap on, finding Roger at the promenade and walking towards him. They passed without acknowledging each other.

Five minutes later, Roger called. ‘Main road, man walking east with a red cap on, big zoom lens inside his jacket.’

‘On it,’ Mick confirmed, turning about and walking briskly along the promenade. At the third block from the hotel, Mick caught sight of the red cap, adopting a parallel course and glimpsing it again at the next block.

The target was now moving away from the hotel, and away from the tourist area, the buildings passed being drab, the streets littered, the cars dusty. And the streets were quiet. At the next block, Mick ran two blocks over and around the corner, now putting a hand in his pocket and strolling towards the target head on.

Reaching either side of a road at the same time, both Mick and the target checked it was clear to cross. Mick crossed the road without looking directly at the target; he was checking the street, the windows and the closed up shops.

Two strides from the man, Mick lunged, a blow to the jaw knocking the surprised man back and spinning him around. Camera equipment clattered as it impacted the road. Mick delivered a good kick the ribs before bending down, grabbing the man by the wrist and dragging him between two parked cars.

With no time to waste, he unclipped the camera strap around the man's neck, patted down the man's jeans - grabbing his wallet, a phone from the jacket pocket, all done in six seconds. Standing, and holding the booty, Mick could see an old lady staring right at him. Spinning around, he ran two blocks over and to the beach, turning the corner so as to be out of line of sight of the local woman.

Slowing, and stepping down onto the sand, Mick tucked himself against the promenade wall. No one was visible on this part of the beach, two old boats with flaking paint helping to hide him. Dropping to his knees, he released the stolen booty and dug furiously, soon placing in the camera, wallet and phone - plus his own cap - into the hole, covering them over with sand. Looking up whilst still kneeling, Mick could see the tops of nearby buildings, but no windows offered anyone a view of him.

Easing up, and furiously trying to get the sand off his hands, he edged the high promenade wall for thirty yards, climbing the next set of steps to the walkway. With a hand in his pocket, he strolled slowly to the first café, sitting two tables in from the promenade and picking up a menu.

'Hello?' the waitress offered.

'Beer, and ... tuna mayo sandwich, please.'

She took the menu and disappeared into the back of the café, a man bringing a beer over a few seconds later. Sirens preceded a police car driving past, down the promenade, a second one soon following.

Munching on his sandwich, beer half drunk - and much needed, Mick observed two police officers walking along, the men seemingly moving with a purpose, checking faces and

descriptions. They glanced his way, took a lingering look, and moved on.

A full hour later, and after a plate of chips and two more beers, Mick finally stood, paying for the meal. 'Thank you.' He turned right once on the promenade, away from where the incident had taken place, and walked casually along.

Roger called. 'OK?'

'I got his goodies, they're in the sand on the beach, but there're police everywhere. I'll meet you at the car in five minutes.'

Two blocks over, the police approached him. 'English?'

'Yes,' Mick answered with a smile. 'But I work in Germany. Interpol.'

'Interpol?'

Mick took out his wallet and handed over his fake Interpol ID.

'Thank you, sir. Sorry to stop you, but we had a robbery.'

'No problem, I hope you catch them.' He plodded on.

In the car, Roger asked, 'What happened?'

'I decided not to wait; I jumped him in a side street. It went well enough, but an old granny saw me and called the police. The stuff is buried in the sand, safe enough, so we'll get it later.'

'Was he armed?'

'No.'

'Could be one of ours then,' Roger cautioned. 'Or agency.'

'I think he was a snapper.'

'Press?' Roger puzzled.

'They might have got whiff of a story,' Mick suggested, but did not sound convinced of the idea.

Back at the villa, Mick caught an hour's sleep, sleeping off the beer and food. Jim set off with them at 6.30pm, the car positioned across the street from the hotel, a hundred yards away. Flora appeared with another woman, Sayeed following, the trio walking over the road to the Italian.

‘Off you go, Jim,’ Mick said. ‘Or should I say – you cad and bounder!’ Jim opened the door, Mick shouting after him, ‘You abuser of old ladies!’

With the suitcase recovered, Jim walked slowly back towards them, eye-patch and blue blazer.

‘Mick,’ Roger urgently called.

‘I see them. Pull off!’

Roger pulled off, Jim noticing the sudden departure. Without reacting, he reached the main road and flagged down a taxi, soon heading towards the airport.

Once inside the taxi, Jim called. ‘Mick, I got company.’

‘We saw. Where you headed?’

‘Airport was all I could think of.’

‘And it was good thinking too. Walk around, sit and wait, bore them to death, then lose them. Buy a book and read it.’

At the airport, Jim called back. ‘Mick, they turned around and gave up at departures.’

‘Just a run past then. But do a good job, change clothes, buy a cap – take an hour. Then get the train to Arroyo Station and we’ll pick you up.’

Mick hung up and faced Roger as they sat in the villa’s lounge. ‘They tailed him to the airport and gave up.’

‘Amateurs?’

‘I don’t know,’ Mick said, his brow pleated. ‘They weren’t there before I clobbered the photographer. And they didn’t just fly in when I did clobber the guy.’

‘They were holding off?’

‘Or invisible; maybe a room overlooking the hotel. Did you see their faces?’

‘They looked like Brits,’ Roger noted. ‘Not Bulgarians.’

Mick nodded. ‘Can’t be Tiller’s department, not this quickly.’

‘Agency?’

‘Maybe,’ Mick let out. ‘And the timing suggests the photographer is linked in. Fuck it, let’s get that camera.’

Arriving at the beach, the light fading fast, Mick said, ‘I’ll stay, just in case that old lady is around. Walk straight down to the beach, left till you see two old boats with the paint coming off, one red one blue. Six foot beyond the boats, two foot from the wall, dig in with your foot. And be careful.’

Roger checked his empty backpack before easing out, his diminishing image observed by Mick. Fifteen minutes later, Roger appeared from a side street, walking slowly, Mick checking the dark street carefully.

Sat in the car, Roger now driving, Mick opened the bag. ‘Nice piece of kit; digital SLR, top of the range. This baby takes video as well, so we’ll be keeping this – if we can get the bloody sand off it.’

He switched it on, selected ‘menu’, and flicked back through the images. ‘Hotel, Sayeed, Sayeed with Flora, Sayeed again ... Sayeed with Flora, some unknowns, more unknowns just walking down the street, Flora with Jim – that’s naughty, but you can hardly tell it’s Jim. And ... Tiller.’

‘Tiller?’

‘Tiller and his mate having a coffee, again walking, getting into a car, meeting two men, leaving two men, arriving at the pueblo, us leaving the pueblo –’

‘Us?’ Roger loudly queried.

‘Us leaving the pueblo, Tiller arriving at the pueblo.’

‘That fucking idiot led them straight to us!’ Roger barked.

‘Tiller arriving at the airport,’ Mick finished.

‘Have we been compromised?’ Roger asked as they drove.

‘No, we look like locals,’ Mick calmly stated. ‘This guy was doing a good job and snapping everyone.’ Mick pulled out the wallet, trying to read the detail in the flickering yellow light given off by streetlamps as they passed by. ‘Herts Garten, German, driver’s license looks real. Five hundred Euros, thank you very much, Herts. A piece of paper with ... Sayeed’s hotel

name on it, and street name. A ... journalists pass to some building.'

'He's press?' Roger puzzled, glancing over.

'If he is, he's in trouble.'

Mick continued to examine the wallet. 'Nice photo of the girlfriend, another photo of her giving him a blowjob – you keep your eyes on the road. Credit card receipt for the plane tickets from Munich, another for a hire car – with the registration printed on it, make and model. And ... a receipt for a meal for two at a restaurant right around the corner from the CIA building in Berlin.'

'That's all we need,' Roger complained.

Mick dialled Colette. 'Boss, it's me, can you get Tiller to call urgently. Thanks.'

They pulled into the villa after a sweep of the pueblo and some doubling-back.

Mick's phone went. 'Canuck, you after me?' Tiller asked.

'Got a problem, boss, a serious problem.'

'What's that?'

'I just relieved a photographer of his nice camera, and his wallet and phone. German fella, CIA I think, and his camera is full of shots of you – and every step you've made since arriving down here.'

There was a long pause. 'Of ... me?'

'And everyone you met. You need to double back a bit more, boss.'

'You have it?'

'All yours, anytime you like.'

'Meet us at the pueblo later, I'll call first,' Tiller instructed, ending the call.

'That could cost him his career,' Roger cautioned.

'We won't tell, and *he* ... sure as hell won't tell,' Mick said as he grabbed the photographer's phone, accessing the last dialled and received numbers, writing them down.

'There's a Berlin number here, so let's stir the crap. If it's what I think it is, it'll divert to a mobile.'

‘Mick...?’ Roger cautioned.

Mick smiled, selecting the number.

‘How’s it going down there?’ came an American accent.

‘Not as well as you might like, old chap,’ Mick said with a posh English accent.

‘Who the hell are you?’

‘We – old chap – are Her Majesty’s Government, and we have a message. The next time you American gentlemen try and photograph one of our senior staff, we will most certainly not be as polite as we were today. You may send your man a few flowers and some grapes, to the hospital. Thank you, and I think the phrase I’m looking for is ... *have a nice day.*’ Mick hung up.

‘What’ll that achieve?’ Roger asked, not impressed.

‘If I’m right, it’ll pull those two men off the hotel – they won’t risk a scene. And I’m starting to think that the nice ladies in Malta were CIA. They would have seen my Interpol ID, knew it to be fake – and assumed I was with Her Majesty’s Government.’

‘Are the CIA watching Sayeed?’

‘Of course, and they’d be more interested in him than we are. If only the nice gentlemen would coordinate these things.’

‘What will you tell Colette?’ Roger asked.

‘Nothing. Camera, what camera?’

‘Tiller will owe you.’

‘Really?’ Mick quipped. ‘The thought had never entered my mind.’

* * *

Jim appeared at Arroyo station, but waited ten minutes to check for a tail. In the car, they circled the block a few times before driving up the hill. Peering down darkened side streets, they again swept the pueblo at length before heading to Mijas and the villa.

Just pulling in, Flora rang. ‘Yes, Flo?’ Mick answered.

‘Come down, I drugged him, he’s asleep.’

‘Don’t go having your way with him, we’ll be right down,’ Mick said with a grin. To Roger he said, ‘Turn around, back to the hotel, she’s drugged him.’

‘Drugged him?’ Jim repeated.

‘She’s probably got her teeth out already,’ Mick added. He shuddered.

At the Granada Hotel, they circled twice before parking around the corner in a dark spot. Mick jumped out, walking around the corner and into the hotel foyer. He found Flora sat waiting with a few pensioners.

‘You alright, Aunty Flo? He helped her up.’

‘Yes, yes. All ready for the confounded aeroplane.’

She said goodbye to her new friends, Mick waving and smiling, assisting Flora into the lift. She handed over Sayeed’s room key. ‘Floor number four, on the left.’

‘Got bored of him did you?’

‘He tried to slip me a stiff drink in the restaurant,’ she complained, a hell of a face pulled. ‘I ditched it when he went to the toilet, and slipped him some ground up sleeping pills.’

‘That’s what you used to do to your late Charlie.’

‘I brought some ready, I sometimes put it my cocoa.’

The lift doors opened, Flora leading the way and pointing out Sayeed’s room. Mick dunked the card in and out of the lock, the green light coming on. Opening the door, he dropped the card into the slot, the room’s lights coming on, controlled by the presence of the card. Sayeed was in a heap on the bed.

‘They helped me get him in while he was drowsy,’ Flora explained as Mick closed the door.

‘Grab a seat, love, this’ll take ten minutes.’

The curtains were already drawn, so Mick got to work. Taking out Sayeed’s wallet, he used his phone camera to snap each part in turn, ID and credit cards, everything replaced as found, plastic items held by the edges. Sayeed’s pockets revealed little, his phone checked, recent numbers all noted before being replaced.

The suitcase was not locked, lifted to the bed and sifted through carefully. ‘Cold weather clothing,’ Mick noted. ‘He’s off to Zurich.’

‘Told us he was off to North Africa. Tunisia someplace.’

The case offered no documents, no secret compartments, and was left as found, carefully checked that it appeared the same and replaced where first noticed, wiped down with the side of a hand. Mick pulled out all of the dresser drawers and checked each in turn, peering inside. The bathroom revealed nothing of interest, the clothes hung in the closet free of anything of interest. A bedside notepad offered promise, the top two blank pages torn off and pocketed.

‘That’s it, love. All done.’

Flora eased up.

‘Wanna have some fun with him before we go?’ Mick asked.

‘I never liked him,’ Flora stated with a curled lip.

‘Got any nail polish?’

She opened her bag, handing over a pink nail polish applicator. Mick painted strips into the hair on the back of Sayeed’s head.

‘Lipstick?’ Mick asked, handing back the nail polish. She handed him a lipstick. ‘Close your eyes, love.’

Mick undid Sayeed’s belt, unzipped him and tugged down his trousers.

‘I’ve seen a lot better than that,’ Flora scoffed.

Mick gently scribed a lipstick mark around Sayeed’s penis. ‘That’ll give him something to think about when he wakes.’ He handed back the lipstick.

‘What I’m supposed to do with that?’ Flora protested.

‘Bin it, just not here.’ He led her out, leaving the room card in the slot.

With Flora’s suitcase and bag retrieved from her room they descended in the lift, settling the bar bill at reception, paid in cash. They left the hotel, but very slowly, no tails apparent, Mick helping Flora as she pretended to be infirmed. Around the

corner, the car's headlights came on, pulling forwards and stopping.

Pulling away, Mick said, 'Don't go up the hill till we're sure we clean. Circle the block.'

Flora was glad to be home, a tea ordered from the maid as Mick examined the phone images, zooming in on various sections, Jim gently scraping the notepad pages with the side of a pencil.

'Nothing,' Jim said after ten minutes of effort.

'Sayeed has three alternate credit cards, two alternate IDs,' Mick put in.

'He didn't fly in with those,' Jim insisted. 'He wouldn't take the risk of a search.'

'Then he was handed them later,' Roger noted.

Mick nodded. 'Question is ... why would someone who wants to be followed *need* an alternate identity?'

'Because he's about to drop off the radar,' Jim suggested.

'Now that we know he's him ... and of no interest,' Roger suggested.

'Hardly,' Mick scoffed. 'He's got most of the world's agencies on him; us, Interpol, and the CIA.'

'Then he thinks he can give us all the slip,' Roger suggested.

Mick eased back, deep in thought. 'Where? Where could he go ... that we can't?'

'Middle East?' Jim floated.

'CIA would have no problem there, and they'd put Mossad on him,' Mick reflected. 'He's off to Zurich next, then Turkey. So ... maybe the paymaster thinks he can stretch a good net around Sayeed in Zurich.'

'Meaning...?' Jim nudged.

'Meaning ... that it will be lively,' Mick confirmed. 'We'll need to be careful.'

'We've been careful up to now,' Roger said defensively. 'We've done a better job than Tiller!'

‘If we’re careful ... we’ll be fine,’ Mick insisted. ‘No risks, everything double checked.’ He took a moment. ‘Jim, nothing wrong with you opting out of this next bit, you still get paid.’

Jim glanced at Roger, his pride clearly hurt. ‘Someone has to keep an eye on you, sonny.’ Mick hid a grin, Jim adding, ‘Besides, there’s nothing on TV for the next few days.’

Colette called, Mick checking his watch. ‘Right, boss?’

‘Anything new?’

‘We got a peek at Sayeed’s room, suitcase and wallet – and no, he won’t suspect a thing. He has fake IDs and credit cards, a whole new identity in his pocket, and he didn’t fly in with them.’

‘So he is dirty,’ Colette noted.

Mick rolled his eyes. ‘We’ll keep an eye on him, then get to Zurich ahead of him.’

‘Good work. Nothing else?’

‘No, all quiet and smooth.’

‘Talk in the morning.’

Mick had just ended the call when Tiller rang. ‘We’re just heading to the pueblo,’ Tiller announced.

‘We’ll be as quick as we can.’ Mick stood. ‘That was Tiller. Grab the bag of goodies. Jim, we’ll drop you at the start of the pueblo, walk towards the bar and scout around.’

Mick found Flora. ‘We’ll be forty minutes, love. But don’t wait up.’

‘OK, precious.’

* * *

At the start of the village they eased to a halt, the car’s wheels crunching gravel on the side of the road, Jim jumping out. Inside the small hillside village they circled twice – it didn’t take long, parking up for five minutes before walking towards the bar and finding Tiller and three men sat in car, a hired BMW. Jim observed from a hundred yards away, ducking into a dark doorway.

Roger led Mick, and the two men he had seen earlier, below and to his bar, opening up, the final two men remaining with the BMW. With the bar's lights now on, Mick handed over the backpack. Tiller sat, grabbed the camera and flicked through images, aghast at what he found.

'Mister Tiller, sir,' Mick began. 'They had you at the airport. So an outside observer might wonder if they were watching Sayeed, or your good self. Since Sayeed is all over the computer, and they had you at the airport, we'd have to conclude that the nice men from the CIA were as interested in you – personally - as much as anyone else.'

'We'll look into that,' Tiller insisted, seemingly greatly embarrassed. 'If, indeed, it is the CIA.'

'And the villa Tishkent?' Mick risked.

'A work in progress.'

'Before you ask, Mister Tiller, sir, I've not reported that camera - or its images - to Mister Colette, and I'm a very forgetful man.'

Tiller stared back for several seconds. 'Why would you *not* report it?'

'Because you, sir, are further up the food chain, and you did hint at some work for me earlier.'

Tiller seemed to relax a notch. 'Your ... actions here have been noted.'

'Can't ask for more than that,' Mick said. 'In addition to the photographer, there were two others guys, but we gave them the slip. I called the number on that phone, a Berlin landline, but it was answered by an American. You'll also see a receipt for a restaurant around the corner from the CIA building in Berlin.'

'You don't miss much,' the second man noted.

'I try not to.' Mick's phone went. 'Yes, Jim?'

'Company. Men in a car with a tracker.'

'Oh dear. Distract them if you can.'

'Problem?' Tiller asked.

'Yes. *Your* car has a tracker fitted - and *we* have company.'

Tiller called the men in the car. 'Do you see anyone?'

'A car passed, can't see it now. A man walking quickly past, towards you, sixties, white shirt.'

'Check under the car for a tracker!'

Jim appeared, out of breath. He forced a smile toward Tiller, then addressed Mick. 'I hit that car with a flowerpot to the windscreen.'

'Crude, but effective,' Mick commended.

A fit looking man stepped down to them, handing a small tracker to Tiller before withdrawing.

'What did you say about the CIA, boss?' Mick risked. He faced Roger. 'Car keys?' Roger handed them over, Mick passing them on to Jim. 'May I, sir?' Mick asked Tiller, extending a hand for the tracker.

Tiller hesitated before handing over the tracker.

Mick gave it to Jim. 'Drive down the hill, dump that in the town centre, and back.' Jim hurried out, Mick sitting and facing Tiller. 'Anything ... *more* that I can do to help?'

Tiller forced a breath, exchanging a look with his colleague. 'If I gave you the lads up top could you sweep our hotel, and Sayeed's, and ... clear the whole damn area?'

'I have a place you can stay the night,' Mick offered.

'No, thanks,' Tiller replied. 'I want a sweep.'

The second man said, 'And should anyone end up in the hospital, covered in green paint and sand ... well, we also have poor memories.'

Mick took a moment. 'Send the guys down, take the car. Do they know your hotel?'

The two men nodded.

'Then might I be so bold as to suggest that you go back, tuck in, and we'll sweep the area, boss.'

The ex-SAS men appeared two minutes after Tiller's departure, all eyes, carefully checking the bar, Roger and Mick.

'Grab a seat, guys. I'm Mick, that's Roger, and the other man you saw is Jim. Roger, beers please.'

The men sat. 'Beers?' they questioned.

‘Yes, because we’re not going anywhere, certainly not to do what that idiot Tiller just asked us to do.’

‘Come again?’

‘Mister Tiller is one step away from a formal enquiry,’ Mick explained. ‘And with what he just asked us to do ... half a step away from a formal enquiry and disciplinary action. He’s also an idiot.’

‘Down the hill are a bunch of armed and trigger happy Germans who’re not averse to loosing off rounds in public. Also down the hill is a CIA team with an interest in Tiller. Now, Tiller wants us to go down there, walk around dark streets unarmed and beat the crap out of anyone we don’t like the look of.’

‘If we run into the Germans they’ll shoot us. If we clobber the CIA there’ll be an enquiry, and some arse kicking, Tiller denying all knowledge of it. You and I, gentlemen, will take the rap. Now, hands up all those in favour of going down the hill?’

The two men exchanged looks, remaining silent.

‘Hands up those in favour of a few beers, a sofa to crash on, and no formal enquiry?’ Mick asked.

Roger placed down two pints. The ex-SAS lads glanced at the drinks, lifted them and said, ‘Cheers.’

An hour later, and with Jim back, Mick finished the story with: ‘So I put lipstick around the end of his dick and left him like it.’

Everyone roared with laughter. Jim recalled stories from Northern Ireland, Roger tales of Interpol operations gone badly wrong.

In the morning, Roger woke everyone with cups of tea, Mick and the soldiers having made good use of the bar’s cushioned benches.

Mick eased up and rubbed his face. ‘Never drink with soldiers.’

The two troopers stared back, bleary-eyed. ‘What do we tell Tiller?’

‘That you were out all night, saw fuck all – and can we have some kip time, boss.’

‘Sounds good,’ the troopers enthused.

‘We’ll drop you down the hill in a bit,’ Roger offered.

Back at Flora’s villa, and enjoying a large cooked breakfast, Jim faced Mick. ‘You think Tiller is ... worth the CIA watching him?’

‘They have an interest in him for some reason,’ Mick offered. ‘And they’re risking an incident by tailing a department manager, so it must be worth it.’

‘Are they interested in his handling of Sayeed?’

‘Tiller is not supposed to be handling Sayeed, P2 is. But now that there’s a link between Sayeed and something that Tiller is working on ... he may just try and grab the whole show.’

‘Those amateurs, Malta and here, I still can’t make sense of them,’ Jim complained.

‘Me neither. I think the honey-trap girls might have been CIA – not French, but the goons were definitely not CIA.’

‘The girls didn’t turn up till you took down some of the watchers,’ Jim posed. ‘So ... was one of the watchers CIA?’

Mick gave it some thought. ‘The guy on the scooter with Interpol ID ... he could have been.’

‘As you said, he couldn’t have identified us.’

‘No,’ Mick sighed. ‘It’s a puzzler. I was expecting some of them to turn up here and label themselves for us. Maybe ... maybe the ladies sat with us because I was at the hotel, and we were in the best spot to observe Sayeed. Then, when I said Interpol, they stuck at it because – like them – we all use Interpol as a cover. I think the girls were convinced that we were working for Her Majesty’s Government and, like here, they didn’t want an incident.’

‘And the angry goons?’ Jim asked.

‘Well, we bumped the Russian couple and nicked the guys wallet, which pissed off the paymaster. His reaction was emotional; typical Russian gangster.’

‘That’s not what I mean. What were they doing there in the first place?’

‘That, my friend, is still keeping me awake,’ Mick admitted. ‘But ... but Sayeed has fake IDs, *and* he’s off to Zurich, so all this bollocks - of him wandering around - is a build-up to the real deal. And ... and I think he wanted to attract our attention, shout to the agencies and say *this is me, wandering around doing fuck all.*’

‘So why the goons?’

‘That’s a puzzle, because they should have brought the agencies down on him like a tonne of bricks. They were less than subtle.’

Jim sipped his tea. ‘You said in Malta, that *you* caused this reaction, using your charm on the watchers. So, if *you* ... hadn’t been assigned this, Sayeed and the watchers would have wandered around Europe being observed passively by the agencies.’

‘Which would have achieved ... what?’ Mick posed with a big shoulder shrug.

‘That Sayeed is clean, until he’s proven otherwise. Back in my day we’d have given the mark a week, and dropped off if nothing interesting happened. Can’t spend money for nothing.’

Mick nodded as he chewed. ‘Could Sayeed be daft enough to think we’d get bored after a week and go home?’

‘What was your deal with Colette?’

‘Pay for a week or two, just passive monitoring.’

‘I’ll get you a dictionary, show you what the word “passive” means,’ Jim offered.

‘Are we making the mistake ... of judging Sayeed by our standards? Are we giving him more credit than he’s due? Could he be daft enough to think we’d ease off, and then he could use his fake IDs to do something?’

‘Stranger things have happened,’ Jim put in. ‘I would have sent someone down for a twenty-four watch, and pulled the guy off if nothing showed up. I’m sure the CIA would do the same,

and Interpol would sanction less time than that. You altered this game by beating the crap out of the players.'

'Question is, does Sayeed still think he can use the fake IDs? And, more importantly, what the fuck for?'

'We're paid to watch and report...'

'You should know me better than that by now, Jim. Besides, there may be a vase lying around someplace in this deal. An ... opportunity.'

'You worry me, Mick,' Jim said, shaking his head, but with a hint of grin.

Mick checked over his shoulder. Whispering, he said, 'Worry for Sayeed; he's walking around thinking that Flo sucked him off last night. Bet *he* skips breakfast!'

Shaking his head, Jim asked, 'We flying out today?'

'Yep. Roger booked a ticket for you; 3pm flight up to Munich. Call me when you get there, but after 7pm. You should get to Zurich around that time. We'll take a drive down to Sayeed later, and have a nose around. I'll give Colette the aliases Sayeed has before we leave.'

Flora stepped in carrying her small dog. 'You alright there, boys?'

'Great, Flo,' Mick said. 'And good work on Sayeed, love.'

'A bit of fun, be dull otherwise. You off later?'

Mick nodded as he chewed. 'Be all gone by 1pm.'

'I could help in Zurich if you like,' she risked.

'After what you did to the mark!' Mick mock complained.

'What? What did I do? He was the one trying to give me a stiff drink, that bloody foreigner!'

Mick and Jim laughed. Mick told her, 'You were supposed to watch him, not get your lipstick on his knob!'

'That was your filthy mind,' she said as she turned on a heel.

* * *

Driving around Sayeed's hotel, they spotted no one of interest, but noted Sayeed sat at a café.

‘What’s wrong with his hair?’ Jim asked.

‘Hair?’ Mick repeated, avoiding eye contact.

‘He looks like he’s had a chunk of hair cut out.’ Jim faced Mick. ‘Did you cut a chunk of his hair off?’

‘No.’

Jim waited.

‘What?’ Mick asked. ‘I may ... have put some nail polish in his hair.’

‘For God’s sake, Mick.’

‘You got to have some fun on the job.’

At 3pm, Roger and Jim, sitting apart, took off for Munich, a two-hour flight. Roger opened a magazine, Jim a thriller novel bought at departures. An hour later, Mick boarded a flight to Zurich using a Russian passport.

The main event

1

Landing at Zurich, Mick was questioned on his purpose, and his trip to Spain, giving lengthy answers in English and Russian. They allowed him through. In the airport's public area he hired a car for cash, using a British passport and driver's license, just not his own.

Seat adjusted, case in the back, Mick pulled away from the car-hire compound in a silver BMW 5 Series, soon going around in circles, filling up with just ten Euros of fuel at three separate petrol stations, finally secure in the knowledge that no one was following.

Pulling away from the final petrol station, Jim called. 'Right, Jim?' Mick answered.

'We're just outside a suitable looking hotel, northwest of the city, and we'll be booking in now. You?'

'I'm on my way to a pre-booked room in a bland hotel full of business travellers. Get yourself to the city centre for 9pm and I'll give you a location. And don't forget the double-back.'

'Yes, dad.'

Mick parked his BMW in the hotel's underground car park, taking the lift up one floor to reception, his case being dragged. He wore a long black coat, a dark suit underneath, and was suitably wrapped up against the chill. At reception, he used broken English to book in, handing over his Russian passport, the receptionist swiping a Santander credit card with Mick's Russian cover name on. He was soon on the sixth floor, and staring out at the dark and the rain.

'Why couldn't Sayeed go to the fucking Maldives?' he muttered. He selected Colette's number. 'Right, boss?'

'You in Zurich?'

'Yeah, all booked in, chocolates on the pillow.'

'I checked the flights from Malaga to Switzerland, and none of your names were on the passenger manifests.'

‘Must be a glitch, you know what computers are like.’

‘What’s your plan?’ Colette asked.

‘To pick up Sayeed at the airport and to tail him.’

‘I ran those aliases you gave me, and he has bookings in three separate hotels.’

‘He did that in Malta, and I still don’t know why. My guess is he already knows where he’ll stay, so we’ll have to tail him. Text me the hotels anyway, I’ll check the map. Listen, boss, we went over-budget in Spain, hire cars and hotels. And Tiller may have ... borrowed us for a few things.’

‘If Tiller wants to engage you, then he checks it with this department first!’

‘We were trying to be helpful, and we’re all on the same side. Could you transfer some money to my principle account?’

‘Fifteen hundred?’

‘That should cover Spain. Thanks.’

‘What’ll you spend in Zurich?’

‘Two hotels for the night, two hire cars at a hundred Euros for twenty-four hours, lunch, and a Dan Brown novel at the airport.’

‘OK. Let me know when you have Sayeed. Goodnight.’

Mick pulled his room key from the wall slot and headed down. He avoided scanning the people in the foyer and grabbed a taxi waiting outside. ‘Mars Club, bitte.’

The taxi pulled away as Mick sent a text message to Jim. Fifteen minutes later, Jim and Roger - both wrapped up warm, entered the Mars Club, found Mick and joined him at a table.

Jim took in the red upholstery and the crimson velvet wallpaper. ‘This a nightclub?’

‘Of sorts,’ Mick answered, a waitress taking orders for drinks.

‘It’s a brothel,’ Roger realised.

‘Ah,’ Jim let out.

‘It’s safe,’ Mick emphasised.

Jim rubbed his cold hands, giving the establishment a disapproving once over. ‘So, what’s the game plan?’

‘In the morning I’ll hire three cars using my fake British ID,’ Mick began. ‘From the airport, it’ll be a three car tail. I have the details of the fake ID’s that Sayeed’s using to book rooms in separate hotels, so if we lose him we’ll each take one of those hotels. I’ll text you those details tonight - so look on the map, and memorise the city layout; lake and river, train tracks. Then, when we have him, the job is to keep him from doing anything, anything at all.’

‘Blocking routine,’ Roger said. ‘Stop the deal going down.’

Jim asked, ‘Are you sure it’s not just a simple stop-over?’

‘I checked the flights. He could fly today and not need a stop-over, same for the day after tomorrow. So he’s either crap at choosing flights, or he wants the stop-over.’

The waitress placed down the drinks for Jim and Roger, Mick handing her a twenty Euro note. She placed a single Euro on the table and withdrew.

‘Expensive drinks,’ Jim complained.

‘The drinks make money for the poor orphaned girls who live upstairs,’ Mick explained. ‘OK, in the morning we’ll need phones on conference call and loudspeaker, and I’ll buy you each bicycle helmets.’

‘Bicycle helmets?’ Jim queried.

Roger turned to him. ‘Wear them driving. Just in case.’

‘Just in case ... what?’ Jim asked.

‘If you’re in the car tomorrow and someone wants to stop you, don’t let them,’ Mick told Jim. ‘The cars will have no comeback, so don’t worry about damaging them.’

‘It’s been a while since I was in a car chase,’ Jim cautioned.

‘Drive the hire car around for a while tomorrow, and get a feel for it. And you won’t be chasing anyone, it’s ... just in case. And don’t forget, they drive on the right here, left in Malta.’

Jim sipped his drink. ‘How’ll you disrupt him?’

‘Disturb his night’s sleep, maybe try and get into his room,’ Mick explained. ‘Then crowd him with the cars. I have a few ideas. To start with, I’ve booked a car for him at the airport, in

fact two. When he leaves the airport there'll be two chauffeurs with signs, expecting to take him to hotels he's not booked into. One has his real name, one an alias.'

'Spook him at the start,' Roger approved.

'Would it not be the case ... that Mister Colette wants to see who he meets, what bank he goes to?' Jim asked.

'But then he wins,' Mick said with a shrug. 'He gets to do whatever it is he came for, and all the crap we've been through means nothing. Besides, he if can't do whatever it is he wants to do...'

'He'll get desperate and sloppy,' Roger finished off. 'He'll make a mistake.'

'And maybe shine some light on what he's really up to,' Mick added. 'Anyway, that's tomorrow.' Mick handed Roger five hundred Euros. 'Colette sanctioned extra money.'

'Don't mind if I do,' Roger offered with a smile.

Mick called over a lady, and she handed over three menus, Polaroid photographs of the poor orphan girls upstairs.

'I'm not hungry,' Jim told Mick. 'But don't let me stop you two eating.'

'Number fourteen,' Mick said as he stood. 'Jim, watch the drinks, I'll be ten minutes.'

Roger stood. 'Twenty-two has a set of jugs to die for.'

Jim found himself alone with his thoughts, sipping his drink. 'I used to have a life.'

Mick was shown to a room, money handed over to a matriarch before entering. Inside, he found his chosen lady in a fine see-through negligee; five-eight, skinny, modest breasts, Russian and cute. And nineteen years old.

She offered a hand to shake after Mick had taken his jacket off. 'Drink?' she asked in English.

'I'm Russian,' Mick explained.

'Ah. What ... would you like?'

'I'd like you sat on the toilet seat, dressed like that will be fine.'

‘Oh.’ She made a face and led Mick into the bathroom, sitting on the toilet seat without disrobing. ‘Like this?’

‘Yes, that’s great.’ Mick unzipped, quickly washing his end in the sink and drying it off.

‘Very considerate,’ she noted.

‘Always,’ Mick insisted. He stood in front of her, offering his hardened member to suck.

2

Sayeed stopped and stared at the name board, his own name displayed in large letters. He took a step, halted, and stared at the man holding it. Ignoring the sign, he moved off, soon noticing a sign for Mohil Ghanda, one of his aliases. Now staring wide-eyed at every face in the arrivals hall he walked briskly on, and with the flow of passengers leaving the airport.

‘The mark is leaving the airport,’ Jim said into his phone.

‘Copy,’ Mick acknowledged. He started his engine, placing on his bicycle helmet, then his driving gloves.

‘Copy,’ Roger acknowledged, mirroring Mick’s actions.

‘Roger, try and get in front of him, or parallel,’ Mick loudly called, his phone plugged into the BMW and on speaker.

‘He’s in a line for the taxis,’ Jim said, his words crackling. ‘Standby.’ Jim announced, ‘Black Mercedes taxi, plate November-Papa 1476, number 132 on the yellow sign. That’s 1-3-2. Standby ... ten seconds ... ready ... he’s pulling off. I’m out of visible, going for my car.’

‘Roger?’ Mick called.

‘I’m at the main exit.’ A toot could be heard. ‘Yeah, fuck you as well. Here he comes, moving off, 1-3-2 on the top, I’m in front, heading for the main flyover towards the city, joining the main road south ... now.’

‘I’m moving in behind,’ Mick called. ‘I think he’s one car in front of me.’

‘Keep it that way,’ Roger suggested.

‘I’m moving off,’ Jim called.

‘Roger, all the hotels he’s booked into are west of the river, within half a mile of the lake. Take that turn. Hang on.’ Mick checked his rear view mirror. ‘We got company, Silver Mercedes, two men in it, passenger on the phone. Jim, we’re on the main road south.’

‘Next exit,’ Roger called.

‘Go right off that exit,’ Mick called. He indicated, moved into the correct lane, coming off the main road a minute later.

‘Yeah, he’s going right,’ Roger confirmed.

‘Mick, I’m not too far behind you, just did a quick hundred miles an hour down that road, so probably tripped a speed camera.’

‘Passing the red building on the right,’ Roger called. ‘Three lanes coming up, heading west.’

‘Take the middle one,’ Mick encouraged. ‘I’m still one car behind him. I think I can see you now, Roger.’

‘He’s going straight on,’ Roger said. ‘Good guess. Lights coming up.’

‘Roger, when the lights change, reverse and hit him, then pull off. Go to one of the hotels and wait.’

‘If you say so.’

‘Mick, I’m close now, passing red building,’ Jim called.

A bang signalled Roger hitting the taxi before pulling off.

‘He’s damaged,’ Roger called. ‘I’m going left up ahead, I’ll wait at the hotel by the lake, the Monte Carlo.’

‘The taxi driver is getting out,’ Mick reported. He tooted his horn for realism. ‘My tail has moved around, now one car behind Sayeed and parallel to me. Oops, got another pair behind me as well. That’s two chase cars, guys. Jim, stay with Sayeed, I’m going to shake things up a bit.’

Mick selected reverse and floored it, smashing into the vehicle behind with force. ‘Sorry!’ He selected Drive and pulled forwards, ramming the first chase car at an angle and nudging it into the car in front. Pulling out into the oncoming traffic, he edged around two cars and back in, now making use of the green light to speed through.

‘Mick, it’s Jim, they’re not following you.’

‘Jim, get out and offer to help, speaking English. I’m going to ditch this car and get eyes-on the second hotel. Oh, and Jim, take the bicycle helmet off first, eh.’

Five minutes later, Jim transmitted, ‘Mick, the two sets of men knew each other, German speakers, refused assistance. Sayeed is on the side of the road with the taxi and the police. And Mick, those chase cars – the drivers are not afraid to show the police some sort of ID.’

‘Agency,’ Mick said.

‘I’m parked up and watching it all in the mirror,’ Jim reported.

‘Stay with them,’ Mick called.

‘Mick, it’s Roger. Should I ditch this car yet? My rear end is attracting attention.’

‘Give it half an hour, see who turns up at that hotel,’ Mick encouraged. ‘Re-position yourself if you need to.’

Ten minutes later, Jim said, ‘Sayeed is in another taxi. Moving off ... turning towards the lake ... straight over ... I can see the lake ... turning right ... pulling up.’

‘I got him!’ Roger said.

‘Go on foot,’ Mick called. ‘Jim, pick me up at the second hotel, turn right and straight on.’

‘On my way.’

‘Mick!’ Roger called. ‘Car pulled in behind Sayeed, two men.’

‘Can you hit it and leave?’

‘I can try. Hold onto your hats.’

Mick and Jim could hear the crunch.

‘I demolished the side of it, moving off ... turning left ... left again ... lights are green ... straight over ... left again. I’m ditching in a side street.’

‘Cover your face, there are cameras,’ Mick called. ‘I’m ditching mine now. Fortunately, it’s fucking raining!’

Sat in Jim's hire car, the three of them faced Sayeed's hotel, the Monte Carlo, as the rain pelted the windscreen, the car steaming up. Mick dialled a number. In German, he said, 'Could you page Mohil Ghanda for me, he should be in reception. Thanks.' They waited. 'No response? Can you try Hasim Ali Sayeed.' They waited. 'No response? OK, thank you.'

'That should screw with his head,' Roger noted.

'He's probably in his room,' Mick said. 'That was for whoever's sat in the damn lobby.' He took out a piece of paper, and dialled the number. 'Hi, it's Mickey. Yes, from last night. Listen, my friend has just arrived from Pakistan, long flight, and needs the services we agreed. Yes. Hotel Monte Carlo, by the lake. Ask at reception for Mohil Sayeed. No, *thank you*.'

'What's that?' Jim asked.

'That, my friend, is the oldest, roughest, and most frightening looking hooker you'll never want to meet in a dark alley or with a full stomach. She makes Flo look like a babe.'

'And the hotel will not be best pleased with Sayeed,' Roger noted.

'OK, Roger, you're the only one whose face is unknown, so go book in. But *don't* ... take any chances, and don't look at anyone. There's a case full of crap in the boot.'

'What ID?' Roger asked.

'Use your Norwegian.'

'Norwegian?' Jim queried.

'I worked there for two years,' Roger informed Jim. 'I can fool everyone apart from a Norwegian.' He stepped out, cold air and rain getting in before the door slammed shut.

With Roger dragging a case along the pavement towards the hotel, Mick said, 'Once around the block, new position.' Jim moved off.

Fifteen minutes later, Roger called. 'I'm booked in, same floor as our boy, who had to explain the old slapper to the management. And Mick, more watchers in this hotel than guests. When I booked in, they did a bad job of standing next to me to glimpse my passport.'

‘It’s a wide net, we knew it would be. Stay in your room till meal time, then try and join someone else and chat.’ Mick hung up. ‘Probably find there’s a convention of Norwegians in there.’

‘Sayeed must be terrified by now,’ Jim noted. ‘The name signs at the airport, the car smashes, the hooker. And those car smashes will make him think he’s in the firing line. I wouldn’t leave my bloody hotel room.’ He faced Mick. ‘This ... this is all getting a bit lively, Mick.’

‘I’m on top of it,’ Mick insisted. He held his gaze on Jim.

Jim peered out of the misted, rain swept window. ‘If we get caught, Mick, how much support would we get from Colette?’

Mick gave it some thought. ‘Some. He sent us to follow, and we can prove that. The cars? Well, they rammed us whilst we were doing what we were asked to do. Look, Jim, no one is going to think any less of you if you want to do a little static work, something a little less risky. You’re a good mate, a mentor, and someone I look up to. I don’t want to see anything happen to you.’

‘The student has taught the mentor a few things lately, you’re way ahead of where I was.’

‘Rubbish, you were just more stealthy.’ Mick took out a pre-pay mobile and switched it on. Entering Sayeed’s number, Mick called, but opened a window first for background noise.

‘Hello?’ Sayeed said.

‘Meet us at the café on the corner, turn left out the hotel.’ Mick hung up.

‘Do you think he’ll do it?’ Jim wondered.

‘He might not know the contact, and there’s no way he speaks German or Russian, so they’d have to converse in English.’

Two minutes later, Jim said, ‘There’s our boy. He’s not the brightest tool in the box, is he?’

‘Wait till he’s inside that café, then drive past and get its phone number. It’s on the fascia, but I can’t see it from here.’

Jim read out the number after driving slowly past, Mick entering it to a pre-pay mobile. 'How many of those do you have?'

'I picked up eight in Spain. Move us back to where we were.' As Jim pulled off, Mick dialled. In German, he said, 'Police. There is a Arab man in Café Marina, opposite the Monte Carlo Hotel, and he has a gun.' He hung up.

'You're a complete bastard, you know that,' Jim lightly said as they circled the block, pulling in at their previous spot.

Less than a minute later, sirens announced the approach of the police.

'Subtle,' Jim complained. 'The idiot Zurich police would tip-off a real gunman.'

Three police cars pulled up, officers running through the rain, weapons to hand, Sayeed marched out a minute later and bundled into a car. As it pulled away, patrons of the establishment left in a line.

'Aye, aye,' Mick said. 'Man in the trench coat.'

'Watchers?'

'I know his face; he's CIA - and quite senior. His name is ... something to do with a nut.'

'Walnut?' Jim offered, getting a look. 'Hazelnut?'

The men in question jumped into a car and sped off.

'Well, that woke them up,' Mick commented.

'Brazil nut?'

Mick shot Jim another look, wagging a finger. Turning away, he said, 'Small nut ... that you eat.'

'Peanut?' Jim quietly risked.

'Pistachio!' Mick exclaimed. 'That's the fucker. Only spelt with an "e" I think. Shit, by now he'd have to be a section chief at least. I met him on a job when I was in, and that was a million years ago.'

'Yeah, well he's back.'

'That the same car?' Mick puzzled.

'Yep. Once around the block, standard sweep.'

'Follow it.'

Jim pulled off slowly, the windscreen wipers working furiously in the rain. ‘He’s stopped outside the hotel,’ Jim noted, halting.

‘Picking up, or dropping off?’ Mick wondered. ‘Get in front of him, ten yards, and stop.’

Jim pulled around Pestichio’s car. ‘Mick...?’

‘Don’t think; act. Stop here. Select reverse. Now floor it!’

Looking over his shoulder, his view hampered by rain-speckled windows steaming-up, Jim powered their BMW backwards, a startled look coming from the driver of the car behind. The rear of the BMW demolished the front of the other car, a bang and a hell of a jolt.

‘Forward!’ Mick said.

Jim pulled forwards. ‘Do you think we should get his insurance details first?’ Jim quietly asked. ‘Swap our details?’

‘Turn right, forget the lights! And again, go right around the block. Quickly.’

‘Mick...?’

‘Just go right around the block, they won’t be expecting it.’

‘I wasn’t expecting it either!’

Turning back onto the hotel road, advancing slowly, they could see two men stood near the car, the car doors open.

‘Advance at a normal pace, indicate and pull around them, then take his door off,’ Mick requested.

Shaking his head, Jim increased speed, indicated and then pulled around, but not far enough. As he did so, Mick grabbed his own door handle. As the nose of their BMW drew level with the rear of the target vehicle, the man in the trench coat jumped back and flattened himself against his car. Mick shoved his door open and hit the man, a door sheared off a second later.

‘Turn right. Go around that car, up on the pavement, quick.’

Jim mounted the pavement, jolting the two of them, and turned, tooted at as he nearly sideswiped another vehicle.

‘Right again, back around.’

‘We won’t get a third time!’ Jim complained.

‘Don’t want one. Here, right again, then into the hotel’s underground car park.’

Jim halted at the barrier and took the automatically issued ticket, pulling into the car park as Mick stuck a goatee beard onto Jim’s face. ‘There’re cameras, so cap on and face down. There, park in the far left corner, next to the lifts.’

Mick fixed his own goatee, sunglasses and cap. Jumping out, he rushed to the smashed boot and forced it open. Jim appeared at the damaged rear of the car, looking very suspicious in his get up. Mick said, ‘Those double doors, try and wedge them open with something.’

They both looked over their shoulders as a car screeched, but the vehicle pulled away normally and left the car park, Jim heading to the doors. He took out a pen and jammed it under one of the doors after opening it.

Mick grabbed the spare tyre, uncoupled earlier, and a large plastic bag. He threw the tyre onto the back seat as Jim returned. ‘Walk slowly out the way we came, I’ll be one minute. Go!’

As Jim walked off, looking like a peeping tom in disguise, Mick opened the plastic bag and pulled out a bottle full of petrol. Cracking open the top, he let it pour out onto the driver’s seat, the fumes soon filling the car. A second bottle was opened in a hurry, poured over the tyre and rear seat, finally left inside the tyre hollow.

Mick looked up, Jim now just about to the barrier. Opening all four of the car’s doors, he struck a roadside flare and tossed it in. Spinning, the flash illuminated the underground car park as Mick sprinted forwards for all he was worth. A long sixty-yard dash preceded a gentle climb up the ramp, a burst of cold air and rain signalling the street.

Jim was halfway across the road, head down and collar up against the rain as Mick pulled level. ‘Keep walking,’ Mick said, putting his hands in his pockets. At the next corner he ditched his gloves, both men ditching their damp goatees at the end of the street.

‘Follow, talk Russian.’ Mick grabbed a handful of Euro coins, hopping on the first tram and paying for both of them. Stood shoulder to shoulder with damp commuters, Mick whispered in Russian, mostly complete nonsense about hotel menus, but the people next to them had no doubt as to Mick and Jim’s nationality.

Three stops later they hopped off, crossed a square and joined another tram. Again stood next to damp commuters, Mick adopted an American accent, talk of the hotel Monte Carlo. Four stops, and they left the tram, getting a taxi back to Jim’s Munich hire car, conversing again in Russian.

Sat inside the hire car, Mick said, ‘Anything on you, anything at all linking you to that car?’

Jim checked his pockets. ‘I had gloves on, and you handed the car to us. Why, what did you do?’

‘I may have accidentally set fire to it.’

‘Jesus, Mick. We’d get ten years for that!’

‘No, we won’t,’ Mick calmly, yet firmly insisted. ‘It was hired with a fake ID, and all the witnesses have different descriptions and nationalities. There’s no link, no prints, no facials on the cameras.’

Jim blew out. ‘Bloody hell.’

Mick’s phone went. ‘Roger?’

‘Mick, the fucking hotel is on fire! I heard police cars earlier as well, they nabbed someone outside.’

‘They picked up Sayeed after an anonymous tip off.’

‘He’s in custody?’

‘He’s clean, so they’ll let him go in an hour. Or three.’

‘We’re all outside the hotel in the rain, doing a guest register check. And Mick, there’s some right dodgy looking fuckers here, most scurrying away.’

‘Stay at it. We’ll go static back at your hotel later. Out.’

‘The police will be all over that hotel for hours,’ Jim cautioned, red cheeked, now damp, and now looking worried.

‘Exactly,’ Mick said with a smile. He waited.

‘The watchers will fuck off, at least those without a good cover story. And right now, Sayeed must be shitting himself.’ Jim wiped steam off the windows. ‘Mick, you’ve been taking huge risks, more than would justify what Colette is paying you, and more than any bounty would cover.’

‘You never know, a vase worth two million might fall into my lap. There’s always a bounty to be had in this game.’

‘Do you have another agenda, Mick?’ Jim asked.

‘Agenda?’

‘I thought I knew you, but after what I’ve seen in the last week – no, I don’t know the person sat next to me. I thought you were just reckless, but you’ve shown some flashes of brilliance, cool professionalism, and ice cold cunning.’

‘Was there a compliment in there somewhere?’ Mick asked without taking his gaze off the street.

‘You make Colette look like a pen-pushing amateur.’

‘He is.’

‘And you also showed up Tiller. And when Tiller asked you to jump on any CIA watchers – you showed a level of maturity and professionalism that I wouldn’t have credited you with. I’ve worked with a lot of field agents, Mick, but what I’ve seen from you in the past week puts you way up there.’ He waited.

‘Maybe I’ve improved.’

‘Mick, is someone other than Colette pulling your strings?’

Mick glanced at Jim, offering a soft and apologetic look. ‘Layers of an onion, old friend, layers of an onion. And if I was working for someone else, you know I couldn’t say. But ... but I would hope that you consider I’m one of the good guys, and on the side of right, law and order, tucking the kids in at night.’

‘I haven’t seen much *law and order* from you lately.’

Mick’s phone trilled. ‘Right, boss?’ he offered Colette.

‘Swiss police are running Sayeed’s name through the computers, all of them.’

‘Maybe Sayeed appeared on their radar for some reason.’

‘What’s been happening?’

‘We followed him from the airport, he’s at the Monte Carlo Hotel, Jim booked in and static. I’m static outside, but lots of goons, so we’re keeping our distance.’

‘The Russian section believes that a Russian gangster called Constantine is involved.’

‘Constantine, eh. Not sure I’m up to speed on the guy. Oh, hang on, police cars heading to the hotel. I’ll call you back.’

‘Coming back to what I said about Colette not pulling your strings,’ Jim posed.

‘He means well.’

‘Who’s this Constantine?’

‘Someone who’s definitely not involved, and someone who’s missing a vase.’

‘Him?’ Jim queried, wide-eyed.

‘Constantine never uses anyone unless they’re Russian, from his hometown, and related to him somehow. He also hates Asians, and has no interest in Malta or Spain. And he hates the Germans more than he hates Arabs.’

Mick selected a number. ‘It’s me. Get me Constantine’s phone number. Yes, I *am* crazy.’ A minute later, Mick wrote the number on his side window, into the condensation. Taking out another pre-pay, Mick punched the number in, glanced at an expectant Jim, and pressed the green button.

In Russian, Mick said, ‘I want to speak to Mister Constantine.’

‘Who are you?’

‘I’m the man who took his vase.’

There was a long pause. ‘Wait.’

‘Yes?’ came a few seconds later.

‘I’d like to speak to Mister Constantine.’

‘You’re a dead man walking, my friend.’

‘Yes, but in the mean time I have something of interest for Mister Constantine.’ Another pause preceded, ‘Wait.’

‘This is Constantine. And you, you are the rat who took my vase?’

‘Since you stole it, it was never yours. I returned it to its rightful owner. Well, I dropped it in Vienna -’

‘You dropped it?’

‘Dropped it and smashed it a few kilometres from the rightful owner, but I took it around to him. His insurers proved it was the right vase and paid out.’

‘And are you the kind of sewer vermin who thinks for himself, or works for others.’

‘I try not to think for myself.’

‘And are you going to offer to sell me the name of who it was who sent you?’

‘What would that achieve? Besides, I did you a favour; I showed you how poor some of your men are at protecting you and your possessions.’

‘I killed them myself, with a sword!’

‘Good enough for them. No, I’m calling about another matter, and I hope to even things between us.’

‘I’m listening, rodent.’

‘Got a paper and pen?’

‘Yes.’

‘A Pakistani nuclear physicist called Mohammad Sayeed has a brother, Mohil Sayeed. Mohil flew to Rome and then onto Malta last week. There was trouble in Malta, people hurt - killed and arrested, the intelligence services clashing with others. Sayeed then flew to Spain, to the Coast del Sol, where there was more trouble, the Russian sections of British Intelligence and the CIA investigating Russian gangsters in the region. A villa named Los Hermanos near Mijas, another called Tishkent near Marbella.’

Jim lifted his hands in silent protest.

Mick continued, ‘Sayeed then flew to Zurich, where World War Three is now going on. And the CIA have just labelled you, my friend, as being behind some deal with Sayeed, and responsible for the problems.’

‘Me?’

‘Check the detail, all of the detail, I’ll call you tomorrow.’
He hung up.

‘Jesus, Mick; our own people would shoot you for telling a Russian gangster that!’

‘They’d have to prove it first,’ Mick scoffed. He opened a window an inch to de-mist the car.

‘What’ll that achieve?’ Jim pressed.

‘First, it will identify for me the real Russians in touch with Sayeed, since Constantine’s not involved.’ Mick balanced an unlit cigarette on his lip.

‘Is London running this show, or are you running it?’ Jim loudly asked.

‘I run my own game. That way ... no screw-ups. Do you think Colette could fathom this out?’

‘Colette would pass it up the chain of command –’

‘And by then it would all be over. Sayeed will make his deal here, and today. Tell me, Jim, is anyone up the *chain of command* taking this seriously? Sayeed’s brother is a nuclear scientist, and he’s up to no good. Don’t know about you, but I smell a huge rat.’

Jim forced a large breath. ‘There is something big going on; I never saw this many players or this much action in ten years of walking the pavements.’

‘Have I failed to report the facts?’ Mick posed.

Jim took a moment, and then shook his head. ‘No, they got the core details.’

‘And still no turn-out of the cavalry.’

Jim reluctantly nodded.

‘So we’re it. Anyway, around to my hotel for a bite to eat, and we can ditch these two coats. There’re bins in the underground car park of my hotel. C’mon. And drive carefully for a change, huh.’

Sat eating in Mick's hotel bar, the local TV news showed the mayhem at the Monte Carlo Hotel, a sea of flashing blue lights. When Mick nodded Jim towards the TV, Jim could see an image of two men the police wanted.

'Poor images,' Jim noted.

'Very poor. Relax.'

Mick's phone went. 'Right, boss?'

'Where are you?' Colette asked.

'We pulled back, at my hotel, having lunch.'

'All hell breaking loose at that hotel, and Interpol are searching a name that cropped up in Malta.'

'One of the goons?' Mick asked.

'Must be.'

'Has ... Tiller shared anything with our department about what the link was?' Mick risked.

'No, nothing.'

'Between you and me, boss, he had a team or two down there, and they weren't on the coast for their health. His project overlaps Sayeed.'

'Well, he's not sent anything over, and their department is senior,' Colette pointed out.

'Still, a little professional courtesy...'

'Office politics.'

'Which is why I avoid working in offices,' Mick quipped.

'What's your plan?'

'Follow Sayeed to the airport tomorrow, then onto Turkey. Any ... changes to the plan?'

'No, stick with him. Talk soon.'

Mick noticed a missed call from Roger and called. 'After me?'

'I'll get the flu from this! Been stood outside in the cold and rain, without a jacket.'

'What's happening there?'

'Sayeed just came back, just as they allowed people back in. Brought back in a police car. And Mick, I noticed a camera snapping Sayeed as he got out the police car.'

‘And the other goons?’

‘All those I noticed earlier have legged it, not least because there are six police officers sat in reception. I think two were taken in for questioning.’

‘Good. That fire cleansed the place.’

‘Do I want to ask ... what I want to ask?’

‘No, you don’t!’

‘I got his room number; 410.’

‘Good, because he’ll get a visit later. Have a meal in the bar. Talk soon.’ Mick entered a number from a piece of paper. In German, he said, ‘Yes, I met you last night, about my Pakistani friend and his ... needs. Yes, that’s the one. He’s at his hotel now, Monte Carlo, room 410, Mohil Sayeed. Yes, five hundred Euros. Thanks.’

‘You’re a complete bastard, you know that,’ Jim pointed out as he cut up his food.

‘And the lobby is full of police,’ Mick mentioned with a grin. He dialled again and ordered a pizza for Sayeed, flowers, and a taxi – or ten.

‘You think he’ll change hotels?’

Mick nodded. ‘Whatever he came to do, he won’t risk it where he is.’

‘Is he crazy?’ Jim thought out loud. ‘Why is he still here?’

Mick took a moment. ‘Probably following instructions from his brother. Either that, or what he’s up to is very profitable.’

‘It would have to be, to stay there with all this going on around him.’

Mick nodded towards the TV screen. ‘They’re looking for two Russian men and ... they’ve arrested two Bulgarians at the hotel.’

‘You hit that man, Pestichio, with your car door. Something ... personal going on there?’ Jim risked.

‘If he’s injured, it goes up the line, and people start asking questions. And, if they ask enough questions, maybe they’ll figure out what Sayeed is up to.’

‘Do *you* ... know what Sayeed is up to?’

Mick shook his head. ‘But given who his brother is, there’s only one possible outcome: the spread of nuclear technology.’

Jim’s brow pleated. ‘In Europe?’

‘No, and that’s the puzzler,’ Mick admitted. ‘And if the deal is with a third world country, why meet here?’

‘Switzerland has ... Swiss banks,’ Jim floated.

Mick lifted his eyebrows and nodded. ‘My thoughts exactly; a pay off, witnessed by a reliable family member. After all, who else could the brother trust?’

Colette called. ‘Mick, just thought I’d let you know, but the Interpol computer is alive with enquiries about Sayeed, Malta and Spain – from a variety of police forces.’

‘Must be more going on than we realise. We’ll keep a discreet distance. Thanks, boss.’

‘What was that?’ Jim asked.

‘Constantine is bribing police officers to check out the story. Computer searches are showing up.’

‘And then...?’

‘Constantine will be helpful. He wants something, we want something, so we’ll swap details.’

‘Will he send people here?’ Jim wondered.

‘No, and we’ll be gone tomorrow.’

‘He could get boys over from Prague in a few hours,’ Jim cautioned.

‘To do what? They would just make him look even more guilty.’

When Mick’s phone went, it was Roger again. ‘Mick, the police just gave me a ten minute once over, including the full legend.’

‘Do you think they suspect you?’

‘No, I’ve been using that ID and story for years. But you can be sure that there’re no armed goons in this hotel, or anyone without a rock solid legend. They’re checking cars outside as well.’

‘Good, you’ll sleep safer.’

‘Sayeed has been in reception twice, police asking him questions. Oh, hang on, our mark is checking out.’

‘We’re moving now,’ Mick said as he stood, Jim putting down his drink and grabbing his coat. At the car, he said, ‘He’ll go to one of the other hotels, but he’ll want to lose any tails first. You take the car to the Plaza, I’ll take a taxi to the Italiano Hotel.’

Mixing it up

1

A full hour later, night coming on, Sayeed arrived at the small Italiano Hotel with his case, keenly observed by Mick. Mick raised his phone.

‘Jim, he’s here. Go static outside.’ Mick dialled Roger. ‘Check out, ask for a refund for all the hassle, book into the Plaza and go static inside.’

‘On it.’

When Jim turned up, Mick jumped into the car. ‘Street is clean,’ Mick commented. ‘And our boy is taking a big risk. He’s in there under another name, a false ID used. If I called the police...’

‘He’d be deported, or in a cell,’ Jim finished off.

‘But then we’d be no better off in getting to the paymaster.’

‘So what’s the plan?’ Jim asked, rubbing the windows with a cloth.

‘If he goes to meet his contact, and we miss him ... well, I think we’ll just disrupt him tonight, keep him awake.’

‘The contact must have missed the meeting already. Banks are closed, and Sayeed’s booked on a flight tomorrow.’

‘Noon,’ Mick reflected. ‘Which gives him an hour and a bit in the morning. But I aim to make him miss the meeting, get jittery and make a mistake. Besides, his contact will probably arrive here tonight for a quiet chat, and a few questions -’

‘Like ... what the fuck is going on?’ Jim finished off. ‘If I was the contact, I would have seen the news and driven away.’

‘Again, it depends on who it is, and how important this deal is.’

Colette called. ‘Any news?’

‘Our boy has moved hotels, were static outside, all quite so far.’

‘Two armed Germans were arrested outside his hotel; the Swiss police have them. I’m still in work, notes coming in thick and fast.’

‘Are we likely to get pulled off in preference to a few professionals?’ Mick asked.

‘Hell no, we want deniability,’ Colette loudly stated. Then quieter, and apologetically, ‘If you know what I mean.’

‘I do, I’m a freelancer.’

‘Talk later.’

Mick lowered his phone as Jim pointed towards the hotel. A car pulled in, its lights off before it parked. A cigarette was lit, revealing two faces. ‘There goes the neighbourhood,’ Mick commented.

‘How did they know he was here?’ Jim asked. ‘Sayeed took an hour getting here, so he shook the tails.’

‘It could be the other team, here ahead of a meeting.’

‘If the paymaster knows what he’s doing, why doesn’t he advise Sayeed on a how to lose the tails?’ Jim posed.

‘For the simple reason that Sayeed and his brother don’t fully trust the paymaster; it’s a deal to be agreed, not a marriage made in heaven.’

Mick fumbled for the pre-pay mobile. He dialled the police. In German, he said, ‘Hello, police. There are two suspicious men in a black Mercedes in Litz Strasser, outside Anna’s Bakery. They have been sat there for hours, just smoking.’ He hung up,

A police car pulled in two minutes later, and slowed alongside the suspect car.

‘They won’t suspect us,’ Jim commented as he and Mick observed the exchange. ‘They’ll think it a nosy neighbour.’

One of the men in the car handed over an ID. The police turned on their internal light and used their phones. A minute later they handed the ID back and drove off.

‘That’s naughty,’ Mick noted. ‘Not agency, but maybe agency with Interpol IDs that check out.’

‘Which could mean CIA,’ Jim suggested.

‘And they knew he’d be here, or at least they think he might come here,’ Mick considered. ‘They’re two steps ahead of London.’

‘Ha!’ Jim let out. ‘London sent us pair here; the CIA have senior staff and agents with good legends. They’re six steps ahead of us!’

‘Ahead of London, not ahead of us,’ Mick insisted.

‘If Sayeed goes for a walk with them there, we’ll have a hard time following,’ Jim warned.

Mick eased forwards and studied the nearby buildings, in particular their upper floors. ‘No vantage points. Drop me at the back of the hotel, then park around the corner from that car, watch the front of the hotel.’

At the rear of Sayeed’s hotel, Mick jumped out, opening a bag in the boot and retrieving six golf balls. He tapped the roof, Jim pulling off through puddles. The rain had eased, but everything remained soaking wet, Mick’s hands, coat and trousers soon wet from climbing a wall. Stepping carefully around the top of the wall, and balancing precariously like a tightrope walker, he reached across and grabbed the fire escape structure, clambering onto it.

Climbing the fire escape slowly, so as to not clatter on the metal steps, he ascended all the way to the roof, finding a sloping slate roof with numerous loft apartments - probably for staff, one with a light on. Clambering awkwardly over a stone balustrade, Mick’s shoes sank into three inches of cold water. Cursing softly, he put one foot carefully in front of the other, his left hand on the cold wet stone of the balustrade, his right hand on the cold wet slate of the roof.

Turning the corner whilst staying low, he edged towards the front of the hotel, soon glimpsing the street where they had been parked, and the opposition’s tail car. ‘Shouldn’t have parked there, lads,’ he muttered.

Two yards in from the corner of the hotel, Mick crouched down, a foot in the waterlogged guttering and a knee on the sloping roof. He peeked over the balustrade, and smiled. With a

golf ball retrieved from his pocket, he took careful aim, lifted up and threw the ball with all his strength, lying back on the sloping roof a second later.

A reassuringly loud crack echoed about the nearby buildings, a glimpse of the car through the balustrade, its windscreen now white. The men were out, their heads darting every which way, including upwards; every which way apart from the hotel their mark was located in.

Mick folded his arms and waited, just a pigeon for company. Ten minutes later, a second car pulled up, the first abandoned, the second vehicle now occupied by four men. It pulled forwards and parked even closer to the hotel, Mick shaking his head. Easing up, the pigeon flew off. With a knee against the sloping roof, a golf ball was launched down, a resoundingly pleasing noise created by the impact.

All four men were out, running in four different directions and scanning this quiet side street, some of the men now on the corner. Mick's phone went. Cursing, he quickly grabbed it and knocked it off. Seeing that it was Jim's name, he called back. Whispering, he said, 'Yeah?'

'There are men on the corner running about.'

'I know, I just wrote-off two windscreens for them,' Mick whispered.

'There's Sayeed!'

'Where?'

'Coming out the hotel, taxi pulling up.'

'Get ready to follow.'

'Wait, he's eyeing the men on the corner ... he's ... paid the taxi and gone back inside, taxi moving off. They spooked him.'

'Watch the front of the hotel, I'm coming down.'

Mick edged slowly along the roof, his feet in three inches of freezing water, his coat soaked. It took a good six minutes to get back to the top of the fire escape, Mick easing himself down and ruining his suit in the process. On the second landing, a door below burst open. He froze, his back against the door on his own landing.

Someone noisily descended the fire escape, sounding as if they were dragging a suitcase. Mick peered down, unsure who it was, but took a good guess at Sayeed. Step by step, he slowly crept lower, being very careful not to make a noise.

When Sayeed hit the alley, Mick raised his phone. 'Jim,' he whispered. 'Sayeed is in the alley at the back. Pull off, go left and left and wait, I'll follow him.'

Mick continued down as quietly as he could, till Sayeed was a good fifty yards away. Landing in a puddle in the alley, Mick slammed his back against the wall and waited, Sayeed still progressing along the alley. He lifted his phone. 'Jim, go left again, along and stop where you can, he'll emerge close to where you were parked before.'

Sayeed turned right.

'Hang on, he's turned right, moving away from where you were before, towards the shops.'

'Standby ... got him. He's just ducked into a small hotel. Hold on, it's ... the Neapolitan. I've got eyes-on the main entrance and I'm well placed.'

'On my way.' Mick ran down the alley, splashing through puddles, frantically trying to select Roger's number.

'Mick?' Roger asked.

'Get a taxi to the Hotel Neapolitan, behind the Hotel Italiano; Sayeed's inside. You'll see the hire car outside.'

At the car, and a little out of breath, Mick ducked in and slammed the door. 'I'm fucking soaked, my shoes full of water.'

'I can't see anyone else,' Jim noted.

'He gave them the slip, and nearly gave us the slip,' Mick said as he tested his wet socks.

'We have him, no one else does,' Jim realised.

'CIA will track his mobile,' Mick said. He exchanged a look with Jim, pulled out the pre-pay mobile and dialled Sayeed, opening both windows first.

'Hello?' Sayeed answered.

‘Turn off your phone till you want to use it, the CIA will track you.’ Mick hung up, exchanging a look and a shrug with Jim.

Roger pulled up in a taxi, soon jumping into the back of their car, umbrella in hand.

‘OK,’ Mick called. ‘Jim, do the walk by, check on a rear exit.’ Jim eased out. ‘Roger, that bar over there: see if you can get an eyes on.’ Roger stepped out.

When Jim returned, he reported, ‘There’s a fire escape, but unless you’re in the SAS you won’t be scrambling over that back wall.’

Roger called. ‘I can see our friend moving around. First, no second floor, one-two-three-fourth room in from the right.’

‘Excellent. When his light goes out, go mobile.’

‘Mick, this bar, it’s a bit ... gay.’

‘Don’t put-out unless you get a drink and a meal first.’ Mick hung up. ‘He’s sat in a gay bar.’

Jim peered across at it, smiling, Mick still struggling with his wet feet. Jim said, ‘Here, take them off.’ He started the engine and adjusted the heater as Mick took off his socks and shoes, wringing out the socks through the window, a strange sight for passing motorists. With the socks placed directly on the car’s vents, the shoes being held, Mick’s footwear slowly dried.

An hour later, Roger called. ‘Lights off.’

‘Get ready,’ Mick told Jim, damp socks back on, his feet inside damp but warm shoes. ‘Start the engine, lights on – or we’ll look suspicious.’

Sayed appeared on the street, well wrapped up, and immediately put up his umbrella, walking left and away from the car. Mick wound down the window, pointing towards Sayeed as Roger crossed the road in front of them. Roger fell into step behind Sayeed, a good thirty yards back, his own umbrella up.

‘Get in front of him,’ Mick said. ‘Hundred yards at least.’ They pulled off.

After a damp ten-minute walk, Sayeed entered a café, Mick and Jim positioned across the street, Roger now getting into the back of the car.

‘Give me your brolley,’ Mick asked Roger as he eased out of the car, soon walking back along the road and across to the other side. With the umbrella up, the rain cooperating by starting up again, Mick walked past the café, getting a glimpse of Sayeed sat with another man. After a meandering stroll, Mick eased back into the car.

‘He’s met a contact, looks East European, about fifty, black hair. When they leave, all eyes on him, forget Sayeed.’

‘Bounty time?’ Roger asked from the back.

‘Bonus time at least, because no other fucker knows about this meeting; the street was clean.’

Fifteen minutes of staring at the café finally resulted in Sayeed leaving, walking back towards his hotel. Roger eased out, umbrella ready, and walked to the corner as traffic threw spray up off the road. The contact emerged alone, and turned up his collar, walking in the opposite direction to Sayeed.

Two hundred yards along the road, the car now in front of the mark, the mark ducked down a dark alley.

‘Dark alley!’ Jim noted. ‘He wants to see if he has a tail.’

‘Go around,’ Mick urged, lifting his phone. ‘Roger, don’t follow the mark down that alley - go around. Run ya lazy git!’

Jim was stuck in lights when the mark appeared, the mark jogging across the wet street and into a pedestrian precinct. With the lights green, Jim pulled up next to the start of the precinct.

‘Other side,’ Mick said. He lifted his phone as they pulled off. ‘Roger, go into the precinct, but stay well back. Look for a parking structure, or go straight through.’

At the opposite side now, they waited. ‘There, going left. Get in front of him, right to the end of that road. Turn right and stop, lights off.’

Looking over their shoulders after halting, they could see the man enter a small hotel.

‘Does that sign say Martzt?’ Mick asked. He opened the door and eased out. At the corner, he could see Roger and Roger could see him. Mick walked over, getting the name and phone number of the hotel, a quick glance inside as he walked past. Roger met him around the next corner.

Mick said. ‘Go join Jim in the car, keep an eyes-on for this place. I’m going to call them and try and book in.’

Roger walked off as Mick asked for a room in German, finding a single room available. He would arrive in thirty minutes, he told them. Back at the main road he flagged down a taxi, a quick trip back to his hotel to grab a part-filled suitcase and return, soon stood in front of a small reception desk, no sign of anyone in the foyer.

Booked in, he found his allocated room, small and pokey, and dumped his case. Back at reception he asked about food, being directed towards the bar. In the bar, he ignored the patrons and closed in on the bored looking barman.

‘English ... not good. Eat ... food.’

The man pointed towards a glass cabinet of sandwiches, baguettes and cakes. Pulling out two sandwiches, Mick pointed at the beer pump before offering a handful of notes and coins to the barman, who picked out what he wanted.

Sitting, Mick took off his jacket and opened the sandwiches, soon cursing in Russian and throwing them down.

A Russian voice said, ‘Not so good, eh?’

Mick turned to the man, who was not the mark. ‘Russian?’

‘From Moscow? You?’

‘Rostov-on-Don. Just outside.’

‘I can hear it in your accent, almost Ukrainian.’

Mick pretended to be offended, straightening.

‘No, no, my friend, I don’t mean to insult you, but they are similar accents.’

Mick shrugged, tackling the second sandwich. ‘You are working here?’

‘Yes, construction manager. You?’

‘Gas futures, stock market.’

‘What are you doing in this dump? Besides drying out.’

Mick looked at the mud speckled onto his trousers. ‘I book into a good hotel, get the paperwork, cancel, and then claim it.’

The other man laughed loudly. ‘If your company pays, so be it; I get forty-five Euros a day for room and food.’ He edged closer.

Mick said, ‘I’d offer you a sandwich, but I’d insult you. Or poison you!’

They got into a debate about hotels in Odessa they both liked, brothels in Moscow and Prague, they even realised they may have liked the same girl. Two beers were downed before the mark appeared, ignored by Mick.

The Russian called to the mark, in Russian, inviting him over. To Mick, he whispered, ‘Ukrainian. Be nice.’

The mark sat with a beer, facing Mick, introductions given, soon back to Odessa and hotels, a loud debate.

‘Your accent?’ the mark asked Mick.

‘Rostov-on-Don,’ Mick replied.

‘Ah...’ the mark let out.

That led to a debate about the Sochi Winter Olympics; a lengthy and heated debate. That, in turn, led to an argument about the Russian fleet based in Sebastopol.

‘Give it back to the Ukrainians,’ Mick said, his Russian friend not impressed, the mark - a Ukrainian, obviously wanting the port back.

With a debate about European visas for Russian tourists starting up, Mick took out his passport and opened a page, arguing that Russians were not fairly treated in Europe. The mark read the passport stamps at length – Europe, Turkey and Egypt - before handing it back. Next, Mick showed three photographs, the images of himself with a woman and a young child at landmarks near Rostov-on-Don; the happy family.

‘Are you working tomorrow?’ the mark asked Mick.

‘Tomorrow? No, that’s why I can drink. Two days off!’

‘A young family is expensive. If you want some work, I am short-handed here, let down by two men.’

Mick gave a big shoulder shrug. ‘Doing what?’

‘I have some files to deliver, some to pick up and sign, then the lawyer signs and it goes back – you know what Europeans are like. It will take a day of taxis and waiting. But we start at 7am.’ He gestured towards the beer.

‘I can sleep it off,’ Mick said. ‘And the pay?’

‘Three hundred Euros a day.’

Mick shrugged again. ‘It all helps.’

‘How’s your English?’

‘Not good, just enough to get by.’

‘You can read English?’

‘Some. I know some German, some French, some Spanish.’

‘So long as you can tell the taxi driver where to go,’ the mark explained.

‘We have a driver,’ Mick explained.

‘Who ... has a driver?’

‘My company does; old Swiss man who takes us back and forth to the airport.’

‘He speaks Russian?’ the mark asked.

Mick shook his head. ‘We use English or German.’

‘Do you have his number?’

Mick tapped his pockets. ‘I have it on an email. I can call him in the morning.’ He checked his watch. ‘Now, the old fucker is asleep, but he’s always up early for the airport run.’

‘Fine. If you can get him it will save on taxi fare. I will see you here at 7am, yes?’

Mick nodded as he stood. He thanked his Russian drinking buddy and set off for his room. In the room, he put an ear to the door for two minutes before lifting his phone. ‘It’s me.’

‘All OK?’ Jim asked.

‘The mark just hired me to run errands in the morning, delivering files to be signed and back.’

‘How the hell...?’

‘I’ll need you to pretend to be an old Swiss driver in the morning, so put things in the car to back that up, memorise a home address here, and study the map tonight for an hour. Be here for 7.30am, and dress like a local, full tank of gas, put a boarding pass or two on the floor in the rear. Oh, check the car for hire tags. And try and grab a nametag, maybe a name sign like at the airport. Ask Roger to hire a second car, I don’t think Sayeed is flying off at noon somehow.’

‘And when am I supposed to sleep?’ Jim quipped.

‘It’s ten thirty now, so plenty of time. Don’t worry about a static on this place for now, go back and get ready.’

Mick checked the door, wedged a chair-back under the handle, put the chain on and settled down.

The big day

1

At 7am, Mick met the man in the hotel's small restaurant, the man claiming his name to be Bogdan. The breakfast bar offered cereal, hot food having to be ordered from a bored looking old man.

Mick explained, 'The Swiss man will be here in half an hour. He will work till 3pm for three hundred Euro, local stops, all in with fuel.'

'Good, good. Have breakfast and a coffee. You only have this suit?'

'And jeans and t-shirt?'

'No, no, the suit is fine,' Bogdan offered, a glance at the dirty trousers. He and Mick occupied just one of six available tables, Mick placing his mobile on the table, its picture-background that of a woman and child.

When Mick's phone went, he tapped it, set for speakerphone. 'Hello?'

'Did I wake you?' a woman asked.

'No, no, I have some work today, some papers to deliver and be signed. A little extra money.'

'Olesya lost a tooth.'

'Lost it?'

'It was loose. She asked me to pull it, but I didn't, so she pulled it out.'

'Which tooth?'

'At the front. Now she has a big gap and pokes her tongue through it.'

Mick smiled at Bogdan. 'I'll call you later, I have to leave soon. Bye.' He ended the call.

'Your first?' Bogdan asked.

Mick nodded. 'And not planned. We're not married, it ... was a party, she fell pregnant, but we stayed together because we like each other – not just for the child.'

They munched on toast covered in jam, stepping outside at 7.25am.

Jim was waiting. He clambered out, dressed in a black jacket, grey waistcoat, and he even had a nametag. ‘Morgen,’ he offered.

Bogdan handed Mick a file. ‘Go to this hotel, that room number, wait while the man reads it – he’s from Pakistan, so he has no Russian. Take him to the second address, where documents will be waiting, and then to the bank at the third address. He will give you a receipt to bring back to me. I’ll then give you a document to take to a fourth address, they will give you a document to return to me. That last document is a shipping certificate, in Russian, so look that it is OK, containers from Dubai to Ukraine, factory parts, to be delivered within the month. Call me if it does not look in order.’

‘No problem. And later I get paid, yes?’

‘Yes, yes, I’ll be here.’

Mick clambered into the car, Jim pulling off – and now three hundred Euros better off.

‘How the fuck did you wangle that?’ Jim asked as they rounded the first corner.

‘My Russian is good. He’s Ukrainian, and he’s shipping something from Dubai to the Ukraine, Sayeed being paid for it at a Swiss bank, so it’s probably only be one thing: fissile material.’

‘What?’ Jim gasped.

They exchanged looks. ‘We have a ... bit of situation,’ Mick stated, opening the thin plastic case that held the documents. ‘And I need you to trust me.’

‘Trust you? Why?’

‘Because I won’t be reporting this straight away.’

‘Are you mad?’ Jim asked in a forced whisper.

‘I don’t want to scare them off, because they’ll just try again later. We need to catch them.’

‘That’s not your choice, Mick,’ Jim firmly pointed out.

‘Check our rear, and slow down while I video this.’

Mick lifted each page over in turn, the writing English, most of the pages concerned with technical details. He held his phone over each page for two seconds before advancing, soon through the twelve pages as Jim checked for tails. All pages were put back as they had been before they pulled up outside the Neapolitan.

‘We’ll see if Sayeed knows my face.’

‘You’re going to meet Sayeed?’

‘Yep. I’m his gofer today, and he thinks I can’t read this.’ Mick opened the door and eased out. ‘Wait for me, ask Roger to tail us as we go. Oh, and sit with the doors locked and leave at the first sign of trouble.’

Mick passed through reception and climbed the stairs to the second floor, finding the room in question. He knocked. Sayeed opened the door and waited. Mick handed over the file and stepped in. Tapping the file, he said, ‘Look, look.’

Sayeed pointed Mick to a chair, before sitting on the bed. Opening the file, he raised his mobile and began a lengthy conversation in Urdu, a full twenty minutes. When done, he collected the pages together and slipped them back into the plastic case, standing and getting his coat.

Mick stood, stretching and yawning before leading Sayeed out. At the car, Mick opened the rear door for Sayeed, easing into the front seat. He displayed a post-it note to Jim and tapped it.

‘Bahnhoff Strasse?’ Jim queried as they pulled off.

Mick nodded and gestured forwards, a five-minute journey through thick traffic. At least it had stopped raining. When Jim pulled up, Mick eased out and opened the car door for Sayeed. Checking the address several times, Mick led Sayeed into a tower building and up to the tenth floor.

At the indicated door, Mick knocked and entered, finding the office of a law firm, a receptionist sat waiting. He showed her the post-it note, the lady immediately gesturing them to an inner office.

‘Morgen,’ a well-dressed man offered; sixty and grey, tall and thin.

Mick showed him the post-it note, to which he simply handed over a large brown envelope. Mick turned, leading Sayeed out. In the corridor, he offered the envelope to Sayeed, who simply shrugged. He didn’t know what to do with it either. Either that, or he didn’t want to carry it.

Back in the car, Mick showed Jim the third address, a bank, but helpfully pointed towards the lake. Jim found it, eventually, Sayeed and Mick jumping out again. It was now 8.45am, and Sayeed checked over his shoulder as they entered the building. Inside the bank, Mick glanced around at the seated tellers and the windowed tellers. Shrugging, he handed Sayeed the envelope and gestured him to a seated teller, grabbing a chair to wait and picking up a magazine.

Sayeed produced his passport and driver’s license when prompted, all checked carefully, before a document was accepted, a counter-foil signed and stamped, handed to Mick. In the car, Mick tapped the first post-it note, the hotel, and they set-off again. At the Neapolitan, Mick gestured Sayeed out with a smile and a pointed finger.

Pulling off, Jim blew out loudly. ‘Fucking hell, Mick.’

‘Sayeed’s brother just got paid, so back to the mark.’ He grabbed his phone and took an image of the document, the receipt. ‘Six million dollars.’

‘Not a bad day’s work,’ Jim noted. ‘And Sayeed can make his flight. We’re packed ready, but we’d be lucky to make it to Munich in time.’

‘Call the airline and try and move to a later flight, or the morning,’ Mick suggested. ‘Oh, and check this car thoroughly for prints before you return it, and trackers after you finally drop me off.’

Back at Bogdan’s hotel, Mick said, ‘Wait here.’ He found Bogdan in the bar, the receipt and original file handed over.

‘All OK?’ Bogdan asked.

‘Sure, but I didn’t say a word to the Asian guy.’

‘That’s OK. Take this file to the address on it, and bring back the documents they give you.’

‘Be done in time for lunch,’ Mick told Bogdan before he left. In the car, he opened the file, finding shipping arrangements for second-hand solar panels, from Dubai to Odessa. ‘They’re using a third-party shipper to avoid any evidence, and using me for this gofer work because they don’t care if I get twenty years in a Swiss prison cell.’

‘Roger is a few cars back,’ Jim mentioned as they drove.

‘You might make your flight.’

‘Roger moved them back two hours.’

‘Good.’

The next address took a few attempts to find, Bogdan’s documents handed over, a receipt issued. Back at Bogdan’s hotel, Mick handed over the receipt with a smile. ‘What’s next?’

‘That’s it for today, more tomorrow, we’ll speak later tonight.’ Bogdan handed over three hundred Euros.

‘And the driver – send him off?’

Bogdan handed over an envelope with another thirty Euros in, both men stepping outside. Mick paid Jim the bonus and thanked him, Jim pulling away.

‘Drink?’ Mick asked Bogdan.

‘No, I must meet friends at the airport. We’ll talk later.’

In his room, Mick watched through a crack in the window as Bogdan left with a case, walking towards the shopping precinct. He hurriedly packed what few things he had removed from his case, and left by the back door, forcing a gate open.

When Roger picked him up, he said, ‘Back round the corner, watch that hotel from a distance for a bit.’

‘Jim didn’t sound happy earlier,’ Roger mentioned.

Mick took a moment. ‘The Ukrainian gang is buying radioactive material from Sayeed.’

‘Then it’s a big stakes game, with a big reward somewhere.’

‘There’d better be after all this effort.’

‘Heads up,’ Roger called.

They observed as a car pulled up, three burly men in padded jackets getting out, scanning the street as they entered the hotel. They left five minutes later, screeching off.

‘That was my execution squad,’ Mick noted, peering towards the hotel, his eyelids heavy. ‘The mark was making sure I wouldn’t speak.’

‘Wonder what he’d do if he knew you photographed all his documents.’

‘He would be ... vexed. OK, back to my hotel, but triple-check our rear. Take this car back, and get yourselves up to Munich. I’ll see you in Rhodes. And ... try and do a good job of reassuring Jim; tell him I’ll call Colette with the news.’

‘Will you?’ Roger asked, glancing across.

‘Something here doesn’t add up, and I’m not sure if reporting this will make it better, or worse. What was Pestichio doing here?’

They stopped at lights.

‘Monitoring Sayeed?’ Roger offered.

‘Pestichio would only monitor an operation if it was a big operation, and babysitting Sayeed wasn’t.’

‘But what you found out was big, fucking huge.’

They moved off.

‘So who knew about it in advance? CIA, Tiller, none of the above? For Pestichio to be here, they must know. Which begs the question ... why not stop the pay-off? I just set the wheels in motion for something big.’

‘Just hope you didn’t get seen doing it,’ Roger quipped.

‘What did you say?’

‘I said ... I hope you didn’t get seen doing it.’

‘Whoops.’

‘Whoops? What the fuck is whoops, Mick?’ Roger asked, clearly concerned.

‘There’s no way they could have predicted I’d get Bogdan’s confidence. So, if they have my face in a camera... I’d just say I was undercover for London.’

‘And what would London say if they saw your face with Sayeed, handing over six million dollars?’

‘They’d be confused. But if the CIA have my happy smiling face, then it begs the question as to why the CIA didn’t stop Sayeed, why they used a camera instead of a toe up my arse. They’re hardly innocent in this.’

‘They’ll wait for the shipment to arrive and grab it,’ Roger suggested.

‘The good old US Navy will board the ship at sea, a CNN crew in the chopper,’ Mick quipped. They pulled into Mick’s hotel. ‘Anyway, see you in Rhodes. Be careful, and check that hire car for trackers, every inch.’

Collecting the remainder of his belongings, and grabbing a quick shower, Mick made ready to leave. When his phone went it was Roger.

‘Mick, our hire car has ... two things it shouldn’t.’

‘Oh dear. Get into a concrete parking structure and swap them over to another car; sunglasses and caps on. Swap the plates as well. Write down any numbers you want from your mobiles and then ditch them. Then get the hell out of Dodge City.’

Mick lowered his phone and walked to the window, peering out at a grey sky, raindrops racing each other down the window, collecting others as they slid down the pane, leaving more behind. ‘Hope I was photogenic.’

When his phone went, it was Colette.

‘Right, boss?’

‘Mick, your name is popping up all over the computer, searches in the last few hours.’

‘I must have been recognised by someone in the CIA.’

‘CIA?’ Colette repeated.

‘Yeah, there all over the city. I even recognised some of them.’

‘What’s ... been happening?’

‘We got close to Sayeed, who tried hard to lose us – and anyone else following him – and he led us to a Ukrainian, some

gang leader. I posed as a Russian in his hotel, got his confidence, and he asked me to do some gofer work for him. I readily agreed, and I read the documents and photographed them.'

'Excellent work.'

'I posed as the gofer and dropped documents to Sayeed, took Sayeed to the bank –'

'The bank?'

'Yeah, I don't know what Sayeed did inside, but I ran him around for a while. Anyway, I photographed all the documents, so we can analyse them later.'

'You off to Turkey now?'

'Yes, flying later. Any ... change to our directive on this job?'

'No, stick with Sayeed. Turkey is not my patch, but the Mid East section kind of regards it as our patch now; they won't complain.'

'I'll call you tomorrow.'

Lowering his phone, Mick rubbed the bridge of his nose. 'What are you doing, Mick?' he softly asked of himself. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he stared at the trouser press attached to the wall. Sucking in a big breath, he stood. 'Fuck it.'

Packed and ready, he took the lift down to the basement, leaving via the access ramp, umbrella up. Flagging down a taxi, he negotiated a rate up to Bern, hopping on a train to Rome with a Canadian passport. Watching the raindrops on the window being blown backwards, dark and sodden countryside blurring by, he closed his eyes.

2

'Mister Constantine, please, it's the vase thief.'

'Vase thief,' Constantine said a minute later. 'Do you have a name?'

'Mikhail will do.'

‘OK, *Mikhail*, I’ve been searching the police computers, and what you said was true; Malta, Spain and Zurich. I even found a source in the SVR who confirms the CIA are interested in me for this ... whatever *this* is.’

‘I can help you, sir, I can help you a lot, and I hope that it will square the books. I’m just a paid individual, so you have no reason to be mad at me for the vase.’

‘How can you help me?’

‘First, I need your help to try and find out what’s going on, and who the people are behind it. The CIA doesn’t know, that’s why they blame you – you’re just someone to conveniently pin the blame on. But ... when this gets out, all of Russian will be against you as a traitor.’

‘What the hell are you talking about?’

‘I discovered part of what’s going on, and I have the evidence to show you – to prove it. I will text you pictures and video in a few minutes, examine them carefully, zoom in.’

‘And what will they show?’

‘That a Ukrainian gangster has paid millions of dollars to buy low grade Uranium from Sayeed, and that it will be shipped to Odessa in two weeks.’

‘And what does this gang want with Uranium?’

‘They aim to put the Uranium in Sebastopol, near the naval yards,’ Mick lied. ‘Beyond that, I don’t know.’

‘Irradiate the naval yards?’ Constantine puzzled. ‘What will that achieve; it won’t harm our fleet? It will be found and dealt with.’

‘We’ll have to ask the men when we catch them. And Mister Constantine, how will you feel when all Russia reads that the west blames you for the attack on your own navy?’

‘When I catch-up with the dogs behind this I will personally slice off their skin!’ he growled.

‘Can you ... allocate some men to help me, some money to work with? I need them in Turkey, in Marmaris.’

‘You want to work ... with my men?’

‘I have people to call on, but they won’t ... interrogate anyone, if you know what I mean. And we’re unarmed, taking great risk working undercover. If we need to storm a building ... I don’t have the resources; I work by stealth, not firepower.’

‘How many men?’

‘Maybe six. And twenty thousand dollars to cover our expenses.’

‘You work very cheaply, my friend.’

‘I won’t ask you for money till I’ve earned it.’

‘You have already earned some by warning me.’

‘As I said, a gesture of reconciliation. And, in the future, I’m available for hire for certain types of work.’

‘You would hire yourself out to me?’ Constantine puzzled.

‘Yes. For work around Europe; tailing, infiltration, research. I have contacts in the western agencies, I’m a useful man.’

‘So it seems. I will send six men to Turkey today, and money. They know people in Turkey to get weapons off.’

‘Can you see this number on your phone?’

‘Yes.’

‘Use this number to contact me, and for your men to contact me. I’ll email you the pictures now, you’ll have to zoom in on them or download to a computer and print out. Oh, and the man pinning the blame on you – he’s is a senior CIA manager called Pestichio – like the nut. He was in Zurich, and was involved in a car accident. Perhaps that information is of some use to you. And may I suggest that you *not* mention the Uranium to anyone yet, not even your own people. Secrets are for bosses, not staff.’

‘Very well, Mikhail. My men will be in Turkey.’

‘And if the men could have a few ladies with them – we don’t want to arouse suspicion when tailing people. Oh, that villa in Spain, Tishkent. Who owns it?’

Constantine coughed out a small, derisory laugh. ‘It is owned by that dog, Brabos.’

Mick took a moment. ‘Brabos? Mister Constantine, is there any bad blood between you?’

‘Yes, I took his nightclubs in Prague.’

‘When the Germans in Spain were shot and wounded – the one’s watching Sayeed, they went to the villa, Tishkent.’

There was a long pause. ‘What?’ Constantine asked in a whisper.

‘I think, maybe, we know why the CIA chose your name. The idiots following Sayeed around are linked to Brabos.’

‘You’ve earned yourself a few more dollars, my friend. And I have some thinking to do.’

Rhodes

1

Mick landed in Rhodes at noon, a morning flight from Rome after a restless night in a cheap hotel. Jim was waiting outside the airport in a hire car, Roger inside the terminal and checking faces. Mick clocked Roger as he walked out of the airport and toward the taxi rank, but did not acknowledge him, getting a taxi to a modest hotel in Rhodes town, just outside the walled part of the medieval citadel.

Booked in, Mick lay on the bed and dialled Jim. 'I'm at the Hotel St. John, just north of the wall. Meet me in half an hour, old town, central square, eyes in the back of your head.'

In the square, Mick found the guys inspecting the tempting tourist trinkets on display; brass metal-works, beaten plates and silver ornaments. He made brief eye contact, the guys following him ten yards back and up through narrow and winding streets crammed with shops selling cheap tourist crap; Arabic or Turkish carpets, jewellery of all sorts, t-shirts and sports shirts, and ceramics. Beyond the tourist trap, Mick turned into a non-descript courtyard, took a table and ordered three beers, no other tourists utilising the small bar at the moment. The guys stepped in a moment later, glancing back at empty alleyways.

'You're being cautious,' Jim noted as they sat.

'After I played Gofer for Bogdan, I think the CIA ran my name through the computer.'

'Ah,' Jim let out. 'They made you. Colette *will not* be best pleased.'

Mick waited, staring back.

'What?' Jim asked. 'What has Colette said?'

'Nothing.'

'Nothing?' Jim queried. 'If the CIA clocked you, they'd talk to London. So ... why haven't they?'

‘That, my friend, is worrying me as well,’ Mick commented. ‘If they haven’t gone through channels, then they don’t want London to know about their operation around Sayeed.’

‘Or their embarrassment,’ Roger said. ‘If they think you infiltrated the gang dealing with Sayeed - they’d be right pissed!’

‘Normally, yes,’ Mick agreed, appearing tired. ‘But I would expect a high-level discreet chat about what I know ... that they may not know.’

‘And ... nothing?’ Jim puzzled.

Mick shook his head, the drinks placed down. They paused for the waiter to withdraw.

‘Sayeed landed in Turkey yesterday, so the trail will go cold,’ Jim suggested.

‘It’s off-season in Marmaris, so we may get lucky and spot him. Besides, he may be at a place Colette linked to the Maltese goons, a hotel owned by a Russian gangster. It’s a solid lead.’

‘Has Colette joined the dots on all the goons in Malta and Spain?’ Jim asked.

‘Not to any reasonable conclusion,’ Mick replied. ‘Jim, that photographer in Spain, the one that I relieved of his camera – it looked more like he was interested in Tiller than Sayeed. And if the CIA picked Tiller up at the airport, then they’re keeping tabs on him.’

‘They think Tiller is dirty?’ Jim puzzled. ‘That’s naughty, because they should hand over anything they have on Tiller to London.’

‘I think Tiller is too stupid to be dirty,’ Mick commented, Roger agreeing. ‘So they were watching Tiller because of an overlap of operations, the Yanks not wanting to share – as usual.’ He took a sip of his beer. ‘Guys, there’s one very undeniable conclusion about why the CIA are keeping quiet, and that’s because they don’t want Sayeed’s plan interrupted.’

Jim and Roger exchanged concerned and puzzled looks. Jim said, ‘If they want it kept quiet, then there are three reasons sat right here why it can’t be kept quiet.’

‘And as such, they may wish us to ... *remain silent* about the operation,’ Mick pointed out.

‘Oh, hell,’ Roger let out.

Jim stared at Roger for a moment, his mouth opening. ‘They wouldn’t dare come for us.’

‘Really?’ Mick posed. ‘You’re retired, Roger was never in, and I’m a freelancer with a poor discipline record. There’ll be no major incident if we disappear, nor tears shed, nor wake held.’

‘They’ll kill us,’ Roger wistfully stated.

Mick took another sip. ‘I have a safe house here, so you could both use it crash for a while, a little apartment in Lindos. I also have an idea about how to fix this, but it’ll take a week or two.’

‘Why are you keeping this from London?’ Jim quietly, yet forcefully demanded. ‘They could help!’

‘Because I want to know what’s going on first,’ Mick answered. ‘Really ... going on.’

‘And isn’t it enough that this Ukrainian gangster is buying fissile material from Sayeed’s brother?’ Jim whispered, glancing over his shoulder.

‘Six million dollars could buy you a shit load of fissile material in the Ukraine itself,’ Mick pointed out. ‘They’ve already had a few security breaches, and lost a few kilograms. And if Sayeed and his brother wanted to keep it secret, then just what the fuck was that stupid arse doing wandering around Europe being followed by goons? This deal – the Ukrainians buying fissile material from Sayeed – has been fed to us with a spoonful of sugar.’

‘We investigated, we followed, we saw people shot, a guy killed, goons arrested, and got lucky in Zurich. But I think the whole thing was to make us, *or someone*, think what they wanted us to think, find out what we were supposed to find out – and not easily. It had to look genuine.’

‘A set-up?’ Jim puzzled.

‘Jim, in thirty years, have you *ever* ... seen anything like those goons in Malta, and Sayeed’s behaviour?’

Jim reluctantly shook his head.

Mick added, ‘We watched the show, we had a little audience participation – as we were supposed to, but I think I fucked it up by getting the gofer job. That ... was a brilliant piece of luck, but not part of the plan for the puppet master, whatever the fucking plan is.’

‘I don’t think any fissile material is heading for Odessa from Dubai. And why from Dubai? Is the material Iranian or Pakistani? If so, Mossad would be all over it. The Iranians are not about to lose fissile material, or sell it, and neither are the Pakistanis.’

‘Then what was the six million dollars for?’ Roger asked.

‘Something else, somewhere else, for somebody else,’ Mick listed off. ‘And we’re in great danger till we work that out.’

‘You’ll go over to Marmaris tomorrow?’ Roger asked, Mick nodding. ‘Count me in.’ He faced Jim. And waited.

Jim coughed out a laugh. ‘Why didn’t I stay in my bar?’

‘Because this gives you a hard-on,’ Mick told him. ‘And a little respect from the world.’

‘Respect is not much use if you’re the most respected corpse in the whole damn graveyard!’

‘You could die tomorrow,’ Roger told him. ‘Or in a year, or maybe twenty. And I want to make some money from this gig. Pity we couldn’t have got the six million.’

‘Never say never,’ Mick commented.

Roger wiggling his eyebrows and smiled.

‘But first, we need to have a poke around Marmaris, and to keep Colette sweet for future work, and to end the job we were paid to do when Sayeed flies off, then ... then find out what the fuck is really going on and make a few quid. Jim, we’re outsiders; if we uncover something interesting then London will reward us – so too others. Information, secret information, is always valuable, and as much as I love Queen and country the price of fuel is going up.’

‘We have to pay the bills,’ Roger quickly added.

Mick offered Roger a mock-serious nod. Facing Jim, he said, ‘My game plan ... is to make use of Constantine’s men tomorrow – they’re bringing us some money – and then to set a filter-trap to see who comes out to play.’

‘You’re going to *use* this Constantine?’ Jim queried.

‘Someone has fingered him for all this, and he’s not a happy chappy. He wants to know what’s going on as much as we do, and he has money, men and resources. Right now, the enemy of my enemy –’

‘Is my friend,’ Roger finished off.

‘And I guess you’ll not let Colette know about Constantine,’ Jim said with a curled lip.

‘Hell no,’ Mick confirmed. ‘I’ll make it look like Constantine is after us ... and that we need more money to go to ground.’ He sipped his beer. ‘What do you say, Jim?’

‘I’d say ... that I dare not just go back to my bar, not till I know that London has my back, and that I can move from Malta. And even then I’d like to know that the paymaster is not after me personally. However this got started, it needs an ending – preferably with the main players in jail.’

‘That’s my aim, Jim,’ Mick emphasised. ‘But no one is going to argue with you taking to the safe house and reading a book for a week.’

Jim studied Mick, long and hard. ‘I asked you a few days ago if you were working for someone higher up than Colette. And what I’ve seen this past week ... well, you’re not the man I thought you were, Mick, and whether you deny it or not, I think you *are* working for someone higher up than Colette, and that you’re the best field agent I’ve ever seen.

‘Getting that gofer job wasn’t a brilliant accident; it was sheer brilliance. So I’m going to work on the assumption that you know what you’re doing, and I’ll assist. The only thing that confuses me is your desire to part people from their money. But, to help me sleep at night, I’m going to assume that you’re working for the good guys.’

‘We all have our crutches,’ Mick quipped. ‘I still believe I’ll meet the right girl, settle down and have kids, and live in a small cottage.’

Roger laughed loudly.

Mick checked his watch. ‘We may as well make a start. We can get the ferry across now, book into a cheap hotel and do a passive sweep. Make your beds look slept in, carry just a small bag over. I’ve got some back-up arriving, so ... don’t be alarmed by big Russian goons helping out.’

‘Bloody marvellous,’ Jim let out.

2

The afternoon ferry from Rhodes to Marmaris docked at 4pm, passports checked, visa stamps purchased and then stamped. Mick grabbed a taxi to a hotel, Roger and Jim a second taxi, meeting at the harbour side an hour later.

‘Nice spot,’ Jim offered, the three of them sat in café overlooking the moored tourist boats, large Turkish flags flying off each. ‘But a bit quiet?’

‘It’s not high season,’ Mick put in. ‘But it gets rammed in July and August. This time of year it’s just nice; you’ve got the weather, but not the crowds.’

‘We’re in the Dolman Hotel,’ Roger said.

‘I’m in the Ockotan, on the front. You’ll see a big picture of a cockerel on the side.’

‘Who’s the statue of?’ Jim asked, pointing.

‘Ataturk; the founding father of post-Ottoman secular Turkey,’ Mick explain. ‘He moved the capital from Istanbul to Ankara so that it was central to all Turks. There’s also a statue of a spaceman, which looks like a deep sea diver, and a mermaid.’

Jim looked out over a huge enclosed bay, a bay that he had examined in great detail as their ferry had entered via a cliff-backed channel. Icmeler itself had been pointed out by Mick as they had cleared the channel, the small resort located to the

west of Marmaris and nestled into a valley. ‘Seems a bit ... oddly quiet and pleasant for espionage work.’

‘You wouldn’t say that on a hot August night down here,’ Mick commented. ‘Then you’d have to watch your wallet, and your watch.’

‘So what’s first?’ Roger asked.

‘You guys can scout Icmeler for Sayeed.’ Mick handed Roger an address. ‘Find that hotel without approaching it - ask the taxi driver to go near it, but not to it. If you can’t get a good OP on the hotel, split and walk the sea-front streets and bars, see if Sayeed is sat with his back to the road again. And guys, the opposition around here is probably armed.’

‘They were everywhere else!’ Jim unhappily noted.

‘Call me if you find anything,’ Mick said. ‘I have some Russians to go meet.’

* * *

Roger and Jim explained to the taxi driver that they wanted to go to a certain place in Icmeler, explaining that they didn’t know exactly where it was, but that it was near the hotel in question. The taxi dropped them a quarter mile past the hotel, having helpfully pointed it out first.

The area they had arrived at consisted of small hotels and large houses, no substantive hotels to be seen, the various properties well spread out and most offering large gardens and empty pools. It could have passed for an urban area, not a tourist area, little in the way of tacky neon hotel signs, screaming kids, or holidaymakers.

Hats and sunglasses on, map in hand, Roger and Jim strolled back along the road that led eventually past the target hotel, crickets chirping loudly all around, the afternoon hot, little breeze evident in the valley. Passing the hotel, Roger said, ‘There’re goons sat around the pool. That ain’t no spot to take the kids paddling.’

At the first junction in the road they found a café just big enough for three tables, and sat. Their position allowed them a partial view of the top floors of the target hotel through a row of trees, no sight of the pool now, but they could view the hotel's access road.

Roger lifted his phone. 'Found the hotel – its goon central. We're up the road, static, eyes on the approaches.'

Sipping his drink, Jim said, 'They probably eat out. That small hotel had no kitchen vents that I could see.'

'Sayeed will walk past here later, heading for a bite to eat in a tourist restaurant,' Roger agreed. 'But we can't stay here too long, it's a bit obvious.'

Ten minutes later, their orange juices downed, they picked up the map and strolled down towards the beach, passing postcard stands, shops selling colourful beach towels, trinkets, and ceramics again - distinctive Turkish blue and white plates. The quiet beach was scanned, no middle-aged Pakistani men seen to be swimming, sunbathing, or chatting up the girls in bikinis.

Walking left, they passed over a gentle stream heading into the bay, reached the end of the tourist trap and reversed course. Back in the centre of the small tourist area they selected a café with a commanding view of the main drag, what it was, and settled in for a long static.

Food ordered, Jim pointed. 'It's Sayeed,' he whispered, putting his cap back on. 'He's just wandering again. There, he's sitting in that café, one over.'

Roger lifted his phone, his back to Sayeed. 'Got Sayeed, sat in a café.'

'We're interested in who he meets, so tail the contact, not Sayeed,' Mick requested.

Lowering his phone, Mick edged around the same corner for the second time and entered a beachfront bar. Six of Constantine's men sat about with three ladies, all of the Russians suitably dressed for summer. Each of the men looked both as if they

could handle themselves, and had taken a few knocks in their time. They were not a handsome bunch.

Mick stood in the bar's entrance and took off his sunglasses. And waited. A man stepped forwards, the others eyeing Mick suspiciously. 'I'm Mikhail, the vase thief.'

'Yuri. I'm in charge.'

'Are you good at taking orders, Yuri, because we have a lot to do and not much time?'

Yuri reluctantly nodded.

Mick led him back inside, opening a map at a table and letting it rest on the tops of glasses and bottles. The group closed in. 'This is where we are, Marmaris. Anyone been here before?'

They all had.

'Excellent,' Mick said. 'This is Icmeler. There's a small hotel here -' He pointed on the map. '- and it's full of men like yourself; big, tough and handsome. We don't know yet if they're armed. On the beachfront, here, is a café, and sat in it is Sayeed, a Pakistani. He doesn't speak any Russian, but his English is good.' He faced Yuri. 'I want the first couple to go and find the café, sit and have a meal.'

Yuri called two names.

Mick faced them. 'Act natural, don't do anything other than observe, don't look directly at him, and talk like you're married and happy, eh?'

Yuri dispatched the couple.

Mick said, 'Ten minutes from now, send a second couple to sit at the café next door, same routine exactly. But remember, we're interested in Sayeed's contact more than him.'

The couple were selected.

'The rest of you, apart from Yuri, walk from here to the harbour and the town, walk around, look and listen for other Russians - tough Russian men, or anyone suspicious. Be careful when following any of them. Report any suspects to us, I'll take a close look. And ... have a nice day.'

With just Yuri left, Mick said, ‘The hotel in Icmeler is part-owned by Brabos, I found a link.’

‘Then we burn it down.’

‘Sounds good, but first we look for evidence; documents, photographs – something to prove that Brabos is behind this and not your boss. But there’s another *small* problem; I have the CIA looking for me.’

Yuir’s eye’s widened.

Mick continued, ‘In Zurich, I got close to the Ukrainian gang and infiltrated their group; they hired me as a deliveryman then kindly sent a team to kill me afterwards. While I was with them I was seen, my name run through the computer afterwards.’

‘The CIA know your face?’ Yuri puzzled.

‘They do. We have ... crossed paths a few times.’

‘Why have the police and CIA not arrested the men involved with this?’

‘That, my friend, keeps me awake at night. It may be because the CIA like to catch people in the act, and I think they’ll board the ship bringing in the *illegal items* – US Navy, big show of force, claim all the credit.’

‘Pah!’ Yuri let out. ‘Americans. And I know about the Uranium.’

‘And the others?’

Yuri shook his head.

‘There may be another reason.’ Mick waited.

‘What?’

‘What happens if the Uranium caused a problem at Sebastopol docks?’

Yuri shrugged.

‘Your fleet will be affected. Maybe, if the people blame the Russian fleet for a nuclear leak, they’ll kick your fleet out. That will make the Ukrainians happy.’

Yuri’s brow slowly pleated. ‘The CIA will never stop this plot,’ he snarled. ‘They will assist!’

‘I doubt they would assist; they wouldn’t take the risk. But, turning a blind eye to it ... well, that’s different. They can see what’s about to happen, so they’ll let it.’

‘But if they stop the ship...?’

‘If ... they stop the ship, my friend. C’mon, let’s go look at this hotel.’

Noticing a small hotel directly behind goon central, Mick and Yuri approached the hotel’s small reception desk.

‘Do you have any rooms?’ Mick asked the lady clerk in English.

‘Yes. Single, double?’

‘Double, for more friend and his wife, they don’t speak much English.’

‘I have one. One hundred Lira with breakfast.’

‘Can we have a look at it?’ Mick asked.

The lady on reception called over a lazy fat porter, who shuffled along and up the stairs, the four-storey hotel not offering its residents a convenient lift. The porter opened a room and allowed Mick and Yuri inside, not entering himself. From the balcony, Mick could see goon central clearly, a look exchanged with Yuri, who nodded.

Back at reception, Yuri paid for the room, showing his passport. Leaving the hotel, he said, ‘I will put a girl in here with me.’

‘Lucky you. But first, go buy a good digital camera with a zoom lens from one of the cheap shops in the town; we need faces. Sayeed’s hotel is key, so take charge of watching it yourself, coordinating the others from here. Call me if anything interesting happens today, I’ll coordinate my people to see who we recognise.’

‘I have money for you at my hotel.’

‘Well, let’s go get it then; I can pay my people,’ Mick enthused. ‘When will you have weapons?’

‘Tomorrow, they are coming from Istanbul.’

‘So, for now we watch ... and we wait.’

Back in his hotel room at the Ockotan, Mick called Colette.
'Right, boss?'

'Where are you?'

'In Marmaris, Turkey, and we found Sayeed and the hotel he's at.'

'Good work, very good work.'

'We'll watch him and see who he contacts.'

'You didn't send the documents you said you had.'

'I tried to download them to a computer in an Internet café,' Mick lied. 'But the cable wouldn't work. I'll try again later.'

'OK. Keep me posted.'

'How's Davies?' Mick enquired.

'Back here, flew back from Gibraltar. The Director has been to see him.'

'That can't have been good for my reputation.'

'Quite the opposite; the Director asked me about you.'

'What did you tell him about the shining star of your department?' Mick lightly asked.

'Only the good bits.'

'Well, let's hope we wrap this up soon with a good conclusion, eh. What's our good friend Mister Tiller up to?'

'Rumours of an enquiry,' Colette said.

'Enquiry ... about what?'

'Don't know, can't pry. Let me know if anything interesting turns up.'

Mick lay back on the bed and closed his eyes, the afternoon warm, the sun beating through a gap in his curtains and highlighting the amount of dust in the room.

When his mobile went, it was a London number. 'Hello?'

'Michael Canuck? It's the Director.'

'I haven't fiddled my expense claims, boss,' Mick joked as he sat up.

‘Tiller is under investigation, and I’m going to ask you a question. What was on that camera, the one you handed him?’

‘Boss, I’m just a low paid helper, I don’t want to get anyone into trouble.’

‘The camera. What was on it?’

‘Pictures of people around Sayeed, taken by the CIA.’

‘You know it was the CIA?’

‘Yes, we found a few things in the photographer’s wallet that pinned him to the CIA.’

‘And the pictures included Tiller?’

‘The sequence started with them picking Tiller up at the airport.’

‘At the airport?’

‘Afraid so, boss.’

‘Let me ask you a simple question, since you met Tiller down there. Did he take reasonable precautions?’

‘In technical terms ... he wandered around with his thumb up his arse and a tracker on his car; he led them right to me.’

‘They were actively following him?’

‘Till a flowerpot went through their windscreen, yeah. We then checked his car and found the tracker.

‘And the pictures on the camera?’

‘Showed that they were dogging him all the way, and snapping everyone he met.’

‘But you yourself spotted the tail and liberated the photographers camera?’

‘And his wallet and phone, boss. I was thorough.’

‘And what happened to those items?’

‘Mister Tiller has them.’

‘Did he ask you not to mention this?’

‘I’ve slept since then boss, and had a few beers.’

‘Did he ask you to cover it up?’ the Director pressed.

‘You might think that, I could not possibly comment.’

There was a pause. ‘Your handler, Colette...?’

‘None the wiser. Mister Tiller offered me a job ... and, you know...’

‘Pressured you to keep quiet.’

‘We’re all on the same side, boss. I didn’t think I was doing anything wrong.’

‘You’re motivated by who pays you, so dangling carrots has an appeal. Which brings us to my next point. Zurich: what the fuck went on?’

‘Can you keep a secret, boss?’ Mick toyed.

‘I am the head of the secret service,’ the Director toyed in turn.

‘Zurich was the culmination of Sayeed leading us around by the nose, whilst being snapped by the CIA step by step. I enjoyed a very nice honey trap in Malta - CIA again I’m sure, and bored the girl, but there’s no doubting that she figured who I am. In Zurich, Sayeed did what he came to Europe to do and met a few people, then went to a Swiss bank for some reason. I know for definite, because I drove him there.’

‘You drove him?’

‘My Russian is prefect, so I posed as a Russian working in Zurich who needed a few quid - after I tracked Sayeed’s contact. He wanted a gofer because he didn’t want to be seen, or caught, himself. So he hired me for three hundred Euros for the day, plus a local driver – who was one of ours as well, and we took Sayeed around as he completed his deal – whatever it is.

‘But I’m sure that we were snapped by the CIA as we went back and forth, so they now have my happy smiling face. They must have made me and linked me to Malta because they were searching my name in the computer, and our hire cars picked up trackers.’

‘And Colette knows this?’

‘Most of it yes, I reported it, it’s in the file. I photographed the documents that I transported as well. May I ask ... if you’ve had an approach from the CIA?’

‘I’ve met them twice this week, and they’ve said nothing. I’m due to see them again tomorrow.’

‘And yet ... they knew Sayeed’s itinerary in advance, I found it in a wallet.’

‘When can we get those documents you photographed?’

‘I’m having trouble downloading them; I’ll try again in a bit. And boss, when you meet the nice men from the CIA, keep in mind that they now fully believe you’ve blown open their little operation - and know more about it than they do. They have my details, and must think I’m more than just the dog’s-body we both know I am. You’re in a strong position at the poker table, boss.’

‘I would be if I knew what Sayeed had been up to. Study the pictures yourself, see if anything stands out, zoom in on them then call me straight back. I’ll tell switchboard to await your call.’

‘OK, boss.’

Mick lowered his phone, staring at the crack of light penetrating the room, dust mites rising and falling. ‘Ah, fuck it. Tiller, you asshole.’

He closed his eyes and lay back. ‘I could lose the phone.’ Blowing out hard, he called Colette. ‘Right, boss?’

‘Something new?’

‘Just had a call from the Director.’

‘He ... called you himself?’

‘Yes, problem with Tiller.’

‘Tiller?’

‘When I was in Spain, Tiller pulled rank, offered me a job. Then me and Jim, well ... we did a few things for Tiller, the kind of things that would get you into trouble if it got caught. I didn’t say anything because Tiller ordered me not to, and he offered me a job.’

‘And the Director found out?’

‘Yeah, somehow. You’re not in trouble, he knows I kept you in the dark about Tiller.’

‘So that’s why Tiller is under investigation,’ Colette realised.

‘You’re not mad at me, boss, are you?’

‘You’re a contractor. It’s up to us to keep our own house in order.’

‘Anyway, the Director asked me to study the images I took and to call him back. I guess I’ll have to please him first.’

‘Of course.’

Mick walked the very short distance across to the beach, grabbing an orange sun lounger and laying back under an orange shade. The afternoon was hot, the calm water inviting, little disturbing his peace apart from the rhythmical sound of gentle waves caressing the sand.

In the distance, he could see tourist boats returning to harbour after a day out enjoying the ocean and the mountain views. Mick put his hands behind his head and took in the beautiful scene, a scene of surreal calm, much in contrast to the thoughts going through his mind.

Back in his room, forty minutes later, Mick flicked through the images. ‘Got no fucking choice, buddy,’ he told himself. He selected the number that the Director had called from.

‘This is Michael Canuck, the Director is expecting my call.’

‘One moment.’

A long sixty seconds later came, ‘Canuck?’

‘Yes, boss.’

‘What’s on those documents?’

‘More than someone like me should be reading.’

‘Meaning?’

Mick took a breath. ‘Sayeed was paid six million dollars to arrange the transport of fissile material from Dubai to Odessa, to be handed to a Ukrainian gang.’

There was a long pause. ‘You have dates, times and details?’

‘On the images, boss, if you believe them.’

‘What do you mean – if you believe them?’

‘I know the difference between discovering something, and being nudged towards discovering something. We’ve been led around by the nose from the start, chased and shot at, and

discovered for ourselves things that the CIA knew from before Sayeed set foot here.

‘If I was you, boss, and I didn’t want to look like a complete idiot in front of the Prime Minister, I’d take what we’ve been fed, use it, but put a peg over my nose to keep the smell of rat out. Then I’d ask myself what the CIA agenda is, what it really is, because I don’t believe for a second that there’s fissile material heading to Odessa.’

‘Mister Canuck, why am I getting better advice from you than my own departmental heads?’

‘They’re pen pushers, boss. Those of us out in the field have a better feel for things.’

‘Where are you now?’

‘Turkey. Sayeed is down here, surrounded by goons with guns.’

‘Why are you still on him?’

‘My remit was to watch him till he left Europe. We stretched it a bit with Turkey, but its European at heart. Besides, I’d like to find out what’s really going on.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Meaning ... never believe a good story when it’s handed to you. And ... why the fuck is Sayeed still here, surrounded by armed goons, when he’s six million dollars better off and should be back home?’

‘Do you need extra resources?’

‘No, boss, there’s a few of us. We’ve got it covered.’

‘If you turn up anything interesting, I want to know before Colette.’

‘Can I ask a favour, boss?’

‘I think you’ve earned one.’

‘I’d like to keep my nice working relationship with Mister Colette as a nice working relationship.’

‘Understood.’

Mick lowered his phone, and sighed. ‘Just have to avoid getting shot, or jailed, or shot then jailed, or jailed and stabbed in prison...’

Still laying on his bed, Mick answered his phone to Jim. Jim reported, ‘Sayeed has been wandering about aimlessly – again, now back at his hotel. Thought I clocked a Russian couple watching him.’

‘You did; they’re with me.’

‘Oh, I see.’

‘Come back over here.’

‘On our way.’

When Jim and Roger arrived back, Mick led them to a small bar in a side street.

‘Same old bollocks,’ Roger said. ‘He’s wandering again.’

‘Did it look like he was killing time?’ Mick asked.

‘Maybe,’ Roger agreed.

‘He’s here for a reason,’ Mick pointed out. ‘A meeting; maybe with the paymaster.’

‘And then?’ Jim nudged.

‘We hand the paymaster to the nice Russian gentlemen, and they ask him a few questions. Oh, almost forgot.’ Mick reached into his pocket and produced a wad of notes. He handed Jim six thousand Euros, the same for Roger.

‘It all helps,’ Roger quipped.

‘Not a bad day’s work,’ Jim agreed.

‘There was one small wrinkle,’ Mick began. ‘The Director called me.’

‘The Director?’ Jim repeated, sitting up straight.

Mick nodded. ‘Tiller is under investigation for something. The Director asked about Spain, and Tiller’s behaviour over there, but I doubt they’d be investigating him for just that, and not so soon. Tiller must have done something else to upset the boss.’

‘He asked us to jump on the CIA,’ Roger noted. ‘Which was a bit naughty. It’s OK when we do it for our own reasons, but to do it for him...?’

Mick smiled, getting a disapproving headshake from Jim. 'Go back to your hotel and scrub up. Have a meal out, somewhere in the harbour where you can see people walking past. After that, pick a bar and watch for passing trade. This place is one long drag, and people walk up and down it, so let them come to you.'

After the sun had tucked itself behind the hills, Mick checked his pockets and set off out, circling his hotel twice. In the taxi to Icmeler he called Yuri. 'I'll be at that hotel in five minutes, meet me downstairs.'

At the hotel, Yuri led Mick up to the room, the room lights out and the curtains open twelve inches, a girl sat in the bathroom and using its light to read a book.

'What have we got?' Mick asked Yuri.

'I have all their faces. They lounge around and play like children, even shouting. I have some names to go with faces. They're Russian.'

'Not Ukrainians?'

'No, Russians. They sound like Moscow born.'

Mick scanned each image in the camera, the pictures backlit and giving his face a blue tinge. 'I don't know any of these; they weren't in Europe.' He handed the camera back.

'I know one face, we were in the army together. He works for Brabos.'

'Then we have the right hotel. All we need now – is for some important people to show up.'

'You think ... Brabos, he will come here?'

'Maybe.'

'I would kill him, and get a good bonus!'

'Finger's crossed then,' Mick said with a smile. He grabbed a pair of binoculars and scanned the hotel, seeing movement in rooms with their curtains open. 'How many men?'

'Eight in total, one Turkish man, an old man. And the Pakistani man.'

'Is he alone?'

‘Yes. His room faces us, top left corner.’

‘And no one else?’ Mick asked, focusing on Sayeed’s room.

‘Just them.’

‘Have your people go back to their hotels, wash and change, come back here for a meal at ... 7pm, and try to see who Sayeed meets. Have most of your people sat at various bars and restaurants here, just two at the harbour in Marmaris. That way, your people will be seated before he arrives. My people will check the harbour.’

Mick lowered the glasses and turned. ‘Tonight I’ll let the CIA know where I am. Tomorrow, we’ll see who turns up.’

‘Why let them know where you are?’

‘So that I can meet the nice gentlemen when *I* choose, not when they choose. I’d rather have our meeting on my terms.’

‘You’ll kill them?’ Yuri puzzled.

‘I ... won’t be shooting first.’ Mick gestured towards the girl in bathroom. ‘Who is she?’ he whispered.

‘Just a hooker.’

‘You and her...?’

Yuri shook his head. ‘No.’

‘Do you mind ... if I do?’

‘No, help yourself. Masha! Do what this man wants.’

Mick stepped into the bathroom as she marked her page. ‘Don’t get up, you’re in the right position as you are.’ He unzipped, pulled out his penis and pushed forwards into her mouth.

Five minutes later, Mick said, ‘Good girl, you didn’t miss a drop. Nice clean dick to put away.’

Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, she lifted her book.

In the bedroom, Mick said, ‘Tonight we watch. But if nothing happens tomorrow, maybe we’ll stir things up a bit over there. Oh, and Yuri, if you know that man’s face, he’ll know your face. Stay here and avoid being seen, or they’ll have the drop on us – instead of the other way around.’

Back in his hotel room, Mick grabbed the mobile he had used to call Sayeed. He switched it on and allowed it to find its network. Sat on the edge of the bed, Mick selected the last number, Sayeed's, and dialled. When Sayeed answered, Mick cut the line. Forming a text message, Mick sent Sayeed the message: "golf balls do make a mess of windscreens", and attached an image of his dick.

Outside his hotel, Mick turned right onto the promenade, the pathway now hosting just a sprinkling of tourists, and ambled along to The Beach Bar. Ducking in for a drink, just one other couple in attendance, Mick wedged the phone in a hole in the bar's wooden structure. To anyone scanning for it, it might have seemed that the phone's owner or user was sat at the bar.

Drink downed, he lifted up and walked slowly back towards his hotel, past bars desperate for some trade, just a handful of people in each. Some remained closed till full season, others struggling along. The beach beds were all stacked up, lonely pedal boats waiting some attention, and the sunshades looked like they had seen better days.

Beyond his own hotel he passed a fragrant kebab house, an ice cream parlour, a burger bar, and continued on as the main road through the town touched the promenade, no bars or cafes till the harbour. Five hundred yards on the shops began, brightly lit jewellery shops hoping for couples about to be engaged or married, a few optimistic shops hoping to sell beach towels and inflatable toys to tourists that had not even packed their cases yet, let alone arrived.

The double-deck tourists boats were all now at anchor, bobbing in the gentle swell, a few scuba diving boats sat optimistically awaiting some trade as Mick ambled past, nodding at two of Yuri's men coming the opposite way. Where the noisy road ended the harbour's sedate pedestrian precinct began, restaurants with many tables but few patrons, waiters stood waiting for the days of the calendar to tick over. Mick's phone went.

'Look up,' Jim said.

Mick could now see Jim waving from a rooftop bar and walked inside, up the stairs and to them, increasing the number of people the waiters had to tend by thirty percent. He sat and ordered a beer. ‘Good position.’

‘Anything new?’ Roger idly enquired.

‘I switched on the mobile I used to call Sayeed, so the CIA definitely have it,’ Mick reported. ‘It’s in a bar over there, so we’ll see who turns up. And, more importantly, we’ll see how ... *friendly* they are when they do turn up.’

Jim lowered his drink. ‘Remind me again: the reason we’re not asking London for help ... is?’

‘Not much London could do, even if they thought we were at risk from the CIA – which they would never buy,’ Mick pointed out. ‘Besides, if there’s an incident here then Pestichio will have to explain it higher up.’

Jim focused on the promenade. ‘Hey, lover boy,’ he softly called in a mocking tone. ‘See what I see?’

Mick peered over the side, Gird and Susy walking along. He let out a sigh. ‘They must have been here on the assumption that we’d follow Sayeed. But why are they walking along in plain view? If they bumped into us face to face ... how would they explain it? *Oh, hello boys, we just slipped away without saying anything – and here we are.*’

‘Are they bait?’ Jim thought out loud as he studied the girl’s diminishing images. ‘To tempt us out? To see if you can’t keep it in your trousers?’

Roger laughed, getting a look from Mick.

‘They ... are the only ones that could make a positive ID on us,’ Mick commented. ‘Jim, tail them - but well back, I’m going to arrange an intercept. Go, quick, but stay well back.’

Jim jumped up and headed downstairs, Mick calling Yuri. ‘Listen, we’ve spotted two girls, CIA, and we need to intercept them. They’re walking through the harbour, towards the beach. Green jumper and a blue jumper, five feet ten, slim, good looking. When your boys spot them, get them to call me.’ Mick lowered his phone and grabbed Jim’s unfinished beer.

‘Take them out of the equation?’ Roger asked, none too concerned.

‘They didn’t call me back after sex,’ Mick stated, feigning hurt. ‘And that’s just *so* ... rude. Besides, I don’t dare leave my hotel with that pair wandering around. It’s a bit like having your ex-girlfriend in a bar when you’re trying to pull.’

When Mick’s phone trilled it was one of the Russians. ‘We see them.’

‘Follow them, and look for a dark place with not too many witnesses. If you can, hit them on the knee with a stick, stamp on an ankle or just punch on the nose as a last resort. We want them away, but not hurt. Understand?’

‘Yeah, yeah.’

‘You’re not much of a caring lover,’ Roger dryly noted. ‘More like a spurned lover.’

‘The Russians have brought three hookers with them. I had a blowjob earlier.’

‘Wanna swap details?’ Roger complained.

Jim called five minutes later. ‘I’m heading back, not least because our nice young ladies just got punched and kicked and left in the bushes.’

‘Double back first,’ Mick requested. They watched from the rooftop bar as Jim deliberately walked right past, Jim eventually entering the restaurant from the rear.

Jim reclaimed his seat. ‘That was subtle. Not!’ He checked his beer with a frown, now almost gone.

‘Now we can move around freely,’ Mick commented, none too concerned. ‘Besides, she didn’t call me. So, what’s the food like in this place?’

‘As good as my beer,’ Jim complained.

The same old routine

Still at the convenient rooftop bar an hour later, Yuri called. 'The Asian man, he ate alone, now in a taxi to Maramaris.'

'Tell us where he stops, then drive off, we'll pick up his trail.'

Five minutes later, Sayeed was reported getting out at the shops at the start of the harbour.

When Mick lowered his phone, he said, 'Our boy is heading this way.'

'He got the money,' Roger puzzled. 'What the fuck's he still doing wandering around?'

'Final piece of the deal,' Mick said. 'The real deal, not the one we think it is – the one we were *meant* to think it is.'

'Aye, aye,' Roger said a few minutes later. 'The wandering Pakistani returns.'

'Behind him,' Jim said.

'I see them.' Mick said. 'Four of them, two groups.'

'What was that?' Jim gasped.

'What?' Mick asked.

'That was a hand-off, a piece of paper. Guy in the pink shirt with the lady.'

'Stay here, Jim,' Mick called as he and Roger stood. They exited the side of the bar and ran up a steep flight of steps, turning left at the top and down narrow side streets backed by an ancient stone wall, dropping into a pedestrian area and walking briskly towards the shops.

At the start of the brightly lit shops, Mick said, 'Five steps back.' With Roger inspecting jewellery, Mick put a hand in his pocket and ambled around the corner. Pink shirt and wife were nowhere to be seen, Mick advancing along the road and back towards Jim.

The couple were not on the promenade, they didn't have time to grab a taxi, and they could not be seen peering into shop windows. Advancing along the shops, Mick checked the inside of each brightly lit establishment till the shops ran out. Two

restaurants were checked before Mick and Roger circled their previous restaurant, eventually re-joining Jim on the roof.

‘Did he double back?’ Mick asked Jim as he sat.

‘No.’

‘Fuck it, we just lost the main player.’

Roger approached and sat. ‘Where’d he go? We had him dead.’

‘Maybe into a shop and out the back,’ Mick suggested. ‘But he could only do that if he knew them, and had arranged it prior to tonight. Fuck it he’s good.’

‘And cautious,’ Jim noted. ‘A hand-over instead of chat, that takes coordination and practice. He looked like a Brit, certainly not east European.’

‘So, Sayeed has a note,’ Mick thought out loud, reclaiming his beer. ‘To do what? To ... meet someone? A place and a time?’

‘A quiet country villa, hard to tail,’ Roger suggested.

‘Problem with quiet country villas,’ Mick began. ‘Is the armed goons. I wouldn’t want to meet at a quiet spot, not with that lot behind Sayeed.’

‘The guy wasn’t carrying anything,’ Roger put in. ‘No case.’

‘Good point,’ Mick agreed. ‘If all he wanted was a chat, they’d use the damn phone.’

‘Could Sayeed be handing the contact access to that Swiss bank account?’ Roger wondered.

‘Oh, now you are giving me a hard-on,’ Mick said. ‘A six million dollar hard on. Normally, you’d need ID, photocopied when you set-up the account. So maybe ... maybe Sayeed has a banker’s draft for him, or something that would let him get access to the money.’

‘And could let us ... get access to it in our fight against terrorism,’ Roger lightly suggested.

Mick focused on Jim. ‘I know you don’t approve of such things –’

‘Hey, for a share of six million ... my morals can be bought. And, it’s dodgy money, so better off in a safe home with us, out the hands of terrorists.’

‘Here, here,’ Roger agreed.

‘The guy doing the handoff is a worry,’ Mick said. ‘A pro. And an old school handoff.’

‘He’s Russian era,’ Jim suggested. ‘We used to practise those in Hyde Park. The CIA used them at one point, but preferred the dead letter drop. So he could be British.’

‘So what’s an old ex-Circus pavement basher doing here?’ Mick asked of himself. ‘It’s not an official operation.’

‘Tiller!’ Jim said in a whisper. ‘Under investigation!’

‘Tiller?’ Mick repeated with a frown. ‘Working for the bad guys?’ He shook his head. ‘No way.’

‘That looked like a British hand-over,’ Jim insisted. ‘And the only reason I spotted it was from years of trying to see how well my lads were doing, which was usually pretty poor. That guy was good at it.’

Mick sipped his beer and took in the view of the bay, the twinkling line of lights clearly delineating the curve of the bay as it surrounded and defined the water. ‘We’ll see how it pans out tomorrow.’

‘Here’s our boy again,’ Roger commented. ‘Could I just smack him in the face – just the once?’

‘Trust me, I’ve been tempted,’ Mick admitted with a sigh.

‘I could hit him with a bottle as he walks past,’ Roger offered. ‘Right from here.’

‘Goons are still with him,’ Jim noted.

Mick lifted his phone and called Colette. ‘Right, boss? Listen, when does Sayeed fly out?’

‘Three days?’

‘Exactly when?’

‘Today is the twentieth, he flies out on the twenty-second at 3pm.’

‘Thanks, boss.’ Mick hung up. Facing the guys, he said, ‘Sayeed is here tomorrow for a full day, then he flies out the

next day at 3pm. If I wanted to meet and swap documents, I'd do it that final day, in the morning, then scoot.'

'Giving the hand-off guy all day tomorrow in which to set a scene for a meeting,' Jim warned.

Mick lifted his nose and peered over the side. 'Do people live on those boats?'

The guys examined the line of boats.

'I can see a couple on one, they just boarded,' Mick added.

'Maybe you can hire them for a day or a week,' Roger suggested.

'Or maybe you can hire one, live on it, and sail documents in and out on it,' Mick stated. 'We lost that fucker right where those boats are.'

'There're fifty of them!' Jim noted.

Mick coughed out a short laugh. 'Where better to hold a meeting? Close to everything, yet private.'

'And no one can see in, or follow, or get close,' Roger noted. 'With the goons on the promenade we'd never get close.'

'And afterwards ... they weigh anchor and it's straight out to sea, where they can meet another boat,' Mick noted.

'Short trip across to Rhodes,' Jim reminded Mick. 'Not that far to northern Cyprus.'

'Whoever he is, he's done his homework,' Roger admitted.

'First person we've come across who has,' Mick scoffed.

'New game plan?' Roger asked.

'Only way to deal with a boat, is another boat,' Mick commented. 'Jim, you have a Yachtmaster license. Tomorrow, see what you can hire for the next morning. If necessary, see what you can hire with a captain.'

'If Sayeed is handing over documents,' Roger began. 'Then they're in his room at that hotel.'

'True,' Mick agreed. 'But what *is* he selling? He got the money for the Uranium.'

'Nuclear bomb designs for someone?' Jim wondered.

'He could do that by email,' Mick scoffed. 'What does he need big and bulky documents for?'

‘Why do they have to be big and bulky?’ Jim challenged.

‘The reason for a face to face, and an inspection of the merchandise,’ Mick explained.

‘Sayeed has six million quid on a slip of paper, so maybe he’s buying,’ Roger suggested.

Mick eased back, his hands behind his head. ‘Buying ... what? And why does he need to meet the guy face to face? Have they never heard of Skype?’

When they eventually left the rooftop bar, they chose to avoid the boats and opted to walk through the busy shopping area, and to the taxis at the far end.

In his room, Mick called Yuri. ‘How’s it going?’

‘The Asian man came back. He left with four men, came back with four men.’

‘We saw him accept a note from another man, a professional, who we think has a boat in the harbour. I think they’ll meet the day after tomorrow, in the morning; Sayeed is flying out after that. So we need to hold off till that meeting takes place, to find the other man.’

‘I’ll talk to the boss.’

‘If we miss the main man, we don’t know what Brabos is up to. Explain that to the boss if you like, or I will. You can attack his foot soldiers, burn down his hotel, or you can really hurt him by finding out what this operation is all about. Clear?’

‘OK.’

‘OK.’ Mick hung up.

Up at dawn, Mick returned to the quayside and patrolled along the line of moored boats, his sunglasses and cap on, seeing if anything stood out. Since there were fifty boats in a line, all moored at the quayside rear-first, it was quite a task. Walking back, he popped into a café now populated by locals, and sat with a strong coffee.

A woman entered, Mick now sat with his back to her, a quick glance taken. Approaching the counter, the man serving said, 'Hello again - every day same time. Two milk? And paper, yes?'

'Please,' she said, a British accent.

'Are you here for many weeks?'

'No, we leave in two days, back to Rhodes.' To Mick, she both looked and sounded in her fifties.

'Ah, Rhodes. You live?'

'No. England.' She paid for her items. 'Thanks.'

Mick remained seated as she left, watching her walk across the road and onto the promenade, and along to a boat. Those boats either side of the one she boarded flew large Turkish flags, but her boat flew a small Turkish flag and a yellow towel hanging off the back, he noted. He sipped his coffee.

Three coffee's later, a man and woman emerged from the same boat. With a jumper hanging over his shoulders, the man led the same woman off along the quayside, hand-in-hand, Mick wondering about them before stepping outside. With the couple out of line of sight, Mick noted the name of the boat: Arcadia.

Turning, he could just see the rooftop bar, and tried to figure if they could have missed the couple the night before. It was possible. Peering up, Mick could see tourists taking snaps from the castle walls. Balancing an unlit cigarette on his lip, he walked to the left, and to the first tacky shop selling binoculars, buying a large pair for the equivalent of three hundred pounds.

Around the back of the shops, he climbed the narrow lanes to the castle, paying twenty Turkish Lira to get in. At the top of the castle he sat on an ancient stone wall and scanned the boats below from left to right.

Most seemed vacant; they just seemed to be moored and awaiting some interest. The diving boats were washing down decks and checking equipment, the tour boats making ready for the day's activities, but more than half of the boats seemed

unoccupied. Sat staring at the line of boats, tourists giving him odd glances as they passed, Mick waited.

When the couple he had noticed earlier finally returned he focused on them. The man turned, showing his face, but Mick did not recognise him. And the man did not seem to check the promenade. Ten minutes later, the same man sat atop the boat and read a paper in plain view.

Lowering the glasses, Mick could see another woman, this one burdened with heavy shopping bags. She approached the rear of a boat, but glanced over her shoulder as she did so. Mick focused the glasses on her. She carefully stepped aboard the boat, a man showing his face for a moment.

‘I know your face, my friend. You used to work for us.’ Mick focused on the rear of the boat, and its name. Trumpet. Lowering his glasses, Mick suddenly registered a man now drawing alongside him with his own set of glasses, taking a position next to Mick with a forced smile and a nod.

‘Nice day for it,’ the newcomer said with an American accent.

‘Not ... good English,’ Mick offered.

The man glanced at Mick, Mick raising his glasses to scan the far horizon whilst keeping the glasses just far enough away from his eyes to note the man’s position.

‘A bit hazy this morning,’ the man noted.

Mick turned, forcing a smile, and began to move past the man. As he did, he noticed a crease in the man’s shirt, in his lower back. Mick moved all of his weight onto his right leg, positioning his left, and shoved the man from behind, right over the ancient stone wall.

Glancing around, he found no one nearby, narrow paths affording him a private stretch of castle wall. Peering over the edge, the man was face down and wedged between two buildings, not visible from the quayside below, a line of emaciated feral cats staring at the rude intruder of their roof space. The man’s legs were moving, but he’d be out of action for a while.

‘Sorry!’ Mick called down to the man.

Wiping the glasses with his shirttails, Mick left them on the wall, walking out of the castle with a hand in his pocket. In the street, he lifted his phone. ‘Jim, I found the main man, and I think the CIA are here already. Meet me behind your hotel, there’s a small café for locals.’

Mick jumped into the first taxi, giving the name of a shopping precinct half a mile down the beach. At the precinct, he walked quickly in and out the other side, straight into another taxi and back to Jim’s hotel whilst glancing out of the rear window all of the way. Joining Jim and Roger, Mick ordered a soft drink.

‘Problems?’ Roger asked.

‘It was probably random, but I just rubbed shoulders with an American, pistol stuffed down his back.’

‘Pistol down a shirt?’ Jim repeated. ‘A bit brazen?’

‘And not well covered,’ Mick noted. ‘So I’m not sure if he was CIA, unless they’re desperate to ... you know.’

‘Did he clock you?’ Jim asked.

‘No, I ... don’t think so,’ Mick lied.

‘And the main man?’ Jim asked.

Mick raised a finger and carefully mouthed, ‘Ex-Circus.’

‘One of ours?’ Jim gasped. ‘There’ll be hell to pay!’

Mick nodded. ‘Get your thinking cap on, Jim. Think back to when I was a loyal employee, a year in, there was a big stink about a job that had gone wrong in Estonia, a double agent who turned out to be one of theirs.’

‘I remember it.’

‘The guy was from the Russian section, no distinguishing features, aged in his fifties now. He best buddy took the wrap for Estonia.’

‘Charles, Ken Charles?’ Jim puzzled.

‘No, not him; he was tall and thin. Think of someone your height or under.’

Jim stared at the tabletop. ‘Russell?’

Mick shook his head. ‘No, that’s not ringing a bell. Sounded ... Irish.’

‘Doyle?’

Mick snapped his fingers. ‘That’s the fella.’

‘Martin Doyle ... is here?’

‘On a boat, right where we lost the hand-off guy, with a woman,’ Mick informed them.

Jim looked horrified. ‘Mick, I met Doyle last year at a function.’ He shook his head slightly. ‘He’s not retired, he has a few years left.’

‘What?’ Roger queried. ‘There’s a British op’ going on down here?’

‘No,’ Mick insisted. ‘I told London where I was. If there was a British op’ here they’d ask us to bug out – and quickly!’

‘I can’t believe Doyle is dirty,’ Jim put in. ‘He’s one of the longest serving and most senior figures in the Russian section. And if he was dirty ... they’d have a hundred men down here!’

‘I know who I saw, Jim,’ Mick insisted.

‘Then he’s on holiday, that’s all,’ Jim insisted.

‘And he just happens to be moored where we lost the guy after a Russian-era hand-off,’ Mick scoffed.

‘Call it in, see where he is,’ Jim insisted. ‘It’s probably just a coincidence, so let’s not ruin the man’s career just yet!’

Mick lifted his phone and selected the Director’s office number. ‘This is Michael Canuck, I need to speak to the Director, urgent.’

‘One moment please.’

A full minute later came, ‘Canuck, I’m in the car, be quick.’

‘Could you tell me if Martin Doyle is still with the service?’

‘What the hell does he have to do with you?’

‘Could you the answer the question, boss?’

There was a pause. ‘Yes, he’s still with us.’

‘And might I enquire if his whereabouts are known?’

‘His whereabouts are classified way over your head.’

‘Wanna bet?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Is he on assignment, sir?’

There was another pause. ‘Yes.’

‘And is he overdue reporting in?’

‘Did Tiller tell you this?’ the Director barked.

‘No. Guess who Sayeed’s secret contact is.’

After a pause, the Director said, ‘You better be joking, or you’ll be in prison a long time, Canuck.’

‘Doyle is here, with Sayeed.’

‘Turn the fucking car around! Now!’ could be heard, even by Jim and Roger. ‘Canuck, are you in a position to ... intercept Doyle?’

‘I am.’

‘I can’t ask you to do what I’d like to ask you to do.’

‘I understand. Call me back later.’ Mick hung up. Facing Jim, he took a moment. ‘Doyle is still in, on assignment, overdue, and ... the Director just asked me to ... *intercept* him.’

‘My god,’ Jim gasped. ‘If Doyle is dirty ... the damage, the things he knows!’

‘Are the things he knows worth money to Sayeed, or Sayeed’s contacts?’ Mick posed, tapping his lip with his phone. ‘Iranians? Pakistani ISI?’

‘It would take a day for London to send a team,’ Roger put in. ‘So we’re it for now. You know which boat he’s on?’

Mick nodded. ‘But we still need to catch them, or link them, or ... find out what Doyle is up to. If he sails out the harbour the Greek authorities can pick him up for London. If anything, he’s less likely to be extradited from here.’

‘He may head for northern Cyprus,’ Roger suggested.

‘Again, big ocean, Royal Navy in Cyprus,’ Mick pointed out. ‘So I’m not worried about him leaving.’

‘If the CIA knew about Doyle they’d grab him,’ Jim quietly insisted. ‘They know the damage he could do to NATO.’

‘Then they don’t know about this part of things,’ Mick said. ‘But, then again, the guy I noticed this morning was right above Doyle’s boat with binoculars. If that guy wasn’t CIA, then who else is keeping tabs on Doyle?’

‘The bad guys,’ Roger suggested. ‘Scouting for watchers.’

Jim was concerned. ‘If we wait and miss Doyle ... well, you’ve already been asked to help out.’

‘I’m not about to storm his boat in broad daylight,’ Mick insisted. ‘I might get him, but I’d go to prison for life!’

‘If he can’t meet Sayeed, then the deal can’t go down,’ Roger suggested. ‘Let’s damage Sayeed.’

‘We just need a little more time to find out what they’re up to,’ Mick said, sighing and rubbing his face.

‘And if London asks you to move quicker?’ Jim posed.

‘I don’t, technically, work for London – remember.’ Mick sighed again. ‘Fuck it. Fuck it all. Doyle is going to screw up our chances of getting the money.’ He rubbed his face. ‘OK, here’s the plan. We all go to ground today, not showing our faces. Tonight, we check Sayeed’s room, then move on the boat straight after. That way, if we’re lucky, we’ll find a clue, and stop them both. The Russians are watching Sayeed, so if he moves early we’ll know. Happy?’

Roger and Jim exchanged looks and shrugs, returning to their hotel.

Back in his hotel room, Mick’s phone went. The Director.

‘Mister Director.’

‘Tell me you have a plan.’

‘Well, Doyle is on a boat. If he slips out you can pick him up in Rhodes or on his way to Cyprus – so cover those angles anyway. I think he’ll meet with Sayeed in the morning, but we’ll move on Sayeed and Doyle tonight, preventing a meeting.’

‘I want Sayeed left alone, allowed to fly out, or there’ll be an incident and press interest.’

‘That’s ... your call, boss.’

‘We’ll want that boat searched for documents.’

‘We’ll move on it later tonight, and if it leaves harbour we’ll let you know. But there is one small wrinkle: I think the CIA might be here, and they want to have a chat with me - I’ve already dodged them twice. And boss, they were armed.’

‘Leave that with me, give me half an hour. And Canuck, the damage done by Doyle could hurt us greatly. Deal with this discreetly and I’ll get you a knighthood.’

‘It would be hard to be a “Sir” and to still work undercover, but it’s a nice thought. I’ll do what I can.’

Mick lowered his phone and lay on the bed. ‘What are you up to Doyle?’

* * *

Two hours later, the Director called back. ‘Canuck?’

‘Yes, boss?’

‘The CIA insist that they have no armed people in your area. We had a long – and difficult – chat earlier. I made my feelings clear, and should they even look at you there would be trouble between our agencies, serious trouble. They had two ladies and two men in the area, on Sayeed allegedly. Their ladies were jumped on by Russians last night and injured, and their men are passive and static.’

‘Then we have a third party in the mix, working for the paymaster, maybe these guys Lodz or Muller, because we have armed men with American accents wandering around. And boss, they were watching Doyle.’

‘I appreciate the ... difficulty of the situation, and I’ll have people there in the morning, some after midnight, but if there is anything you can do to stop Doyle ... well, we’re all hoping and praying at this end.’

‘There are a few local thugs I know, I dealt with them before. If I had a few quid to play with I could hire them,’ Mick lied.

‘How much?’

‘Probably five grand.’

‘There’ll be twenty-five in your account within the hour. Does Colette have the details of a bank account that you use?’

‘Yes.’

‘Spend whatever you need.’

‘I’ll go out now and find them. Talk soon.’

Mick lay back and closed his eyes, his room warm as the midday sun beat through the window.

When his phone went, it was Constantine. ‘Can you talk?’

‘Yeah, no problem.’

‘You move on this hotel soon?’

‘Yes, tonight, and then on the man who Sayeed came to meet. Hopefully, something will give me a clue as to what they’re up to.’

‘No one knows where Brabos is, maybe in Europe.’

‘After tonight, I’ll go look for him if you like.’

‘And do you have ... other paymasters?’

‘Yes, but they’re interested only in Sayeed. When Sayeed leaves Europe I’ll be free. Can you do me a favour? Search the computer for a Muller, probably a German, a Lodz, also a German from the Munich area, and see if there is a link to Brabos and those villas in Spain.’

‘Who are these men?’

‘They hired the German gunmen who protected Sayeed in Spain and Malta. They’re linked to Brabos somehow, and they may lead me to him.’

‘And then?’

‘You make me an offer for his whereabouts.’

After the call, Mick could see a missed call from Colette. He selected Colette’s number. ‘Right, boss?’

‘I’m not actually supposed to deal with you directly anymore, not at the moment, it’s only supposed to be the Director or the duty officer.’

‘I’m sure it’ll work itself out.’

‘Panic here, complete mayhem in the Russian section. Tiller has been suspended, and everyone who knew Doyle is being questioned.’

‘To be expected.’

‘Listen, I found a few things in the computer, a fresh search on your name, originating from Munich police. That was ...

yesterday. And Interpol obtained court orders to grab CCTV from various places in Malta, Spain and Zurich.'

'Track back to those requesting it and kick up a fuss, take it to the Director and try and grab the tapes.'

'That would label you ... as one of ours.'

'If you track back, you'll probably find that it's not Interpol, but an officer being bribed.'

'Ah, yes. Will do. Anything else?'

'That's it for now, boss. I'll talk to you again – when I'm allowed.'

Mick lay back. Thinking.

* * *

At 5pm, Mick called Yuri. 'Tonight, when Sayeed goes for his meal, I'll try and break into his room and look around his things. After that, we'll storm the boat and search for documents. After that - if you still want to attack Brabos' men – then that's up to you.

'I'll need some of your people to follow Sayeed, one couple to watch a boat, and the rest can assist with the hotel. I'll be there at 6.30pm. Do you have weapons yet?'

'Yes, pistols.'

'See you in a bit.'

3

Leaving his hotel with a small backpack, Mick had sunglasses and cap on, despite the sun being low on the horizon. He circled around his hotel and entered a tourist shop, browsing for five minutes and buying a black shirt. Moving off, he jumped into a taxi, halting at a shopping precinct half a mile down the road. Once through the centre, having bought a few items, he grabbed a second taxi and set a course for Icmeler.

Stopping the taxi away from Yuri's hotel, Mick walked the final two hundred yards, checking the street carefully. He went

straight up to Yuri's room. The curtains were open, a man on the bed, the hooker in a chair.

'Is he still there?' Mick enquired.

'Yes.'

'OK, then all we need do is to wait for Sayeed to leave. Where are your people?'

'My people are down in the bars, they will see him as he walks down.'

Mick peered out of the window, beckoning Yuri closer. 'See those bushes between us and them? I'll want two men there, and armed. How many men follow Sayeed when he goes?'

'Four, with four left in the hotel,' Yuri explained.

'Where do *they* eat?' Mick puzzled.

'They go out after, when the Asian man comes back.'

'Ah. You have a pistol for me?'

Yuri produced a Beretta. Mick knelt over the bed, and striped the weapon down quickly, and in the dark, inspecting the firing pin and barrel.

'You know weapons,' Yuri commented.

'I did a course once.' Mick assembled the pistol, stuffing it down the back off his trousers.

* * *

At 7.30pm prompt Sayeed left the hotel with his minders, Yuri's people already seated in the tourist bars and confirming the mark's arrival at his usual spot ten minutes later. Mick left the hotel and circled around, checking the dark street before meeting two of Yuri's men, the men now stood waiting in the required position. Mick positioned them exactly where he wanted them, covering the pool and gardens of Sayeed's hotel.

'If I come running - shoot them, not me!'

Now with his new black shirt on, backpack over it, Mick approached the dilapidated fence that separated the two hotels, easing past the remnants of a little-used tennis court, a solitary tennis ball sat waiting some attention. Night had come on early

thanks to the surrounding tall hills and some helpfully placed storm clouds, but it was certainly not pitch black.

Beyond the tennis court, and turning back to face Yuri's hotel, Mick could see several room lights on, but all of the curtains were conveniently drawn. A dog barked in the distance, causing him to turn toward it for a moment's consideration. Through to the other side of the fence, he negotiated around white plastic sun beds, his route a simple crossing of mown grass. Noticing several towels drying, he tossed them into the pool as he closed in on the hotel structure itself. With his back against the hotel, stood now between two ground floor rooms, Mick lifted his phone and sent a text message to Roger, the only sound permeating the dark being loud and competing crickets.

Stood waiting, Mick could hear voices from within the hotel, a firm breeze cooling his face as he waited. A loud bump echoing off nearby buildings signalled Roger hitting a parked car with his own hire car, and screeching off. The voices inside the hotel got suddenly louder, then faded. It was time to move.

Mick hopped up onto the poorly fashioned concrete balcony of a ground floor room, reaching up to the metal railings of the balcony above. A rigid metal drainpipe and rough concrete walls provided good purchase for his trainers, progress made to the second balcony. Stood on that balcony, balancing and wobbling whilst reaching up, he gripped the balcony above, his trainers finding plenty of purchase on a drain offshoot. Voices could now be heard through the dark, but coming from around the other side of the hotel, as Mick's hands, wrists and elbows registered their complaint at tonight's chosen activity.

Breathing hard now, Mick reached up and clambered to the third balcony. Standing on it and balancing, he reached up for Sayeed's balcony, soon scrambling up and over, a view now of the lights of the nearby hotels and houses, catching sight of the brightly lit bars in the distance, a whiff of cooking coming from somewhere close by. With an ear to the door glass, he stopped to listen for twenty seconds. Nothing.

With flat palms against the glass door, Mick pushed hard, but it wouldn't budge or slide. Producing a small glasscutter attached to a ring, he placed the ring on his finger and made a strong fist, scribing a mark diagonally across the glass from corner to corner, repeating it in the opposite direction, the sweat on his forehead cooling in the breeze.

From his backpack, he pulled out a reel of black masking tape and made a large cross on the window; vertical and horizontal lines, not diagonal. Stood next to the glass, side on, he nudged the centre of the door with his hip, hearing the glass crack. Four triangle shapes now hung inward, enough of a gap for him to reach in and get the door lock.

Sliding the door across twelve inches, he eased in sideways, immediately noticing a case on the bed. Mick closed the curtains tightly and turned the light on, finding no sophisticated key card system, just badly painted concrete walls. The suitcase was locked, the glasscutter employed to slice the case's plastic, punched through and pulled out, the edges bent back, the cloth lining torn away.

Not aiming to hide his presence, he pulled everything out, throwing the clothes about the room, finding nothing of interest. Checking under the bed he found only dust, dead flies and shoes, bringing the shoes out. He even ran his hands under the mattress and tore off the sheets, throwing pillows off the bed after tearing them open.

The bedside cabinet offered nothing but tourist flyers, the bin holding no clues. The wardrobes were teased quietly open, Sayeed's shirts and jackets checked before being thrown on the bed, all pockets tested, shirt pockets torn away. The bathroom displayed Sayeed's travel case, emptied into a stained toilet, its inner pocket checked.

A dresser supported two small drawers, both pulled out and checked; even the inside of the dresser was checked. Nothing.

Stood with his hands on his hips, thinking, Mick could see an air vent grill that looked as if it had been replaced recently. Standing on the bed, he examined the grill close up, soon seeing

that the screws were loose. He yanked it off. Reaching around inside, he found a file.

‘Bingo.’

Sat on the bed, he opened the file and skimmed a few pages, returning to the first. Adopting a heavy frown, he read the detail of the front page, details of chemicals, reagents, quantities, times and dates, money.

Taking out his phone, he photographed each page, noting a name on the last page; H.E. Becker. Putting the pages carefully back as he had found them, Mick placed them back in the file, but then hesitated. He glanced at the vent, considered taking the file with him, but finally returned it to exactly where he had found it. The grill was duly fixed back in place, and checked at length that it appeared as it had done previously, screws pushed back in.

Opening his backpack, two bottles of green gloss paint emerged. Tops off, and shaking them carefully and with aim, he covered all of Sayeed’s possessions, shoes, even socks, then splattered the walls, being careful to splatter the grill. The doors received lines of paint, the floor, even the ceiling fan, the bathroom, every inch covered.

Standing on Sayeed’s bed, careful where he now stepped, Mick unzipped, peeing over Sayeed’s clothes, and off the bed and into the shoes. ‘Been dying to this for a while, Sayeed old friend. So have a little something from me and the boys.’

Leaving the paint bottles behind, Mick knocked the light out, slipped out past curtains speckled with green paint, and closed the glass door. Peering down, the breeze again cooling his sweat, he could see a dark figure sat having a cigarette.

Mick texted Roger. A second crash, a minute later, caused the smoker to run around the hotel, voices now raised. Mick began climbing down, his fingers again registering their complaint at scraping over rough concrete. At ground level he checked his pistol, now in hand, and peeped around the edge of the hotel. The Russians were examining damage to a second car. Turning, he ran across to the fence, easing through quietly.

‘All OK?’ the two Russians asked.

‘Yes. C’mon.’

In Yuri’s room, Mick accepted a cold can of Fanta orange, a little green paint on his hands. ‘Sayeed had documents hidden in a vent, but they were just requests for the purchase of certain chemicals. I have a name, and I put the documents back. Besides that, I just trashed his room and all his clothes.’

‘And now?’

‘And now we have a boat to hijack,’ Mick said, still breathing heavily. ‘Leave someone here watching that hotel, but give me the rest of your people. Send them to the harbour.’ He opened his backpack, handing over eight red flares. ‘Set these off where the jewellery shops are opposite the harbour, create a diversion when I say. You, Yuri, come with me.’

Arriving at the harbour side by taxi, Mick slung his backpack over his shoulder, checked his pistol tucked down his back, and led Yuri onwards. Advancing slowly, they ambled along the shop side of the harbour road, reaching the start of the pedestrian area, the cafes and bars.

Mick raised his phone. ‘It’s me. Diversion in ten minutes.’

‘Who is it?’ Yuri enquired. ‘English people?’

‘I have people down here helping me; they’ll help to create a diversion. Can you see your people?’

Yuri looked back. ‘Yes, they’re spread out.’

Mick checked his watch. ‘Call them. Tell them to start the flares and put them in bins or under benches at exactly eight o’clock – or when they see red flares at this end.’

Yuri lifted his phone, ducking into an alley as they waited. Mick called Jim back and gave him the time, Roger and Jim now positioned in a convenient alley above the cafes and below the castle’s fortifications.

At exactly eight o’clock, Mick led Yuri across to the boats, just as two red flares landed behind them, bright red points of light giving off plenty of smoke. Another two landed, tourists fleeing, shopkeepers closing doors, taxi drivers shouting, many pulling away.

Along the quayside, Mick could now see many points of red light, smoke billowing. When the smoke covered the boats he took out his pistol – the move mirrored by Yuri, and ran forwards. Jumping onto the rear deck of Trumpet, Mick kicked open the galleys swing doors and rushed inside, he and Yuri soon stood over two bodies in the dimly lit interior. They exchanged puzzled looks.

Mick knelt and closely checked the face of Doyle, sure that it was him, Doyle shot in the chest twice at close range, the blood on Doyle's shirt partly dried. The woman had been shot in the head at close range, but this was no murder-suicide.

'Someone beat us to it,' Yuri noted.

'And any documents that might be here.' Mick patted down Doyle and removed his wallet. 'Sloppy,' he said to the unknown assassin.

Lifting up, he quickly scanned the galley. Grabbing two paperbacks off a shelf, he handed them to Yuri. 'Go down below and to the rear as far as you can go and set fire to the books. Quick!'

Mick lifted a hatch at the front of the galley and dropped down, using his pale blue phone light to see. Two cooking gas canisters presented themselves, both turned on with a hiss. Clambering back up, he closed the hatch carefully before attending the cooker, turning on all the dials as Yuri reappeared.

'No evidence,' Yuri commented.

'No evidence,' Mick repeated as he nudged Yuri out the back of the boat.

Yuri reached the rear railing of the boat. A crack of the air, a spatter of blood, and Yuri fell backwards onto Mick, Mick watching it all in slow motion. Pushed backwards, and now under the boat's upper deck, Mick was sheltered from the sniper. The quayside was a mass of pink smoke, sirens getting louder, several points of red light penetrating the ghostly pink mist.

Mick grabbed Yuri's collar and dragged him back, sure that he was dead. Frantically, he reached over and grabbed Yuri's pistol from where it had fallen and tossed it into the water with a 'plop'. It was soon followed by Yuri's mobile phone, his wallet, even his wristwatch.

Turning – and heaving a big breath and holding it, Mick ducked through the galley, now full of gas, and out through a forward skylight, up onto the front deck and shielded by the wheelhouse. There was nothing for it, and very little time. Staying as low as he could, he dived over the front of the boat, and into the black water.

Hitting the water and doing a forward roll, his world changed. It changed from the smell of gas and smoke and the sound of sirens, to the cold shock of the water, the sounds of bubbles, pinpoints of pain in his ears as cold water penetrated them, and a lack of orientation. Opening his eyes whilst still submerged, he could see points of light, and swam towards them as his eardrums complained about the sudden pressure changes and the cold water that they were being subjected to. Bursting through the surface, gasping for air, Mick tried to orientate himself. The world of sirens returned.

Heaving two breaths, he ducked under the surface and swam past the next boat. More breaths, and he cleared the second boat in line, choosing now to swim slowly on the surface, shielded from the sniper by the tall boats, all packed conveniently close together.

Four boats down the line, Mick peered across the bay, seeing the outline of his own hotel. Coming ashore here would take some explaining, and a half-mile walk whilst sopping-wet, something that was bound to attract attention. And the quayside was busy; there was nowhere to come ashore unseen.

The initial shock of the cold water had passed, and Mick could now see an alternative to coming ashore here. He struck out across the bay, secure in the knowledge that there was no current, and that these boats didn't move at night. The water's surface was also invitingly dead calm, it's calmness measured

by the long lines of coloured light reflecting from the beachfront bars and restaurants.

A hundred yards out, Doyle's boat blew with an almighty echoing bang. Turning, he could see a tall mushroom of yellow flames, soon turning into smoke, an orange glow left where he knew the boat was, its lower decks well alight.

Swimming on his back, fully-clothed and with his trainers still on, Mick kicked out gently and moved away from the harbour, a million flashing blue lights defining the quayside.

Forty minutes later, and starting to chill, he bumped into something, a rope attached to a buoy. Halting, the rope offered him a reprieve, a pause on his long journey. The harbour was now just a distant blur, a thin horizontal line of flashing blue lights.

Turning, Mick could see his hotel, the beach now fifty yards away. Ditching his pistol, he moved past the rope and struck out for the sand. Reaching the shallows, he eased up onto his knees, then his feet, the water draining out of his clothes as he stood there feeling ten stone heavier than normal. He had aimed for a stacked pile of sun loungers to use as cover, and now approached them. Arriving at the loungers, a guard in a uniform appeared, smiling widely.

'I drink, I go swim,' Mick told him.

The man smiled and nodded. 'Cold, no?'

'Cold,' Mick agreed. He pointed. 'My hotel.'

'Like this? No, my friend.'

'I'm in room 2-1-0. If you get me a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, I'll give you twenty Euros.'

'Twenty Euros?' The hotel's security guard went inside, duly returning with a plastic bag containing jeans and a t-shirt from Mick's room, leaving Mick wondering if his room had been cleaned out.

Stripping off his wet clothes, and wringing them out, Mick placed on the dry t-shirt and jeans, placing his wet clothes in the plastic bag. From Doyle's wallet, he pulled out a damp twenty-

Euro note, handing it over. ‘It will be good when dry. Thank you, my friend.’

Mick walked across the promenade barefoot, stopping to wash his feet under a tap designed specifically for sandy feet. He attempted to wipe his feet on a patch of grass, as best he could, and entered the hotel. ‘Room 2-1-0, please,’ he said in Russian, the two duty staff smiling widely as they fetched his key.

Safe in his room, Mick took out his phone, now dead, and removed the SIM card. Grabbing a pre-pay from his case, he swapped the SIM cards and powered up the phone, soon calling Jim.

‘You’re alive!’ Jim shouted.

‘Yeah, calm down.’

‘We were up in the alleyway when we saw you go aboard, then heard the crack of a round fired from a sniper rifle – so we legged it. When the boat blew... well, we thought you’d had it.’

‘Doyle and his lady friend were dead when we got there, a professional hit. But they didn’t remove Doyle’s wallet, so were either in a hurry, or didn’t care. Listen, there’re professional assassins out there, so stay in your hotel, pack, and get the early ferry out. When you queue to the ferry ... adopt a party of people, and be careful. I’ll see you in Rhodes.’

Mick called London.

‘Duty officer.’

‘This is Michael Canuck, there’s been an incident in Turkey, I need the Director *right now*.’ Mick waited a full minute.

‘Canuck?’ the Director called.

‘Yes, boss. Listen, Doyle and his lady were both shot dead by a professional –’

‘Doyle’s dead?’

‘Yes. Might I be so bold as to enquire if you got someone here in time...?’

‘No, we didn’t – and we don’t assassinate people!’

Mick sat on the end of the bed. ‘Just checking. I also got shot at by a sniper.’

‘Are you OK?’

‘Yes, just a bit cold; I went for an impromptu swim. Listen, I took Doyle’s wallet and blew up the boat and bodies, it may help – it may not.’

‘Christ...’

‘Sayeed is leaving tomorrow, but I got hold of documents that he was hiding and photographed them.’

‘Good work. Again.’

‘I’ll be out of here in the morning, nothing else I can achieve here. Check with the Turkish police about forensics on that boat, it was called Trumpet. Canuck out.’

Heaving a sigh, Mick called Constantine. ‘I need to speak to Constantine, it’s Mikhail the vase thief.’

‘Hello?’ came a minute later.

‘Mister Constantine, Yuri is dead.’

‘Dead? Brabos’ men?’

‘A sniper. We boarded the boat, but the man Sayeed was due to meet was already dead, a professional hit. The men at the hotel are just muscle, they’re not professionals.’

‘Yuri was a good man, he will be avenged.’

‘Sayeed will leave in the morning. I’ll then look for Brabos in Europe; I have a lead. Call your people, get them to pull back, ditch their weapons, we’ll talk tomorrow.’

Standing under a hot shower for ten minutes, Mick returned from terra mare to terra firma, feeling now more human than fish. Dressed warmly, he entered the hotel’s bar, a cheeseburger heated up in the microwave, a beer downed. Followed by a few more beers, washed down by a few more.

Escape and evade

1

At 10am, Jim called. ‘We’re on the ferry, leaving the bay, but that ferry queue was scrutinized by a million police officers and two million dodgy looking goons. And Mick, some of the goons look familiar.’

‘I’ll find another way out. Did they stop you?’

‘No, Roger and me linked arms with two old ladies; they never gave us a second look. How’ll you get out?’

‘I have an idea, I’ll see you in Rhodes tomorrow. But do me a favour: look around Rhodes ferry port, and if you see any goons then ... well, try and disrupt them, but don’t take too many risks.’

‘They’ll have the airport covered,’ Jim cautioned.

‘Trust me, I’ll get out. Fifty Euros on it.’

‘I hope you know what you’re doing.’

Mick called Colette. ‘Right, boss?’ he said, but with no energy in his voice.

‘Ah, Mick, I got some intel: three bodies were taken off a burnt out boat, no ID so far, the boat hired with a false name, no mention of Doyle’s identity.’

‘That’s something, I guess. And Sayeed?’

‘Sat waiting a flight at Dalaman, oddly dressed.’

‘I relieved him of his clothes and suitcase.’

‘Oh. Well, we have people at the airport. He’s booked onto a flight to Rome, thereafter to Pakistan.’

‘Got a paper and pen?’ Mick asked.

‘Fire away.’

‘Have an expert check these chemicals, I want to know what they’re used for, then a link to a H.E. Becker.’ Mick listed off the chemicals. ‘I don’t know to spell that lot, so don’t ask. And please don’t search on that name through any computer that might alert him.’

‘Hang on,’ Colette requested. ‘Internet has a H.E. Becker, chemist and scientist, World Health Organisation, so I guess that’s not him.’

‘Nationality?’

‘German. He ... er ... works out of Geneva and ... Munich.’

‘You’re right, he’s not our man,’ Mick lied. ‘Listen, there are people watching the ports and airports here - besides your guys, so I’m going to have to slip out.’

‘How?’

‘Leave that to me. But for now, I’m the rabbit surrounded by foxes.’

‘Our people left the area after Doyle’s death,’ Colette mentioned. ‘Do you want me to see if they can return?’

‘No, this is kid’s stuff. I’ll let you know when I’m out.’

Having missed breakfast, Mick suffered another warmed up cheeseburger in the bar, a pint of lemonade and orange juice to help with the hangover. Back in his room he sorted his case, going through everything he needed and throwing away a few items – out the window and onto scrubland behind his hotel, scaring feral cats.

Stood at the window, the day warming already, he took in the view of the mountains before observing tourist couples out walking in nearby streets. ‘Nice day for it,’ he told them, his words unheard.

Placing on swimming shorts, he threw on a casual t-shirt, his damp trainers, and grabbed a small backpack, a bottle of water and towel placed inside, his wallet and phone in a velcro-fastened pocket on the shorts. Ready now, he left his room.

Outside his hotel he placed on sunglasses and a cap, and crossed the narrow promenade to the beach. Taking off his trainers, he tied the laces together and placed them around his neck. Entering the shallows, the water cold on his feet, he turned right and waded along the beach, looking every bit the tourist – if the only one paddling this morning. Two hundred yards along he found what he was looking for, a group of pedal boats for hire, jetskis, and two speedboats.

He pointed at the speedboat. 'How much? In Euros?'

'Half hour, one hour?' a Turkish youth asked.

'One hour.'

'In Euros ... fifty Euros, sir.'

Mick handed over the money, the boat pushed out, basic instruction given. 'This petrol or diesel?' he asked.

'Petrol, sir. Please don't go inside the ropes, don't go out of the bay.'

'Yeah, no problem.'

They wrote down his hotel, name and room number, that which they were given. With the engine already idling, Mick selected 'reverse' and pulled out, turning as he went. Selecting 'forwards', he coaxed the nose around and out into the bay, soon tearing across the calm water at thirty miles per hour.

Across the bay, almost a mile, he surveyed the far shore of the natural harbour, not finding what he was looking for. Turning towards the ferry port, he closed the throttle, approaching the far side of the ferry port ten minutes later, and seeing what he was after; a refuelling station. It offered petrol, diesel, and goons walking around.

Turning around, Mick closed the throttles and headed across the bay, ten minutes taken to reach the cliff-enclosed channel leading out to the Mediterranean. Entering the channel, Mick slowed, glancing left and right at the rocks. Five hundred yards into the channel, on the left, he spotted a cove. Slowly entering the cove, he navigated through a tight gap before opening into a small sandy bay, a cave on the right, the water deep enough for the speedboat.

'You'll do.'

He eased the boat slowly around, carefully exiting the cove, and returned to the channel. Closing the throttles, the front of the speedboat lifting up, he turned right and headed back into the bay, pointing the nose at an area of trees between Icmeler and Marmaris. Approaching, he throttled back and turned side on to the shore, standing and peering at the empty beach, sun

beds stacked up and chained together. Satisfied, he powered back to his start point.

Getting out of the boat, helped by the youths, he asked, 'How much for two hours? In Euros?'

'Eighty Euro, good price.'

'OK. I'll come back after lunch.'

Returning to his hotel, via a long cold paddle, Mick packed his case with what few items he had brought over from Rhodes, going through everything before checking out with his Russian passport and Santander credit card.

Hopping into the first taxi, Mick directed the driver to the far end of Marmaris beach, halting at a point which he guessed was parallel to the trees he had seen from the speedboat. Walking down side streets, he joined a path at the back of the beach, passing only a handful of tourists, and soon found himself alone, the beach at this end of Marmaris deserted, nearby houses and hotels seemingly empty.

Reaching protruding rocks that prevented further easy navigation along the beach, Mick stopped and sat for ten minutes, checking every direction. No one was about. Moving around the stacked sun beds, the chains rusted, he placed down his case, hidden from view unless you were swimming past.

Walking back to his seat across soft sand, he remained a further ten minutes, the day pleasant, the beach and the view quite beautiful, the sky clear. Secure in the knowledge that no one had seen the case being left, Mick walked back towards civilisation, and to the busy main road.

A quarter mile along the road he spotted a petrol station ahead, a green fascia and green pumps. Ducking into the first shop he noticed, he bought two three-litre plastic cartons of water, emptying them on a parched looking bush outside whilst being curiously observed by bored taxi drivers. 'I water them every day,' Mick commented. 'Need to look after the shrubs.'

Carrying the empty containers along to the petrol station, he chose a black-coloured petrol pump and filled up, being watched like a hawk by the man inside.

Leaving the full containers at the pump, Mick walked across and paid, he even left a tip, soon lugging the heavy containers back down the road whilst looking like a tourist lugging water. Arriving back at the end of the beach, a couple were walking towards him, having reached the end of the beach and turned about. He plonked down.

With the couple now out of sight, he dumped the fuel on the sand next to his case and returned to the seat, washing his hands in the sea en-route. Fifteen minutes of diligent observation offered no potential threats. Lifting up and stretching, and brushing down sand, he headed back to the centre of Marmaris beach in no particular hurry. Stopping at a mini-market, he purchased bottled water, chocolate, Smarties in a tube, cleaning rags, soap, and numerous plastic bags. And Ritz crackers. Making good use of side streets, Mick hit the beach right opposite the speedboat hire.

‘Hello again. Two hours, yes?’ He handed over eighty Euros. ‘I can go to Rhodes on this?’ he asked with a smile. The youths smiled back, shaking their heads.

They helped him aboard, pushing out the same boat. Reversing, he eased back, coaxed the nose around and selected ‘forwards’. Pulling off gently, a little sea spray hitting his sunglasses, he took in the bay, the day glorious. ‘Nice day for it,’ he muttered. He turned and waved at the youths. ‘See you next year.’

Closing the throttles, he powered down the bay and to the part of the beach less visited. Halting two hundred yards off shore, he idled the engine and sat back as an old couple wandered back from the rocks, a ten minute meandering stroll till they were out of sight. Checking behind, he figured that the only other boats that he could see were either sufficiently far away not to see him, or to care. He closed the throttle and powered ashore, the nose of the boat soon wedged into the soft sand.

Jumping out and landing in a few inches of water, gentle waves rippling ashore, he ran up the soft sand and to the stacked

sun beds, grabbing his case. Back at the speedboat, he reached over and placed the case behind the front seats, rushing back for the heavy fuel containers. Struggling to ease them up and over, he eventually got them on the back seat.

Seeing another couple walking his way, he pushed the boat's nose out till he was up to his knees in water. Wading around to the rear, up to his waist, he grabbed a silver handhold and clambered awkwardly aboard.

Waving at the couple, he reversed back a few yards, coaxed the nose around, and again selected 'forwards.' Turning towards the channel, he powered away with a roar, the nose rising, a welcoming cool spray hitting him in the face. Looking over his shoulder, he watched Marmaris Beach reduce in size, and now in importance.

Now in the channel leading from the bay to sea, and bobbing in the increased swell, he had to wait a good twenty minutes till the tourist boats had all moved past, then further awaited the passing of a small cruiser. Finally clear, he turned into the cove, beaching the speedboat on the sand where it was out of view of the channel's traffic. Knocking the engine off, he sat back, taking a swig of water. Checking his watch, it was 2.30pm; five hours before it would be dark enough to leave.

With his face to the sun, serenaded by the gentle waves hitting the sand and shingle, he relaxed and tried to get a few hours sleep. But every hour, larger waves would rock the speedboat, signalling the passing of the ferry to Rhodes or back again, the route to freedom taken by Jim and Roger passing by almost close enough to touch.

At 5pm Mick checked the boat's fuel tank, finding it almost full; he didn't bother to top it up. He sat eating the Ritz crackers, a little melted chocolate washed down with bottled water, his face feeling as if it had caught the sun this afternoon. One small part of the cove still enjoyed sunshine, the rest now in shade. By 6pm no other boats were now passing, the day cooling rapidly, Mick throwing on a sweatshirt and his jeans.

At 7.30pm, now sat in the dark, Mick said to himself, 'Right about now, Sayeed will be having his evening meal in Rome. Back to the road, no doubt, a little green paint on his clothes.' Smiling, he started the engine and reversed back, trying hard not to hit any rocks and trying desperately to remember where those rocks were. Figuring that forwards was less risky, he gently edged forwards and around in a tight turn, one gentle scrape registering

Easing slowly through the tight entrance to the cove, he peered through the dark for the lights of other boats, secure in the knowledge that he would see them a long way off. Moving further out into the channel, he saw no lights back towards the bay. Turning left and increasing speed a little he could see lights ahead, but figured them to be at least a mile away, and the lights of boats at sea or commercial vessels anchored.

Keeping mid-channel till the open ocean was reached, Mick could feel the swell building beneath him. The enclosed bay of Marmaris had been dead calm, and this speedboat was not designed for ocean voyages, that he knew only too well. It was only twenty-five miles to Rhodes, but it was never going to be a smooth ride.

Setting a course to the right, a course that he figured would keep him a mile from the Turkish shoreline, he increased speed a little and settled back. This was also never going to be a quick journey either.

Well out to sea now, the movement of the speedboat was starting to make him feel sick, the spray now cold and annoying instead of welcoming. Keeping the shore's lights in view, three hours brought him to a point where he was sure that he could see the lights of Rhodes in the distance. Navigation was easy, but the ride was anything other than comfortable.

Three and a half hours in he was not worried about fuel, since he was taking it easy, and the Turkish lads had offered to hire it out for two hours without mention of refuelling. The waves he was now encountering were bigger, but rounder, the

speedboat rising and falling in a rhythmical motion, progress steady.

Five hours of tortuous going – and a careful re-fuel - resulted in the lights of Rhodes being clearly visible, very little visible behind him now. Edging to the northwest of Rhodes, and trying to avoid populated areas, Mick followed the coastline a mile out, increasing his speed. Moving closer to shore on a particularly black stretch of coastline, Mick could see a sandy beach surrounded by what looked like black rocks, or maybe trees. He nosed towards it.

Two hundred yards out, he could see the small beach as a dark grey in contrast to the black around it, house lights visible up a hill, a few lights visible five hundred yards down the coast. Making a choice, he powered in, hitting the sand and beaching the speedboat. He threw off his suitcase and knapsack, jumped over the side and pushed the boat out.

Stood looking at it, the waves eventually brought it back in. He took off his jeans and placed them on his case. Scrambling aboard the speedboat, he started the engine and selected reverse. Noticing a large black area of what were clearly rocks – he could hear waves crashing over them – he closed the throttle and smashed right into them with a loud crunch. Reversing, he turned in a wide circle and repeated the exercise, certain now that the speedboat was holed.

Nosing the speedboat onto the sand, he took off his t-shirt and threw it onto the beach. Reversing out, he slowly turned the speedboat, got himself ready, closed the throttle and dived off the rear, hitting his head on the sandy bottom of the cold and shallow water. Standing up to his chest, cursing, he half-waded and half-swam ashore. Still up to his ankles in water, he glanced over his shoulder to see the driverless speedboat approaching. He dived clear, the speedboat beaching itself just a few feet away from him, its engine loudly turning over, water gushing from the propellers in shallow water.

Mick stood. ‘What is your problem!’ he shouted at the speedboat. ‘Go home! Or sink! Or go home and sink!’

Reaching over the side of the speedboat, he knocked it into reverse and pushed it back, past the first few waves. Back on the sand, Mick watched its dark image disappear, its engine sound softening. He sighed with relief.

Taking off his wet shorts, he stood naked in the dark, wringing out the shorts before swirling them overhead. Placing the damp shorts on his suitcase, he rubbed what water he could off himself, shaking his hands to rid his fingers of seawater. Putting on his t-shirt, he suddenly became aware of movement.

Across the grey sand, a dark image approached, and there was very little he could do about it. But as the dark outline got closer he thought it a woman or a child, finally seeing a distinct wiggle of the hips. The person stopped a few feet from him, just a dark outline, and clicked a lighter on, casually lighting a cigarette.

‘Nice night for it,’ Mick offered, now having seen the woman’s face.

She shifted her weight onto one hip, and supported the elbow of the arm she held the cigarette with. ‘Are you some sort of smuggler. Or just lost, mad at your boat for *it* being lost - and wanting to teach it who’s boss?’

Her accent was English, South East England, and posh. Mick took a moment. ‘I can explain. Not very well, but I can explain.’

She took a drag. ‘You do realise ... that this is a private beach, and that you’re stood on it with no clothes on.’

‘First, I didn’t know it was a private beach, and second – it’s dark, and third – you shouldn’t be looking at my dangly bits.’

‘You can put something on if you really want to.’

‘I thought I’d stand here and dry out for a while.’

She took a long drag. ‘So, do you usually take your anger out on your boat?’

‘Only when it disobeys me; I fuel it, so it should do as it’s told.’

‘And does it ... *do as it’s told?*’

‘Hard to say, we only just met today,’ Mick replied.

She took another drag. 'I don't think your relationship with your boat is what you hoped for. Take a look behind you.'

Mick looked over his shoulder, the boat coming back to the beach, in reverse. 'Now, if you bet me a million quid, I couldn't get it to do that again in a million years.'

'Perhaps you should talk nicely to it, let it have its own way once in a while. But you must be doing something right ... because it just keeps coming back for more.'

'If you'll excuse me for a minute, I'll go and let it down nicely.'

'Just leave it there; no one comes here but me. The neighbours can use this beach, but they never do.'

'That's very accommodating of you.'

'It's called Smuggler's Cove, so you fit right in,' she toyed. 'And don't mind me, you scratch your balls all you like.'

'Sorry; salt and sand.'

'And just where were you planning on sleeping tonight? On the beach?'

'If you offered me a beer ... I'd tell you the whole story.'

She took a drag. 'I have beer.'

'Could I borrow your cigarette for a moment, I want to tell the boat that it's over between us.'

She handed over the cigarette, Mick taking a drag as he approached the speedboat, his dangly bits dangling in the dark and soon in the cold water again. Knocking off the engine, he opened a fuel bottle and tipped it over, letting the petrol guzzle out. Stepping back to the sand, and taking a final drag, he flicked the cigarette into the boat.

Facing the girl, the beach was suddenly illuminated as flames shot sixty feet into the air. And the girl was not half bad, he realised. Approaching his case, he put on his jeans.

'When you end a relationship ... you really end it,' she noted.

The second fuel bottle blew, the beach as bright as day for a moment.

‘Always go out in a burst of flames, never just fizzle out,’ Mick said as he lifted his backpack and case. ‘Lead on, private beach owner.’

She turned. ‘Kate.’

‘Mick.’

‘You don’t sound like a Mick,’ she said as they crossed the sand.

‘It’s short for Michael, but Mick makes me sound more working class.’

‘And why would you aspire to be working class? You sound well educated.’

‘Oxford.’

‘What did you read?’

‘Politics and languages.’

‘I read chemistry. At Oxford.’

‘I dropped out after two years, and started calling myself Mick.’

‘I dropped out a week before my exams, and went to Goa for a year. Mummy and daddy were not best pleased.’

‘This their place?’

She took a moment. ‘Yes. But I hide away here, and they sleep better knowing that I’m safe.’

‘How would they feel about you adopting smugglers?’ Mick toyed as they climbed steps through the dark.

‘They would be concerned, which is why I do things that make them concerned. That’s the whole point.’

‘It’s not much of a rebellion – if they don’t know about.’

‘I’ll leave the boat there, and they’ll fret about it. Of course, I’ll tell them I torched it, not you.’

They entered a large villa, a large and expensive villa.

‘Nice place,’ Mick commented.

Inside the villa, Mick dumped his case and backpack, padding around barefoot. She offered him a towel, Mick dusting sand off his feet outside the main door.

Back inside, she handed over a beer. ‘So, Mister Smuggler, you said you’d tell me the story.’

‘I did, didn’t I, and it’s never good for a man to lie to a girl who offers him a beer.’

‘I thought all men were liars,’ she toyed. ‘Especially when they have a beer in their hands.’

‘We only lie to girls when we don’t want to hurt their feelings. Does my arse look big in this? No, dear.’

‘You have quite a good arse, for a man.’

‘It was dark,’ Mick said. ‘It probably doesn’t look so good in the daylight.’

‘It’s light enough in here, so show me now.’

‘You ... want to see my arse?’

‘Why not, I got you a beer, helped you land on these shores illegally, and assisted you in committing arson. I’d say you’re indebted to me.’

‘I don’t know how showing you my arse will quite wipe the slate clean, but I’ll give it a go.’ He stood, placed down his beer bottle on a marble coffee table, and removed his jeans. Grabbing his beer, he turned around once before sitting. ‘Well?’

‘It’s a good arse, for a man. So, tell me the story.’

Mick took a moment. ‘I have an apartment in Lindos. I bought it, I paid for it, but my ex-girlfriend somehow changed the documents without me noticing ... because now I can’t sell it, and she rents it out to her friends.’

‘What a bitch,’ Kate whispered in conspiratorial tones.

‘Exactly. So ... I figured I’d fly to Turkey, steal a speedboat – a cooperative one, come across, trash the apartment, and leave without customs ever knowing that I was here.’

‘How’ll you get back, now that you’ve ended your relationship with your speedboat?’

‘Well, the thing about ending relationships is ... you get angry in the moment and don’t think about the consequences. I’ll have to figure another way of getting off the island.’

‘Steal someone else’s speedboat,’ she said. ‘In fact, I know someone I don’t like, one of daddy’s friends. You could steal his; I can get the keys.’

‘You’re being very obliging,’ Mick noted.

‘It’s boring here. Having a naked smuggler sat here ... is the highlight of my year.’

‘You ... get out much?’

‘I sometimes don’t leave the villa for a month.’

‘And ... do you work?’

‘Yes, I’m a copy editor – all done via email, so I don’t have to see real people, just names on emails.’

‘And the reason for this self-imposed exile in paradise?’ Mick asked.

‘Well, it fits. I’m supposed to be a bit bi-polar, although I just think I’m fucked off with the life that other people think I should lead.’

‘We all have to follow our own path. I dropped out and disappointed everyone, and I’ve been disappointing them all ever since. In fact, you could say I enjoy it.’

She toasted him with her own bottle. ‘To disappointing the world.’ She sipped her drink. ‘Now, I don’t do the sex thing very well, and I’ve had hardly any practise. What are you kinky about? What is it ... that you’re ex-girlfriend didn’t like doing?’

‘Well, you could sit on the toilet and give me a blowjob? She hated that.’

She put down her drink and stood, offering Mick a hand. ‘Come on then.’

Mick was firm by time they got to the bathroom.

‘Trousers down?’ she asked.

‘No, no, just sit there.’

She sat as asked, accepting Mick’s hard member without a fuss. ‘Salty,’ she mumbled, looking up. ‘Sea ... salty.’

He eased out her blouse and cupped her breast. ‘Perfect.’

2

Half an hour later, a gas fire now lit, Mick sat enjoying a nice red wine, his trousers back on.

‘So, where were you going to sleep tonight?’ she enquired.

‘I would have walked to a hotel, or got a taxi.’

‘I have a spare room you can use.’

‘That’s very kind of you. But didn’t your mother tell you to avoid men like me?’

‘She did, often, which is why I’ve always gone for men like you.’ She took a moment. ‘Do you think I’m being ... reckless?’

‘I’m ... not the right person to ask about that. When they hold the annual convention of Reckless People Anonymous, I’m the one they don’t let in, just in case I damage something.’

‘As proven by the boat stunt.’

‘Which, I think we can safely say, qualifies me as reckless,’ Mick noted with a smile.

When his phone went, he had to hunt around in his backpack to find it. ‘I’ll probably need to take this.’ He lifted it to his ear. ‘Jim?’

‘You OK?’

‘Yeah, I’m fine, on Rhodes.’

‘You’re here? Then why didn’t you call?’ Jim complained.

‘I just got here. Any ... problems?’

‘We spotted a goon on the ferry landing earlier, but Roger pushed him into the water. Guy had a long swim. But I think we were made, and our hotel. We doubled back, but we’ve now got company across the street.’

‘Oh dear. Got a hire car?’

‘Yes.’

‘Pack up, check out, knock your mobiles off, drive around and lose the tail, check the car for trackers.’

Kate sat listening.

Mick continued, ‘If you’re sure you’ve shaken them, drive to the northwest of the island and I’ll meet you. Hold on a second.’ He lowered his phone to his chest and faced a curious Kate. She was not concerned, nor worried, just curious.

‘Here’s the thing: I have to two friends in a hotel and ... there are a few international terrorists tracking them, and ... or ... the CIA, and those tracking them would like to shoot holes in them, or have them lead the bad guys to me. Kate, I know it’s

imposing, but how would you like to set a world record for being reckless, the kind of reckless that would give your parents simultaneous multiple heart attacks?’

‘Are you going to stop lying to me?’

Mick studied her. ‘Are you going to tell me how many times you’ve tried to take your own life?’ Mick quickly countered with.

She took a moment before turning away, facing the welcoming flames of the gas fire. ‘So many times ... I’ve lost count.’

‘I work for Her Majesty’s Government, and I had to leave Turkey without being noticed, or shot, or ... captured.’

‘Your friends can stay here tonight,’ she offered.

Mick put the phone back to his ear. ‘OK, I’ve got us a safe house, not the one I originally had – another one, and a nicer one.’

‘That was quick!’

‘Drive to the northwest. Hold on, I’ll give you to someone who can give you directions.’ Mick handed Kate the phone.

‘Where are you now?’ she asked Jim. ‘OK, head for the airport, turn right, which is west...’ When finished, she ended the call and chucked the phone back.

Mick opened his backpack and took out three passports from a watertight plastic bag, handing them over. As she thumbed through the passports, Mick dialled. ‘Duty officer, please. Duty officer? It’s Michael Canuck. I’m in Rhodes – at a safe house, but I have company, and the company wants to shoot holes in me, so I’d appreciate some other company, the kind that doesn’t want to shoot holes in me. In the morning? Thank you.’ He hung up.

‘So why are they trying to shoot holes in you?’ Kate asked, sounding none too concerned as she handed back the passports.

‘They ... are trying to do something, we ... are trying to find out what it is, they ... would rather we didn’t find out what it is, and we follow each other around. And when they get fed up of

us following them they send people to try and shoot us full of holes to ... deter us from following them. If you follow.'

'Sounds interesting.'

'Never a dull day, unless we don't have an assignment, and then it's very dull. I do divorce work then.'

'Divorce work? They let you freelance?'

'I am a freelancer, just a part-timer and an amateur, hence the speedboat. Some day, when I grow up, I want to be a proper secret agent. Oh, did you say you studied chemistry?'

She nodded, sipping her wine.

'Tell me what the following chemicals have in common.' He listed them off.

'They're what we call *courtroom chemicals*.'

'Court – room?'

'They're the chemicals that factories are always leaking - and making people sick; always in a court somewhere, people trying to get compensation.'

'Why would anyone want to buy them, that specific group?' Mick puzzled.

'You wouldn't, they don't go together. They have no use together, unless you really want to poison a river.'

'No one would buy that lot for a practical purpose?'

'No, never.'

'And what would be their link to the World Health Organisation?'

'Courtroom chemicals; the WHO is always conducting a study, helping the victims.'

'And there would be no reason for the WHO to buy those chemicals?'

'Sure, in tiny amounts - for analysis in the lab.'

'Not by the tonne?'

She shook her head. 'Why?'

'It's somehow related to a case I'm looking at.' He pointed at a laptop. 'Does that have a web link?'

She nodded, reaching over and sliding it to Mick before pouring more wine. 'I have a car you can use.'

‘That would put you in danger,’ Mick softly stated as he accessed the web.

‘More danger than my monthly attempt to end it?’ she posed.

Without looking up, Mick commented, ‘*Your* attempts ... fail. The men outside *would not* fail.’

‘They might save me the job then.’

‘They might ask a few questions first, and hurt you, and I wouldn’t want that – I’ve hurt enough people by accident to keep me awake the rest of my life.’

‘You’re even more fucked up than I am.’

‘By a long way, Kate. By a long way.’

Jim and Roger pulled in half an hour later, Mick telling Roger to park the car down the road half a mile and walk back. Inside, Mick introduced Kate to Jim.

‘How ... how long have you known Mick then?’ Jim asked.

‘Since he came ashore in a stolen speedboat an hour or two ago.’

Jim faced Mick as Mick focused on the laptop. ‘Mick? Are we ... taking a risk here, and not just our own safety?’

‘It’s OK,’ Kate told Jim. ‘I’m ... suitably qualified for the task of *risk taker*.’

‘I hope you know what you’re doing, Mick,’ Jim complained.

Kate handed him a bottle of beer.

Without looking up, Mick asked, ‘That hire car? Fake ID?’

‘Yes.’

‘Abandon it then. Because I think we have some professional company.’

‘Yes?’ Jim asked, now sounding concerned.

‘Are you a bit ... old to be sneaking around?’ she cheekily asked Jim, Mick laughing.

‘Yes, my dear. *Way* too old for all this.’ Jim sat and sipped his beer. ‘At least we have a speedboat to escape on.’

Now Kate laughed, spilling her drink, Mick focusing on her.

‘What?’ Jim asked.

‘Nothing,’ Mick said, returning to the Internet.

‘Some food?’ Kate asked, smiling widely.

‘Sure,’ Jim agreed, Mick nodding.

Roger came in, out of breath, sounding like he had jogged back. ‘Too damn old and overweight for jogging,’ he complained.

‘Yes, well apparently I’m too old as well,’ Jim complained. ‘According to the young lady of the house, who Mick recruited to the cause an hour ago.’

‘Good one, Mick, great pad,’ Roger enthused.

When Kate returned, Mick introduced Roger, Kate handing him a beer. They sat listening, wide-eyed, as Kate re-told the story of the speedboat from her perspective. At the end, Roger roared with laughter, Jim not happy that the getaway vehicle had blown up.

Mick turned to face them, and heaved a sigh. ‘I think I might have worked out what’s going on.’ The guys were all ears. ‘And, if I’m right, then the professionals out there are well paid and highly motivated, and they won’t give up.’

‘We upset a big fish?’ Roger asked.

Mick nodded. ‘I have more investigating to do, a few pieces of the puzzle to solve.’

Jim asked, ‘Why they mad at us, and not at London?’

‘Possibly because they know who I am, and probably because they don’t know what I found out, and they would like to know if their game plan is secure. Kate, if you ever meet these gentlemen, then tell them we held you at gunpoint and made you help us.’

She shrugged a shoulder. ‘I’ll tell them you torched my favourite personal speedboat.’

Mick shot her a look, then said to the guys, ‘Let’s get some food in us, some rest, and we’ll leave early. I’ve asked London for some help, so right now they probably have the local police out in force looking for anyone they don’t like the look of. That means we can fly out, or ... we set a filter trap here.’

‘I know the island,’ Jim offered.

‘I know some of it,’ Roger put in.

‘I know most of it,’ Mick added.

‘I grew up here,’ Kate put in. They focused on her. ‘I can get you small hire cars with no questions asked, a local who’ll do anything for money, and I know somewhere where everyone gets lost – apart from the locals.’

Jim did not look happy at the idea that Kate might help, staring across at Mick.

Mick said, ‘I think I figured out what’s going on, and if I’m right ... then hundreds of people will be hurt or killed, maybe thousands. Time to take the gloves off Jim; this is no longer about us.’

Jim lowered his gaze.

Mick focused on Roger. ‘If I don’t get to meet the main man, we’ll never be left alone.’

Roger nodded his understanding.

‘Besides, there may be a bonus,’ Mick added.

Battle plan

1

At 6am, with the pre-dawn sky promising a fine day, everyone was up, washed, and munching on toast, Kate quite the host. A map of the island was laid out and studied after breakfast, annotated and discussed, mountain roads followed with fingers.

At 7am, Roger and Jim returned with two dusty and beaten up old hire cars, the owner rudely awakened, cash and false IDs thrust into his face before he had the time to check them. Kate called her odd-job man, and the scruffily dressed individual turned up half an hour later, needing a coffee. Or two.

Mick thrust five hundred Euros into the man's hand, the man promising a dated .22 bolt-action hunting rifle and two old Webley .22 revolvers – pre-Second World War, but with plenty of ammunition. They sent him off to get the weapons, and to meet them at a certain point in the mountains.

Jim and Roger drove the short distance down the road to their original hire car, ten minutes of searching revealing a tracker. Leaving the original hire car at a local bar, Kate now drove Mick in her car, Roger and Jim following behind in separate hire cars – Jim with the tracker. They climbed up into the hills, past the signs for a butterfly sanctuary, past a house that Mussolini apparently once owned, and turned off along a bumpy track.

At a clearing on the track they found the local man sat waiting in his car. He jumped out, weapons handed over and inspected, rounds fired off at trees. A second five hundred Euros was handed over, with the promise of more, a bonus if the local man had a bath in a stream.

Kate walked a hundred yards down to an abandoned cottage, the cottage reached by a path off the main tarmac road, not the track their vehicles were now on. The cars were duly moved along the track and into a shaded spot, the local man tasked with watching them. Kate had willingly offered to be the bait,

and now started a fire. Fire started, and with smoke being issued from the cottage's chimney, she sat outside on a well-worn bench and stared at the trees as the sun rose.

Jim and Roger switched on their mobiles, on a three-way call to Mick. Then they waited, just the birds for company, the pleasant wood a surreal backdrop to the task in hand.

A car passed half an hour later, but didn't stop. It came back five minutes later, but again did not stop.

Mick whispered, 'One above, one below. Knock your phones off now. Plan Alpha.'

* * *

With a green balaclava covering his face, the first gunman stepped slowly through the undergrowth, each step measured, each footfall almost silent, the ground in front checked, the immediate area being scanned diligently. Moving at no more than ten metres per minute, he advanced over the crest of the hill and down the other side, a pistol levelled.

Smoke registered with his nostrils; wood burning smoke. He smiled. Reaching a large tree trunk, he clambered up and peered down, glimpsing the cottage below and the source of the smoke, noticing someone sat outside.

Mick slowly sat upright, from where he lay covered in pine needles and leaves. With a plastic pop bottle in his left hand, the old revolver in his right, he placed the end of the revolver into the mouth of the plastic bottle, aimed at the man's right shoulder and fired.

A simple 'pop' echoed a short distance around the forest, hardly disturbing the creatures within. The gunman spun around, dropping his pistol, his right arm twitching with spasms. Mick aimed again and hit the man in the knee, the would-be gunman falling forwards, his face landing on Mick's shoes.

Sat fully upright, Mick pointed the pop bottle at the man's head. 'Another move and you're dead,' he whispered, repeating

it in German. Easing up slowly, and keeping the man covered, Mick straightened, kicking away the man's 9mm pistol. Dropping onto the man's back with a knee elicited a loud groan. Mick checked the immediate area for ten seconds, whilst patting down the man.

Pulling out the gunman's ID, Mick gave it a quick once over: Czech. He pulled the man's mask off, moving to the side to get a good look at the man's face, but not recognising his would-be assailant.

Whispering directly into the man's ear, Mick said, 'Tell me who sent you, and you get an ambulance and a prison cell. If not, you die slowly right here – and you don't get paid.'

The man snarled and took the pain.

Mick grabbed a middle finger of the man's left hand and broke it backwards, moving to the right hand and repeating the exercise. Still the man resisted. Pulling out a small knife, whilst checking the immediate area, Mick reached down and sliced the defiant man's ear off, placing it on the dirt in front of the man's eyes.

Making a fist whilst holding the knife, Mick stabbed down into the good shoulder. 'That was your rotary cuff tendon, you won't be playing tennis for a while, my friend. Who sent you? Was it Lodz or Muller?' That caused a reaction. 'And do you want to die here for nothing?'

Swivelling around, Mick stabbed down into both buttocks, swiftly followed the backs on the knees. Now the man could not control the pain.

'Kessler,' he forced out. 'Prague.'

'Not Lodz?'

'Lodz is an ... amateur. He was ... used.'

'Ah... ' Mick let out. 'And Muller?'

'Inter ... inter ... man in middle. Just money.'

'And do you know who is above Kessler?' The man shook his head as best he could, laying face down in green moss, Mick asking, 'And ... are you working with the CIA?'

'No,' the man whispered.

‘And the sniper from Marmaris? Is he here?’

‘No.’

‘His name?’

‘Ranhaus. We ... don’t know ... story ... only ... pay for job.’

‘Sounds about right.’ Mick stood, stamping down on the man’s left elbow with force. Retrieving and checking the modern 9mm pistol, Mick whispered, ‘Don’t go anywhere. Bleed quietly. And you’re only hope is an ambulance in thirty minutes.’ Mick moved off quietly, down towards the cottage.

Jim took careful aim with the dated bolt-action rifle, positioned now just twenty yards from where the assailant’s car had halted, the driver’s window conveniently open, the man now sat smoking. Jim had a small pop bottle over the end of his rifle, a rag over that. He aimed at the man’s shoulder, took a breath, and fired.

There was no recoil, no smoke, and very little sound, Jim’s clanking reload being the loudest part of the process. Taking aim again, he could see the man grimacing and staring out towards him, his eyes wide. Since the man’s shoulders were no longer visible, Jim did what Mick had asked and aimed at the man’s chin, loosing off a round.

Lifting up, Jim could see the man drop from view, reappearing with more blood than Jim had ever wished to see. Jim ran across to the car, the rag and bottle dropped. Opening the driver’s door, Jim could see a pistol on the man’s lap, the man now holding his face together with his left hand.

Pulling the man by the collar, Jim dumped him unceremoniously onto the road, the pistol clattering. He picked it up, urgently checking the road both ways. The car was clear of useful documents, the scanner lying on the passenger seat, the boot offering nothing more than a spare tyre and the smell of oil and rags. Jim grabbed the man’s wallet and ran off into the bushes.

Below the cottage, Mick joined Roger, a bloodied mess on the ground, a man rolling around, Roger covered in pinecones and leaves. ‘Walked right over me,’ Roger said.

‘It’s easy to beat a pro if they have an objective to meet. It forces them to move, and allows us to wait. Got his ID?’

‘Yep, and a name: Kessler.’

‘Good. C’mon.’

Roger stamped down on the man’s neck before moving off. At the cottage they collected Kate, who had heard just a slight popping sound, before reclaiming the vehicles.

Mick handed the local man the old rifles and pistols, wiping them clear of prints. Plus another five hundred Euros. ‘Take these guns away and hide them, then call the police, say you were here visiting the cottage, made a fire ... and you heard shooting, finding wounded men. OK?’

‘Yes, yes.’ The local man headed off in his beaten up old car.

‘Back to base,’ Mick told the others, smiling confidently.

2

Back at Kate’s villa, the dutiful hostess made everyone a brunch, enjoyed on the patio, 9mm pistols tucked away.

‘What’s next?’ Jim sullenly asked, still in deep shock over what he had done.

‘I doubt they have more than one team here,’ Mick commented as he ate. ‘And London will cover us as we leave. Then ... then we go for the paymaster, if – Jim – you wish to. If not, I have an extra twenty thousand pounds that London gave me. It’s yours to take and go.’

‘And sit in my bar, waiting for a stranger to walk in and smile before pulling out a gun?’

Mick took in the pleasant sea view. ‘Well, there’s a chance of that. But I doubt they know who you are, or care. And, when I land in Germany, they’ll be otherwise distracted.’

Colette rang. ‘Mick, can you talk?’

‘Yes, just sat hiding out. What news?’

‘The authorities there picked up two men with fake Interpol IDs, they have them in custody, and three men were just found shot and wounded.’

‘Crikey! All going on around us. Can we get an escort at the airport?’

‘We have people ready, and the local authorities know about it,’ Colette reported. ‘So whenever you’re ready, get to the airport.’

‘Thanks, boss, sorry to put you through so much trouble.’

‘Still mayhem here, your name mentioned a lot. They found a third body on that boat, killed with a high velocity Teflon round to the head. They say he’s a Russian gangster, so everyone is in a flap.’

‘Russian? Well, that’s not good, not close to Doyle.’

‘I couldn’t believe you blew the damn boat up.’

‘I wanted to hide the fact that he was one of ours, I figured ... you know, less evidence, less press attention.’

‘Doyle’s been positively identified as ... someone else - you know,’ Colette reported.

‘Yes, well ... maybe a bit of closure on that. Any idea what Doyle was working on?’

‘Rumour has it he infiltrated a Russian gang, fella named Brabos.’

‘Think I might have heard of him.’

‘Oh, those chemicals –’

‘Forget it, dead end.’

‘Oh, OK.’

‘We’ll fly out later if we can get tickets, I’ll call you when I need the number of our people. Talk soon.’

‘Well?’ Jim asked after the call.

Mick made a face. ‘We’re ahead in the game. They nabbed two goons, and found the three wounded men. And we have people at the airport. Jim, you and me – we’ll fly to London and face the music. Roger – pretend you don’t exist and try and get a ticket.’

‘Leaving so soon,’ Kate floated.

‘Can I come back visit?’ Mick asked.

‘Yes,’ she said after a moment. ‘If I’m ... here.’

‘Give me your email address as well. And ... could you try and move that speedboat, please.’

‘My parents are due down next week; it’ll shock them.’

Mick readied his suitcase, Kate calling the airport to try and find spare seats. Hearing them discussing flights to London, Mick sat on Kate’s bed and called the Director.

‘Right, boss?’

‘You’re on your way back, I hear.’

‘Flying into London. Listen, given that I may have ... stretched a few laws, rules and procedures here and there, a Q&A might not be a good idea. I’m a freelancer, so maybe you should just put me and Jim straight on a flight to Malta.’

‘I wouldn’t have allowed anyone to question you anyway, but a good job that you reminded me. The CIA are not happy, accusations of damage to staff and property by you *and or* unknown others?’

‘I’ve ... no idea what you mean, sir. And have they told you what they think is going on?’ Mick nudged.

‘They’ll intercept a ship, certain that the fissile material is bound for Ukrainian gangs that’ll use it to irradiate the Russian fleet at Sebastopol. Even talk of letting the SVR know.’

‘And their reasons for not sharing that earlier?’

‘They wanted to be ... sure. The evidence was ... sketchy.’

‘And did you have a spoonful of sugar with that story?’

‘They thought that they were on top of the plot, and in charge, but had the rug pulled out from under them when they saw you and Jim take Sayeed to the bank. They were ... most put out, and suddenly very forthcoming about sharing intel, since it looked like we had infiltrated the gang at the highest levels.’

‘I have a new lead or two, boss. Will you OK me to follow them up?’

‘Sayeed is gone, Doyle is dead ... and the CIA will intercept the ship. So why don’t you tell me what it is you think you know.’

‘I have a lead on the paymaster for all the goons and shooters. I’d like to see what makes him tick.’

‘I can see some merit in that.’

‘Thanks, boss, I’ll liase with Colette as normal.’

‘Canuck. We’ve followed your movements from country to country, and at certain hotels, but have no record of you on any flight, no credit card payments. Would you ... like to explain that?’

‘I know a good forger in Amsterdam, boss. Nice woman, huge tits, does really good work. I busted her once when I was with Interpol.’

‘I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that. Good day.’

Stepping out to the garden, Mick called Constantine.

‘Mikhail, what have you found out?’ Constantine asked.

‘I have some names. Got a pen?’

‘Yes.’

‘Kessler is the man who hires the gunmen, and Muller is just a go-between, a money handler. The sniper who got Yuri is called Ranhaus; he’s not amongst three men who we shot today, here in Rhodes. Do me a favour: don’t use the computer to search for these men - it’ll tip them off. Spend some money around Prague and Munich, try and find Kessler and Muller. There’s a link to Brabos, so Prague will be a better bet than Munich. And I think I have a lead on the main man.’

‘Not ... Brabos?’

‘No, I think he is just muscle. Anyway, I need to investigate. Did your people get out of Marmaris?’

‘Yes.’

‘And that hotel?’

‘Caught fire before my people left, but the other men had gone. It was empty.’

‘I’ll be out of reach for a day or so, then I’ll call you from Germany.’

Back inside, everyone was just about packed. Mick called, ‘Guys, anything on you that you shouldn’t have on you? Double check now, just in case. Roger, ask Kate nicely if she’ll take you to the airport and see you off, pretend you’re her father.’

‘Cheeky bugger,’ Roger said.

‘Jim, use your own ID at the airport; for today, you ... are you. Give me your fake IDs to carry.’

Kate announced, ‘There are seats on a BA flight for Heathrow at 3pm; I reserved them in the name Canuck. Roger, I didn’t reserve a flight, but there are London seats available on a few flights.’

‘Thanks, love,’ Mick offered her, a kiss on her forehead. ‘Roger, be an unsociable git on the flight and ignore us. So, we all ready?’ They were, Mick checking his watch. ‘Then I suggest a cold beer ... and a walk down to the beach.’

Stood on the sand, the four of them stared at the sunken and burnt-out speedboat in the shallows, its silver windscreen frame sticking out above the gentle waves.

‘Do you think they have insurance?’ Jim idly asked.

‘Doubt it,’ Mick commented. ‘You know, I’m sure there was some chocolate I left on the boat.’

‘Might have melted in the heat,’ Roger noted. ‘Nasty stain on the upholstery then.’

‘And the sea water will leave a salty stain on the seats,’ Kate put in.

Jim said, ‘Right now, there’s probably a ruddy great search and rescue underway over there ... for some daft tourist lost at sea.’

‘When they check the details I gave them, they’ll find that I – the daft tourist hiring the boat - don’t exist,’ Mick informed the group.

They swigged their beers, stood in a line, the beautiful small beach a surreal backdrop to the actions of the morning.

‘Lovely here,’ Jim noted.

‘Do you sunbath nude?’ Mick asked Kate.

‘Yes, it shocks the neighbours when they’re in,’ she replied.

When the BA flight to London lifted its nose, Jim blew out.
'Bloody hell, Mick.'

'Have a beer and close your eyes. You'll wake-up to find it's
all been a dream.'

Arrivals and departures

1

Stepping off the plane at Heathrow, Nolan was waiting, a crooked smile and a shaking head offered to Mick. He opened a side door and waved them through.

In the quiet corridor, he asked, ‘Does your luggage have your names on?’

‘Nope,’ Mick answered.

‘Come on then, we’ll intercept it as it’s unloaded.’

‘So, how’s dreary old London?’ Mick asked as they walked.

‘Don’t know what you did, Mick, but we’re just about deporting you to Malta. They even paid the tickets, so it must be bad.’

‘I over-claimed my expenses by three pounds twenty,’ Mick quipped.

Luggage collected, Mick and Jim were entertained by Nolan and his colleagues in the staff lounge, teas made, biscuits offered, old stories dug up. An hour later, slipping into departures by a side door, Mick and Jim boarded a flight to Malta, the last flight of the day, the plane offering familiar colours – and nice lady pilots.

* * *

At 10pm, sat in Jim’s bar and with beers in hand, a knock came at the door. Jim checked through a window before letting Roger inside, Roger trailing a case.

‘Street clear?’ Mick asked Roger.

‘Looks OK, I did a good review. Get me a frigging beer, huh.’

With the three of them sat at a table, Jim asked, ‘So what’s next?’

Mick took a moment. ‘Well, we could wait to see who comes down to Malta looking for us, taking them on familiar

ground. Or ... or we go to Munich and try and get the paymaster and his boss.'

'And by *get him* ... what exactly do you mean?' Jim pressed.

'Jim, those guys this morning – they came to kill us,' Mick said whilst staring into his beer. Lifting his gaze, he said, 'I'm sorry for getting you into this, it's ... escalated beyond what anyone could have predicted.'

Jim now stared into his own beer. 'When I shot that guy in face ... well, it took all of my strength not to puke over the poor fella.'

'Think about what he wanted to do to you,' Roger put in. 'He wanted to shoot you ... and leave you in the woods for the maggots.'

'If I can find the main man, then all I need to do is let Constantine know where to find the guy,' Mick explained. 'He'll deal with him. And, without the main man paying people to come our way ... we're in the clear. Gunmen don't hold grudges; they do what they're paid to do. And those three guys this morning? They'll be in prison for twelve years at least.'

'And the CIA?' Jim asked.

'They've had a long chat with London and they won't be coming for us,' Mick explained. 'Besides, apart from the honey trap and the photographer – they've not been aggressive, and they probably won't. When they clocked us giving Sayeed a lift they figured that London had blown the case wide open and confessed their operation.'

'Still can't believe we did that,' Jim said, shaking his head.

'You looked good in your grey waistcoat,' Mick quipped. 'Besides, the CIA now probably think you're a top agent. If you need a little work...'

'Hah!'

Roger said, 'I haven't seen any faults or screw-ups coming from you, Jim. You did as well as I did, and this isn't easy work.'

Jim regarded Roger for a moment. ‘Mick promised me if I drank and woke up, it would all be a dream. When I woke up on the flight, all I found was his ugly mug.’

‘You can stay here and cover our rear,’ Mick offered. ‘You’ll still get paid.’

‘Waiting for someone to come through that door with a warm smile and a 9mm down his pants?’ Jim scoffed. ‘I could never serve another person in here without wondering about them.’

‘Hell, Jim, you said you wanted to sell up and move anyway,’ Mick began. ‘So put this on the market tomorrow, rent a small place for cash, and come with us; there may be a bonus. And if I zero in on the main man, Constantine should slip us a large wedge of money.’

‘How large?’ Roger asked.

‘Couple of hundred grand,’ Mick said with a shrug.

‘That’s more than this place is worth,’ Jim noted, staring into his beer. He took a sip. ‘I’m in. I should have my head examined, but I’m in.’

‘Right,’ Mick loudly began. ‘We’ll get ourselves on the day trip to Sicily in the morning on fake IDs, then drop off the grid, a long drive up to Germany. Get some sleep, leave the cases – just take a backpack with essentials, the rest we buy as we go. And mobiles off.’

‘Haven’t switched them back on,’ Jim said, Roger nodding.

2

The trio enjoyed a pleasant day and a cool breeze as the tour boat made its way across to Sicily, Mick recounting the tale of the speedboat, but from his perspective. Docked in Sicily, and not bothering to listen to the tour guide giving the times that they had to be back on the boat, they set off with their backpacks, catching a bus northeast up the coast road and to the ferry port at Messina, joining another ferry for the short trip across to mainland Italy and Reggio di Calabria.

Arriving just after 4pm, they hired a BMW 5 Series for 'local use', Mick taking first turn at driving.

'Are we sitting comfortably?' Mick asked as they set-off north. 'Then I'll begin. Your tour guide today is Michael, a sketchy record when it comes to damaging cars – but not as bad as Jim's record. We'll be travelling up the E45 – which becomes the E35 before turning back into the E45 - and ultimately back into the E35 till we reach the Swiss border north of Milano. Use the toilet now, please, because it's about ... oh ... six hundred miles to the border, give or take a traffic jam east of Rome.'

'I'll kip now,' Roger offered. 'Take over when it's dark, I don't mind night driving.'

'Best to have two awake and one asleep,' Jim suggested.

'Have the Swiss abolished their border checks yet?' Roger asked.

'I think so,' Mick answered. 'But you still have to just flash your passports if you're from the EU.'

The first few hours of the long trek were OK, the car comfortable, but bums were soon complaining. When it was his turn to take a break, Mick lay back as best he could, watching the yellow motorway lights flash past. Quiet motorway service stations were visited every two hours, coffees downed, doughnuts or bagels munched on, legs stretched, bums allowed some circulation again.

* * *

At 1am, the Swiss border controls loomed large, ugly concrete structures built into the sides of mountains becoming distinct through rain-speckled windows. With passports shown briefly, the BMW moved north, Roger now at the wheel, Jim beside him, Mick's turn to get some sleep. At 7am they stopped for breakfast at a roadside diner south of Munich.

Pointing with his fork, Mick said, 'That hotel there will do for today. Never more than one night in any place around here,

and rotate the IDs. Get a shower, couple of hours kip. And eat well, just in case we have to go all night.'

'And the game plan?' Jim asked, buttering his toast.

Mick took a moment, and chewed his sausage. 'I think I know what's going on, but I need to join the dots. And the best way to do that will be to get a key player and ... *persuade* him to talk. This Kessler may know something, but I have a lead on someone else, someone who's a soft target. We'll go have a look at where he lives later, place near Ravensburg.'

'And this ... individual?' Jim pressed.

'Is ... a senior figure in the World Health Organisation.'

Jim and Roger exchanged worried looks. And waited.

Mick explained, 'Organised crime.'

They waited.

'He's one of a few men, all scientists and doctors, who recommend to the World Health Organisation when a pandemic is a pandemic, and which drugs are suitable and would work best. They recommend drugs from certain pharmaceutical companies, and then tell the WHO that an outbreak is imminent, and ... the drug companies make a shit load of money.'

'Back in Sayeed's hotel room in Icmeler I found a document, a wish list of chemicals to be bought and shipped to Africa and Iraq. There's no known use for them all together, there's no reason for this man to want to buy tonnes and tonnes of the fucking stuff, and if you drop this shit in the local water then the WHO coordinates the treatment, and the main man recommends drugs and companies to supply them.'

'And ... why buy the chemicals in secret, and from Sayeed of all people? Why, because it's all illegal as fuck. Someone drops this shit into the local river, people fall ill, doctors treat them with drugs from certain companies, the WHO is at the centre of it all. The drug companies make money, and the middle man at the WHO earns his cut.'

'What's that got to do with fissile material?' Jim puzzled.

‘I don’t think there is any,’ Mick commented as he cut up his breakfast. ‘Sayeed’s whole show was just that, a show to give the intelligence agencies a bit of a distraction. Sayeed got this document *after* Zurich, and after he had been paid by the Ukrainian gangster - who’ll have a long wait for his Uranium.’

‘It was a ... ruse?’ Jim queried.

‘A ruse worthy of the imagination of Doyle,’ Mick floated. ‘Our good friend, Mister Doyle, was sent to infiltrate a Russian gang, but ended up working for a Russian gangster named Brabos, who’s linked to the people behind the chemicals. As soon as the name of Sayeed - plus the idea of fissile material and the notion of Ukrainian gangs reached the ears of the CIA - they saw only what they were supposed to see, and ignored all the small detail. All the CIA wanted was to board that ship ... and to look good with their high profile case.’

‘This whole thing ... was just a giant distraction?’ Jim asked.

‘No so giant. I guess it was supposed to be a quiet operation, Sayeed acting suspiciously, the goons around him attracting attention and making it all look plausible, but –’

‘You fucked up their nice quiet operation,’ Jim noted. ‘They expected a passive monitoring of Sayeed, standard operating procedure. Instead, you beat the crap out of people and took their wallets!’

‘And that annoyed someone, and escalated it into this,’ Mick explained. ‘It all got out of control. And with Doyle advising these people on standard operating procedures, I’m guessing that they think I’m working for someone other than London.’

‘Are you?’ Jim firmly asked.

‘I’m working for Colette when he needs me, and trying to make a buck when I see an opportunity,’ Mick said, trying to placate Jim. ‘Nothing more complicated than that.’

‘The CIA were watching Sayeed all along?’ Roger asked.

Mick nodded. ‘And quietly. They knew about Zurich, that was their main interest, but the main event was Doyle in Turkey, striking a deal.’

‘So who killed him?’ Roger asked.

‘Don’t know,’ Mick admitted. ‘It’s unlikely to be an agency hit, so I think that maybe his own people lost trust in him. After Jim and me drove Sayeed around Zurich, it must have looked like London was playing a double bluff. And Doyle, he worked for Tiller. Tiller was being watched by the CIA, who must have known Doyle was dirty, or suspected it at least. I don’t really think Tiller knew, but he got the blame either way.’

‘When I saw the CIA watching Tiller I figured something was up, and seeing Doyle’s face in Marmaris joined a few of the dots for me. What should have happened ... was simply Sayeed gently strolling around Europe, receiving the money in Zurich under the watch of the CIA, and then fucking off home. Turkey was the puzzler that kept me awake: why hang around if you just made a few million quid?’

‘And after all the hassle!’ Jim noted. ‘He was crazy to remain in Europe.’

‘He had to, for his final meeting, the important one,’ Mick suggested.

‘What do you think was Doyle’s role?’ Roger asked.

‘To advise on the operating procedures of the agencies, to recognise faces, and to plan a big ruse that would be believed. When the CIA eventually raid that boat they’ll look like idiots, and no one will bother to track Sayeed afterwards. Cry wolf once, but not twice. But I don’t know why Doyle was sent to the final meeting; he risked being recognised. Something there doesn’t add up.’

‘The goons in Malta?’ Jim asked.

‘I think they were sent to try and make it look like other agencies were interested in Sayeed. Some joke of Doyle’s, no doubt.’

‘The joke backfired when you took down all of his people, using anything other than standard procedures,’ Jim realised.

‘They must have figured that a non-agency team would screw with Sayeed,’ Mick added. ‘And they wanted Sayeed to walk the prescribed path to Zurich and be seen.’

‘They drew a lot of attention to Sayeed,’ Roger puzzled.

‘No, I did that,’ Mick admitted. ‘But, it served their purpose. London and Washington saw Uranium, I saw anything but that. Only I saw the chemicals list. And this ruse allowed Sayeed to get paid, because the CIA were interested in the Uranium shipment, so had to allow the payment to go ahead. Besides, if the CIA knew that Sebastopol would get irradiated – would they stop it?’

‘No,’ Roger said. ‘They’d fuck over the Black Sea fleet.’

‘A very tempting smelly fish,’ Jim realised, grinning. ‘First the CIA thinks it’s fissile material, then they see an opportunity to drive a wedge between the Ukraine and Russia and screw with the Black Sea fleet. No wonder they let the payment go ahead.’

‘Doyle did his homework,’ Mick commended. ‘And he played them well.’

‘But not you,’ Jim posed.

‘The agencies were looking from the top down. I looked at the foot soldiers and saw that they were not agency, but emotional beings,’ Mick explained. ‘I could see that Sayeed was being led along the garden path; a big smelly fish.’

‘And how much of this does London know?’ Jim asked.

‘Enough not to trust what they see presented to them,’ Mick answered. ‘But nothing about the chemicals yet. Those chemicals are way outside the remit of SIS, and a ... police matter, if that. Even if London was interested they couldn’t do anything. They’d hand off to Interpol, who must have been infiltrated by this gang.’

‘And the reason we’re here?’ Jim pressed.

‘One, to stop them, and two – to make a buck,’ Mick explained. ‘Simple.’

‘Mick, if you’re that interested in making money, then maybe the gang itself would make you a deal,’ Jim angrily posed.

‘I’m not like that, Jim, and you know it. Money from the wallet of a goon is one thing, but being a hired hand for an organised crime gang? No. There’ve been many opportunities

for me, but I get by on what Colette pays me, and the divorce work. It keeps my soul just two steps away from hell, not one.'

'I can vouch for that,' Roger put in. 'He does get kittens out of trees. He removes their wallets afterwards...'

'Jim, if those chemicals make it where they're going ... then they'll poison thousands of people, just so that the gang can make a buck treating them afterwards. That ... is a big part of my motivation for being here. The second part is the gang wanting us dead and sending those men for us in Rhodes. That's not allowed, so I aim to have a word with them. And finally, we may see an opportunity to make a buck to keep Roger happy.'

'Damn right,' Roger said.

Jim blew out. 'I spent my whole life pounding the pavements and teaching others, not a shot fired in anger. And yesterday I shot a guy in the face. Sixty one, retired, and I'm doing this.'

'When you could be serving pensioners in your bar, dreaming of glory days gone by,' Mick quipped.

* * *

Outside of Ravensburg they eased to a halt at the edge of a village, Mick studying a map. Looking up, he said, 'Right, over that hill, through those trees, is the home of a certain Dr. H.E. Becker. I'm going to have a peek. It's coming up to five o'clock, so maybe the good doctor will get home in the next few hours. Drive off, don't stop local, and be back here in exactly three hours unless I text Roger's phone.' He stepped out, binoculars under his coat, turning up his collars against a light rain.

The BMW pulled away, Mick following a little-used path to the woods, soon in a darkened copse and studying dark shadows, stopping to listen intently. Descending along a little-used path, stopping every ten yards to listen as he progressed, Mick took a full half an hour to spot the house in question.

It sat isolated on a well-maintained gentle grass slope, several acres of grass, and was set back ten yards from the road. The house looked pre-war, 1930s, and probably ten bedrooms, a grey slate roof with attic windows. Mick lifted his binoculars and studied the house, in particular its doors and windows, those that he could see.

An hour later, night coming on and darkening the wood further, a car pulled in. A fit looking man jumped out of the driver's door, opening the rear door for a man in his late fifties with greying hair and now wearing a sombre suit. The passenger, presumed to be Dr Becker, advanced on the house as the driver grabbed a briefcase and a bag.

'Driver/bodyguard, huh?' Mick muttered to himself.

A second man, also fit looking, walked out to the car, opened the boot and brought in a suitcase.

'Two bodyguards.'

The second man, now lugging the suitcase, checked the area before entering the house.

'Two *switched-on* bodyguards.'

Mick turned about and clambered up the muddy track through the dark, sending a text as he reached the top, as he stood waiting behind a hedge near the road. The BMW pulled up half an hour later, Mick jumping in. It sped off.

'Our boy has two goons with him,' Mick reported. 'He's not just a medic at the WHO.'

'And the house?' Roger asked.

'Easy enough. No dogs that I could see, no kennels or dog toys around the garden. Thought I saw a housekeeper in the kitchen.'

'And this guy's position in the grand scheme of things?' Jim asked.

'Paid to fiddle technical reports for the WHO,' Mick commented.

Back at the roadside hotel, Mick called Constantine. 'It's Mikhail. Could you get four men and some weapons to Munich tonight?'

‘They can drive from Prague. Three hours maybe.’

‘I found the house of one of the men involved. I don’t know what role he plays, so I’ll have to have a word. He may lead us to the others.’

‘I have a lead on a Kessler. You were right, he works out of Prague, and is known to be friends with a certain Ranhaus.’

‘Don’t move on them yet, find out everything you can, and when we move we’ll try and do it together.’

‘I don’t have an address yet anyway. This man you will talk to, will he know where Brabos is?’

‘Let’s hope so,’ Mick said. ‘If not, he’ll lead us to others who will.’

‘I have heard about these three men in Rhodes; they were mutilated badly. You did this?’

‘I needed answers,’ Mick flatly stated.

‘I will dispatch the men now. Where will you meet?’

Mick gave the details of the roadside hotel. ‘Get them to call me when they arrive, have them book in if there are rooms free.’

At 11pm, Mick received a call, the Russians booked in and on the next floor up. At their room he knocked, shown in, four men in black leather jackets occupying a double room.

‘I hope you’re not all planning on sharing that bed,’ Mick told them. ‘Got a weapon for me?’

The first man handed over a pistol, checked by Mick.

‘They’ll be wary tonight, but not in the morning. Tomorrow is Saturday, so maybe the housemaid goes out shopping. We’ll leave here around 6am, getting there before 7am, and then we wait. And gentlemen, call your boss if you have any doubts, but I say what we do, how we do it, and when we do it. Clear?’

They nodded.

‘Get five large pop bottles, and in the morning tear up a blanket, make squares around three feet each by six foot.’

‘Home made silencers,’ a man commented.

‘I have plastic gloves you can use,’ Mick informed them.
‘Get plenty of food, get to sleep, and be ready for 6am.’

Trademark execution

1

At 6am, Jim and Roger set off through the grey dawn half-light to check the area of the house, a 'drive-past' under a leaden grey sky. The Russians had brought two cars, both black Mercedes, so Mick joined them in one as they set off.

Pulling up near the wood, Mick scanned the area from the lead car. Jim called a minute later. 'How we doing, Jim?'

'All clear. His car is there, no movement.'

'Wait in the village, don't be seen.' Mick lowered his phone. In Russian, he said, 'Two come with me, two stay with the cars. Drive up the road a few miles and wait, but don't stop where anyone will notice you. Find a café or petrol station, something where there are tourists and cars. We may be all day.'

Placing on a cap to cover his face, a fake goatee beard to disguise his features, Mick opened the car door and stepped out, scanning the immediate area, a light drizzle on his face, the sky dark and angry this morning. With the two cars pulling off, Mick and the two Russians carried their pop bottles and blankets through the field, soon swallowed by the dark wood, its inside as dark as night.

They stopped to listen for five minutes, a dog bark registering on the breeze, then penetrated deeper into the wood, the same course that Mick had taken the day before. Descending, and glimpsing the house through the mist and rain, they found a log behind a bush and halted, all eyes focused on the house.

'Can we smoke?' a man asked.

'Yes, they won't see it.'

The men lit up, Mick accepting a cigarette, but just balancing it on his lip.

At 8.30am, the three of them now cold and damp, the housekeeper stepped out. Mick jumped up, placing on surgical gloves before taking out his pistol. Lifting his pop bottle, he

threw his blanket over the bottle and wrapped it around once, holding the pop bottle with his left hand. The Russians copied, the three of them soon advancing down the muddy path as if levelling rifles. As they observed the house from behind trees the housekeeper was joined by the driver, a car soon started and reversed out.

‘That leaves one guard and the doctor inside, so don’t shoot the fucking doctor,’ Mick said as they advanced to the edge of the wood. He halted behind a tree.

The car driver negotiated the manual gate before pulling away down the access road. As it passed the first bend, Mick walked briskly forwards, onto the exposed grass and forwards at a fast pace.

Reaching the house at a corner, he walked to the left, levelling his pop bottle at the windows. At the front of the house he snapped his head around the corner and back, advancing when he saw that it was clear. The door appeared solid. He turned about, walking around the Russians as they stooped low, and to the rear.

Passing the kitchen, he peered in quickly, beyond it noticing patio doors. Advancing on the doors he could see shoes inside, legs stretched out, someone watching the TV. Turning his head, he whispered, ‘When I move, you move, but careful who you shoot. If I get this one, don’t shoot at all - unless absolutely necessary.’

Facing the patio doors, Mick could see an ornament at his feet. He kicked it over. The man’s feet disappeared, soon an image at the door. Mick jumped out so that he was square to the man, three shots fired in quick succession. The glass shattered, the man crumpled - knocked backwards. Mick jumped inside.

Muddy shoes stained a nice magnolia carpet as Mick ran thought the lounge. It was clear, no one else visible. Turning into the hall, he advanced along a dark flooring of wooden blocks, an open door on his right. Bursting in, a startled man in a suit stared back, his mouth hanging open in abject horror and surprise.

Mick lowered his odd arrangement of pop bottle and blanket and fired at the man's knee. A scream preceded the man bouncing off his desk and hitting the nice wooden flooring, his chair knocked backwards. The Russians ran in.

'Search the house. Quickly!' Mick said in Russian.

'I have money,' came from Dr Becker in English.

Mick discarded his pop bottle and blanket, putting his pistol in his pocket. Grabbing Becker by the shoulders, he lifted him up and threw him across his own desk. 'First, where is Brabos?'

'What?' Becker puzzled.

Mick lifted a golden letter opener and stabbed down into Becker's good knee. 'Where is Brabos, the Russian?'

'Spain,' Becker cried. 'Costa del Sol.'

'Is there Uranium on that boat?'

Becker tried hard to recognise the face of his tormentor.

Mick stabbed the good knee again. 'Uranium?'

'Yes,' Becker cried.

'There is?' Mick puzzled.

'Yes. I have money. Here.'

'Who do you work for?' Mick asked. A pause in answering caused a stab through the hand. 'Who?'

'The committee,' Becker cried.

'Organised crime?'

'Yah.'

'And what is Brabos' role? Muscle, guns, what?'

The Russians burst in. 'The house is clear.'

'One of you watch that window and the road, the other search this room for money.' Mick focused again on Becker.

'What does Brabos do for you?'

'Gunmen, mercenaries.'

'Mercenaries?' Mick repeated with a frown.

'Yah.'

'Where do you send mercenaries?'

'Baghdad.'

'Russian mercenaries in Baghdad, protecting ... Russian diplomats?'

‘Yah, and others.’

‘The chemicals, they are to make people sick.’

‘Yah. I have money!’ Becker screamed.

‘Where’s the money?’ Mick asked.

‘Here, drawer.’

Mick pointed a Russian towards the drawer. Pulled out, the deep drawer offered up a holdall full of Euros. ‘Take it when we go.’ Mick stabbed into Becker’s other hand, eliciting a shrill scream. ‘Who is your boss?’

‘What?’

‘Who do you work for?’ Mick roared.

‘I am ... chairman ... committee.’

‘You ... you’re the boss?’

‘Yah. Take the money, go, I say nothing.’

‘You should have lied, my friend.’ Mick turned Becker over, reached around and undid his trousers, pulling them down. To the Russian with the money, he said, ‘Kitchen roll. Quick.’

When the kitchen roll appeared, Mick grabbed several sheets and scrunched them up. Taking out his pistol, whilst being curiously observed by the Russians – as well as a wide-eyed Becker looking over his shoulder, Mick shoved the end of the barrel into Becker’s anus and fired three times, quickly ramming in the kitchen roll to block any blood escaping.

Lifting Becker’s trousers, he turned the now silent doctor over and did up his zip and belt, lifting Becker into his chair.

‘That will take the police and coroner a while to figure out,’ Mick commented as the Russians stared at him. ‘C’mon. Out!’

Retracing their steps, they ran past the dead guard, crunching through the broken glass, back into the light rain and onto the neatly mown grass, running up the slippery wet grass to the woods, all three of them still holding their pop bottles and blankets, one lugging the heavy holdall.

The pop bottles were discarded at various points in the woods, the blankets thrown away separately as per Mick’s instructions. Pistols were wiped down before being dropped into muddy hollows, stamped in, covered in dirt and leaves.

When Mick text'd Roger, all they had left was the holdall. Mick opened it and estimated the contents.

'Two hundred thousand Euros,' he informed the Russians, lying. 'Call your boss, he owes me a payment, so ask him about it.' Mick straightened and waited, the Russians glancing at each other.

They called Constantine as they waited, their boss agreeing the money since it never cost him anything, and now he knew where Brabos was. The holdall was handed over.

'Not a bad morning's work,' Mick commented. He handed each Russian a wad.

Jim and Roger pulled up ten minutes later, the Russian cars not far behind. Mick shook hands with the Russians and told them to drive directly back. Inspecting his muddy shoes, he jumped into the back seat, Jim pulling off.

'Well?' Roger asked from up front.

'Got a lead on Brabos, he's on the Coast del Sol, so maybe near that villa Tishkent. But, according to that guy Becker, the Uranium *is* on the ship.'

'There is Uranium?' Jim queried. 'We need to let London know!'

'The entire US Navy is going to intercept that ship,' Mick pointed out. 'So let them.'

'And the bag?' Roger nudged, turning to look at the chunky hold all.

'Oh, about six hundred thousand Euros in large notes.'

'Yeah, baby!' Roger let out.

'Do you have everything from that hotel?' Mick asked. They confirmed they did. 'Head for Switzerland then.'

* * *

When Mick's phone went, it was Colette. 'Right, boss?'

'Where are you?'

'Prague,' Mick lied. 'Just got a lead on who Doyle was working for, Russian called Brabos – the fella you mentioned,

who's on the Coast del Sol as we speak. If we're still on the clock we could head there. Why don't you ask the Director, because we need to see what Doyle might have told this Russian fella.'

'You can take it on my authority; go there and see what you can find out.'

'Thank you, boss.' He hung up. 'I forgot to ask Becker about Doyle. Very unprofessional.'

'Fuck Doyle,' Roger said as they joined a highway. 'We got the bounty.'

'OK, guys, I'm going to show you *exactly* how to open a Swiss bank account, and which banks to go to, because we don't want that money with us too long. But you'll have a debit card that you can draw money from around Europe, five hundred Euros a day limit.'

'Now I'm a proper criminal,' Jim noted. 'What happened back there, at the house?'

'You don't want to know,' Mick told him, getting a look off Jim. 'Those two Russian lads, well ... they got nasty with the questioning. Besides, they'd get the blame, not us, and you were just the getaway driver, Jim.'

'Oh, I feel so much better.'

Roger faced him. 'Feel two hundred grand better!'

Jim blew out. 'That is a lot of money. It'll keep me going for a while.'

'How many drinks would you need to sell at your bar to make that?' Mick asked from the back.

'About ... three hundred thousand, which would take little more than the next thirty years.'

'Sell the damn bar and take a world cruise,' Roger loudly encouraged Jim.

'What'll you do with yours, Mick,' Jim asked, glancing at Mick in the rear view mirror.

'Oh, the usual; drink and prostitutes.'

Marbella

1

Mick stepped out of a shop and placed on his sunglasses. Stepping across to a beachfront café, he joined Jim and Roger. He opened the cigarettes he bought, balancing one on his lip.

‘Mick, you spend as much money as real smokers,’ Jim pointed out.

Mick nodded absently. ‘We’re missing something.’

‘What we missing?’ Roger asked.

‘Becker said the Uranium was on the ship, but they must know that we had a look at Sayeed’s documents, and they definitely know that the CIA are all over it. So why would the Uranium be dispatched – just to be intercepted?’

‘Maybe they’ll do a swap at sea, at night,’ Jim suggested.

Mick wagged a finger. ‘That’s my thinking. But, as far as I know, the CIA have informed the SVR, so no Uranium will be landed in the Ukraine, or get anywhere near Sebastopol.’

‘Someplace else?’ Jim posed.

‘CIA would be all over the European ports,’ Mick said. ‘And Dr Becker and friends are not about to irradiate Europe. And I keep thinking about Doyle, and what he was up to.’

‘Like you said, giving them a blow by blow account of how we operate,’ Jim suggested.

‘But was that all? And who killed him?’ Mick floated.

‘*They* must have,’ Roger put in.

‘But why?’ Jim asked.

Mick raised a finger. ‘That morning, I went up to the castle above Doyle’s boat, spotted what I thought was a CIA guy, and ... well, pushed him over the edge.’

‘You pushed him ... off that castle?’ Jim asked in a whisper.

Mick nodded. ‘So, maybe they thought I clocked Doyle – which I had at that time.’

‘He became a liability the minute you knew about him,’ Jim stated.

‘That makes sense,’ Mick agreed. ‘But why was their valuable inside man doing hand-offs in Turkey? Why a face to face meet?’

‘You meet someone face to face if you plan on doing lots of deals,’ Roger put in.

‘Fair enough,’ Mick agreed. ‘So why would Doyle of all people be doing lots of deals with Sayeed? I’m thinking that Doyle may have been there to meet someone else.’

‘Doyle once told me that he fancied retiring to Oman,’ Jim mentioned.

Mick took a moment. ‘And if he did live in Oman, he could attend a great many face to face meets with Sayeed and his brother from there, for this group.’

‘But Doyle is dead now,’ Jim reminded Mick. ‘They’ll have to get someone else.’

Mick sipped the last of his beer. ‘According to Becker, the Uranium is going somewhere, and that certainly isn’t towards Europe or Russia. And I still don’t believe that either Iran or Pakistan would lose some. OK, we fit?’

‘Ready,’ Roger announced. They stood. ‘Constantine’s men down?’

‘Eight of them; big, ugly and armed,’ Mick commented as he downed the last of his drink. He led them off, joining Estepona’s quayside. ‘And this time, Jim, keep your hands off Flo.’

Completing two legs of the square quayside, they were welcomed aboard a hundred foot yacht by a strangely dressed man in a blue and white nautical outfit. Inside, they found Flora dressed in a pink tracksuit that matched her hair, her small dog barking a greeting.

‘Right, love?’ Mick said by way of greeting, slouching down on a white leather chair. He took in the yacht. ‘Very nice.’

Roger and Jim said hello.

‘It’s ten grand a week *very nice*,’ Flora reported. ‘All the crew in their little funny uniforms come with it.’

‘This is how the other half live,’ Jim said as he took in the tacky décor.

One of the crew, in a funny uniform, took orders for tea and coffee.

‘What you got for us, Flo?’ Mick asked when the crewman had withdrawn.

‘There’s quite a few of those Russians around here throwing the money around. Since you called I’ve been flat out at the casino.’

‘You’re suffering for the cause, Flo,’ Mick dryly stated. ‘Suffering.’

‘Aye, well, I think I found your particular one. Shifty little bugger; five ten, stocky, scar, black hair.’

‘That could be him,’ Mick agreed.

‘He throws the money around, but I watched him; he don’t like losing it. I asked about him, and he uses a Rolls Royce, but I saw the plate. It’s a hire job, like this boat, and it comes with a driver. I know the owner - he’s nice enough, and he says that they pick him up in the hills, up by the golf course.’

‘Marbella Golf, Benahavis?’ Mick queried.

‘Aye, up there and on a few miles. Picked up by Rolls Royce each Friday at 6pm, like tonight.’

Mick turned his head to the guys, ‘Jim, Roger, two car tail, starting at the main road near the golf club. I’ll go sit up the hill with binoculars and see what I can see.’ He turned back to Flora. ‘What time is it booked to take him back?’

‘I am, always the same. He starts with a meal at some new place.’

‘Bodyguards?’ Mick asked.

‘Two of them, and a tart – always a tart with him,’ Flora reported as the drinks were placed down.

‘Eyes on,’ Roger reported. ‘Jim, pull out now and tail from in front, I’ll get in behind him. Mick, you there?’

‘I’m listening, but too far up the hill. He’ll have to come around that first hill at least. I can’t see the golf course from here.’

‘Pulling out now,’ Jim reported, his words distorted from using speakerphone. ‘Moving off. I see him!’

‘I’m moving in behind now,’ Roger reported.

‘Straight on at the first junction,’ Jim reported a minute later.

‘With you,’ Roger reported.

‘Still climbing, going straight up,’ could be heard from Jim.

‘Indicating right,’ Roger shouted. ‘Jim, double back behind me, you missed his turn.’

‘I can see him,’ Mick announced. ‘Nice clean view. Roger, ease back. Straight on at next junction, straight on again ... left fork where it splits ... on a private road, break off, both of you.’

The image of the Rolls Royce disappeared behind a large villa. Refocusing his binoculars, Mick could see several men sat about a patio, guards in the grounds, even guard dogs.

‘Guys, we found a right mobster’s lair. And the guests dress like Germans and Swiss, not Russians.’

‘What’s the security like?’ Roger called.

‘Six, eight goons with Rottweilers,’ Mick informed him.

‘Oh, that all,’ Roger quipped.

‘Back to the hotel, guys, I got the location.’

Peering through the binoculars, Mick could see the shaped orange tiles of the roof, the villa’s whitewashed walls, tended lawn and blue pool. He could also see a high wall - perhaps eight feet high, the end of the villa’s garden transforming from landscaped wonder to a pile of rubble in a small ditch.

Following the line of the ditch, no more than a few feet deep, he noticed that it joined a gorge, a red brick wall placed at its join. ‘What are you there for, Mister Brick Wall? Winter torrents?’

Mick followed the course of the gorge higher, up around the hill he was on, past a few small villas, and up to a small dam. 'Nah, I couldn't. Could I?'

Lowering his binoculars, Mick walked around the goat track that he was on and to the road. Jumping into his small hire car, he descended the valley around winding bends until he reached a bridge crossing the dried riverbed, the barest hint of damp at its centre, a few green shoots making use of the moisture.

Crossing the bridge and turning right, Mick passed a sign saying no entry, and pulled up next to the dam. Easing out, Mick could see a concrete wall with a central rusted sluice gate that appeared not to have ever been used, controlled on top by a large rusted wheel, locked with a chain and hefty padlock.

Staring at it, Mick said, 'Lord, you do move in mysterious ways.'

3

'Why are we doing this?' Jim complained the next day, covered in sweat and dust.

Mick stopped, peering up at the midday sun. 'It's good for you. It'll get some weight off.'

Roger wiped his brow, blew out, and continued moving rocks to the side of the dried riverbed. By 3pm they were down to the red brick wall, a simple push knocking it over. The bricks were duly pulled out one by one - the mortar originally used being of a very poor quality, and thrown to a point where Mick was busy building a wall. Heavy rocks, bleached in the sun, were now carried up and placed down, creating a channel towards the villa's offshoot.

With the bricks removed, Mick issued tools - pickaxes and shovels, the offshoot dug out, the resulting rubble gainfully employed and used to enhance the diversionary wall. Finally, as the sun disappeared beyond the hills, Mick inched quietly along the ditch, lifting out rocks and branches and clearing the proposed path of the water.

Ten yards from the villa, he crept stealthily along, removing the last few rocks, and making an assessment of the water's potential flow. Ahead of him rested a pile of rubble, too close to the villa to risk approaching, but he could see that on the right hand side, next to the wall, it dipped lower and was comprised of mostly sand, sand that would be easily washed away. He withdrew, taking his time.

After a well-earned shower, and a well-earned beer in the hotel bar, Mick said, 'If we create a bit of a flood it will force the guards to go see what's causing it, and distract them, hopefully enough for Constantine's men to move in. But when the first shot is fired, you two block the access road and create diversions.'

'I'll hire a mini-bus today,' Roger said. 'Fifteen seater, petrol in the back. Just beyond the golf course, at the start of the right exit, I'll torch it.'

'I've hired a car,' Jim mentioned. 'I'll do the next junction up. That leaves the escape route for the Russians to the east.' Jim took a moment to study Mick. 'You ... going into the villa with them?'

'I need answers to a few questions,' Mick replied. 'And the answers are in that villa.' He shrugged.

'You got the money,' Jim pointed out.

Mick stared back for a second before lowering his gaze and studying his beer. 'I told you before, Jim, money is part of it – not all of it.'

'And if you find out anything useful...?' Jim nudged.

'London gets a call, of course.'

Covering fire

1

The next morning, Jim and Roger were again on wall building duty, Mick high above the villa and studying its layout and design, approaches and blind spots. After an hour of observing the villa from high above, Mick walked around the goat track to where he could see Jim and Roger labouring away, an involuntary smile taking hold.

Dropping down toward his dusty hire car, Mick could see what he thought was a fifty Euro note on the side of the path. Making a face, he bent down and lifted it.

A gun cocked behind him.

Slowly, inch-by-inch, he turned around. Doyle.

‘I take walks up here most days, and I spotted your car,’ Doyle casually informed Mick, easing up from a culvert and tossing away a sand-coloured camouflage net. Dusting himself off with one hand, he kept the pistol levelled at Mick as he stepped closer.

‘Neat trick on the boat,’ Mick offered, focused on the gun.

‘My doppelganger. We go way back; I used the man in Russia. They would be watching him – thinking him me – and I would be ... elsewhere. So, Michael J. Canuck, just who ... are you working for?’

‘Constantine.’

Doyle took a second, his brow pleating. ‘Constantine?’

‘He’s not too bright, but he pays well. I have no allegiances, Doyle, I work for the highest bidder.’

‘And the scraps that Colette throws you?’

‘Often provide ... opportunities, information, set-ups and payoffs.’

‘Ah. You know, when you started jumping on our people in Malta and Spain you had us confused, very confused. I kept telling them that Her Majesty’s Secret Service didn’t do things like that.’

‘Constantine measures success in broken bones.’ Mick shrugged. ‘It’s a Russian thing.’

‘And your Russian is perfect, so much so that you infiltrated the Ukrainian gang.’

‘I put myself next to Bogdan in his hotel, made myself look like I needed a few quid, showed him a picture of the kids back home, and he hired me for the gofer work. But he did send an execution squad around later; I missed them by a minute.’

‘And Colette; he has no idea of your ... abilities, nor financial leaning, does he?’

‘He thinks what I want him to think.’

‘And good old Dr. Becker; what happened to him?’

‘I found his name on documents that Sayeed had, lists of chemicals, tracked him down and gave the address to Constantine.’

‘Who shot him up the backside three times, in a trademark execution that was seen once in Riga and once in Prague.’

Mick shrugged. ‘It’s a Russian thing.’

‘And on Rhodes, the slicing and dicing?’

‘Me and Jim jumped on the people following us, a few punches and kicks, then left the men for Constantine’s boys.’

‘How is good old Jim, haven’t spoke to him in ... well, a year or two.’

‘He does the driving, knows what he needs to know. It gives him his pride back now that he’s...’

‘Useless? Surplus to requirement? On the scrap heap? That was why I made the move to the other side,’ Doyle explained. ‘Retirement was looming, and your friend Jim was the living embodiment of the cliché that I *did not* ... wish to become.’

‘Why did you risk showing your face in Marmaris?’ Mick risked.

‘So that future deals would be ... face to face, and could not be tampered with, as emails can. Trust ... is everything.’

‘There never was any Uranium heading for Odessa, was there? It was just something to confuse the CIA, to let the payoff go ahead.’

‘You’re wasted working for Constantine.’

‘Offer me enough and I’ll take him down.’

Doyle studied Mick for several seconds. ‘Not my decision, old chap.’ He waved the pistol. ‘Walk down the lower track, back around towards the villa.’

Mick turned and started walking.

‘When do Constantine’s men get here?’ Doyle asked.

‘Late tonight,’ Mick lied.

‘And the ... plan of action?’

‘I show them the villa and fuck off with the money, and then they ... do what they do.’

‘Loud and bloody. How uncivilised of them.’

Walking on, Doyle asked, ‘Our people were sure that they shot one of your compatriots in Malta, but we found no record of any hospital admission.’

‘You know Davies, Russia section?’

‘Yes...?’

‘He got hit in the shoulder.’

‘Oh, Michael ... you have so made my day. I think I have an erection coming on. Davies was shot.’

‘Guess he took your paperclips in the office,’ Mick noted as he walked.

‘How did he get out of Malta?’

‘I got him around to HMS Exeter.’

‘Ah. And what a good move. You know Davies used to be in the Navy?’

‘Yes,’ Mick said.

‘So Davies would have been enjoying the attention, telling stories of what a hero he was, when in fact he was as useless as Tiller.’

‘And Tiller was under investigation, by his own side and the CIA, because of you. It was Tiller who sent you in, wasn’t it.’

‘It was indeed, and I feel so ... *aggrieved* at causing Tiller so much anguish. Tell me, a large gang of men jumped some of our boys in Malta -’

‘Royal Navy. I ... borrowed a few lads,’ Mick reported.

‘You are resourceful, aren’t you.’

* * *

Sat under a tree, Jim swigged water from a bottle, handing it to Roger. After Roger had swigged, putting the top back on, Jim said, ‘Someone’s coming. Duck back there.’

They crouched under a tree, peering through the foliage at the hillside.

‘That’s Mick,’ Roger said. ‘Someone behind him.’

They waited a full ten minutes as Mick and Doyle progressed slowly down the slope.

‘That’s Doyle!’ Jim whispered. ‘He’s alive!’

‘He has a gun on Mick!’

‘Do we call London?’ Jim thought out loud.

‘And tell them what?’ Roger baulked. ‘If that lot in there hear a police siren they’ll kill him. And how long would it take London to send a hostage rescue team?’

‘They wouldn’t consider a rescue; he’s a freelancer,’ Jim sullenly admitted.

‘We could get Constantine’s men, but only Mick has the fucking phone number,’ Roger complained. ‘But we could flood them out! That may force them to abandon the villa, but they’d probably just shoot him before they go.’

‘Christ,’ Jim blew out, angered and frustrated.

‘He knew the risks,’ Roger pointed out. ‘And right now he’s wondering if one captured ... is going to become three captured.’

‘We’ve got to do something,’ Jim insisted.

‘Mick might talk his way out; they can’t really know what he’s up to. Trust me, he can blag them. But my guess is – if they were going to kill him – they’d not do it in the villa, they’d drive him up the mountain, or walk him up that hill and bury the body. If they drive him out in the morning I can ram their vehicles off the road with that mini-bus.’

‘I should stay here then, just in case they walk him up the hill,’ Jim suggested.

‘You’re not armed, Jim, they are.’

‘You got Flo’s number?’

Roger took out his phone, the sweat dripping off his face. He called Flora, operating the phone with filthy hands. ‘Flora, listen, Mick’s been kidnapped. Yes, the Russians. Do you know anyone with a shooter?’ He listened. ‘Shotguns? For clay pigeon shooting? Yeah, that would do. Fast as you can. Thanks, love.’ Roger lowered his phone. ‘Nothing’s going to happen for a few hours, I think those lads would like to ... you know, ask Mick a few difficult questions.’

They exchanged looks.

‘C’mon,’ Jim urged. ‘Let’s get to Flo.’

2

The guards at the villa were surprised to see Mick appear, and fell into step with Doyle as he led Mick across the grass, around the pool and to the patio.

‘Have a seat,’ Doyle said, making it sound like a pleasant invitation.

Mick smiled and waved at the other men assembled, then grabbed a half drunk beer and finished it. ‘Thirsty work, spying.’

‘Our friend here works for Constantine, whose men arrive tonight,’ Doyle informed the others. ‘So we can expect trouble.’

Brabos stepped out and examined the man whose face he had seen in grainy black and white photographs. He grabbed a seat and pulled it forwards, studying Mick intently. ‘You work for Constantine?’ he asked in Russian.

‘No, I work for myself. Constantine hired me to find you, and to disrupt anything you did.’

‘You sound Russian.’

‘British Secret Service trained,’ Doyle proudly stated. ‘Now a freelancer with a taste for a ... retirement plan.’

‘How much did Constantine pay you?’ Brabos demanded.

‘Two hundred thousand pounds.’

Brabos smiled widely. ‘He’s getting cheap.’

‘He very nearly screwed up *our* plans,’ Doyle pointed out. ‘He’s results driven, and very good at what he does; he found this place. Oh, and *it was* Constantine who killed Becker.’ Doyle faced Mick. ‘Does Constantine know what we do?’

‘Do?’ Mick asked.

‘What sordid little secrets we have?’

‘Not a clue, which just about goes for me as well. At one point I thought you were just trying to set-up the CIA for a fall.’

‘That would have been a pleasant side-effect, yes,’ Doyle admitted.

‘Will Constantine come here?’ Brabos demanded.

‘His men should be here today, late tonight. He’ll be coming tomorrow or the next day – assuming that his men capture you alive – so that he can cut you up himself.

‘Pah!’

‘What *is it* with you Russians?’ Doyle asked.

‘I will capture him, and feed him his own cock!’ Brabos growled.

‘I could arrange that ... for the right fee,’ Mick offered.

‘How about we don’t cut your balls off,’ Brabos offered.

‘How about two hundred and fifty thousand?’

‘You’re in no position to make deals,’ Doyle pointed out.

‘Do you know where Constantine will be? What name he’s using?’ Mick countered.

‘Does he know the location of this place?’ Doyle asked.

‘A rough description, yes. But I was to lead his men to the hill so they could observe for a day or so. If they lose contact with me they’ll know I’ve been caught.’

‘Call him,’ Brabos ordered.

‘Show me some money,’ Mick countered.

Brabos took a pistol off one of the guards and cocked it. ‘Call him!’

‘Show me some money,’ Mick insisted.

Doyle laughed before Brabos attempted to pistol whip Mick, Brabos sent flying through the air by Mick and landing with a thud.

‘Stop it!’ a German called, Brabos helped up by a guard. ‘Bring him inside.’

Two minutes later, Mick was securely tied to a chair as the elderly German man sat on a sofa opposite. ‘Who hired you to go to Malta?’ the man asked in a heavily accented voice.

‘British Intelligence, to baby sit Sayeed around Europe.’

‘So why did you not ... *baby sit* Sayeed?’

‘On the first day I got the wallet of a Russian man –’

‘After he was hit with the car, yes?’

Mick nodded. ‘Yes. I rang Constantine because the man was Russian and asked him to check the ID. Constantine called back and told me Sayeed’s itinerary –’

‘Constantine ... knew of Sayeed’s itinerary?’

‘Yes,’ Mick lied. ‘He asked me to find out everything, and to disrupt whatever it was, to identify the people around Sayeed and to ... well, damage them all. Hurt them.’

The German glanced at Doyle. ‘How did Constantine know of Sayeed?’

‘CIA,’ Doyle suggested. ‘Constantine may have a contact who also wants a retirement plan.’

‘Or a leak here, who also wants – as you say - a retirement plan,’ the German inquisitor suggested. He held his stare on Doyle, who shrugged. Turning back to Mick, the German asked, ‘Did Constantine tell you how he knew?’

‘No, he only trusts me so far.’

‘So you hit the men in Malta and Spain, and took their wallets?’

Mick nodded. ‘Sorry.’

‘And the car fire in Zurich?’

Mick nodded apologetically. ‘Just having a bit of fun.’

‘A bit of ... fun?’

‘Under cover work is stressful,’ Mick pointed out. ‘You need a release.’

‘How did you infiltrate the Ukrainian gang?’

‘Constantine called me and told me where to find Bogdan.’ The German seemed most put out. Mick continued, ‘So I booked into Bogdan’s hotel, befriended another man and convinced them that I was a Russian worker who needed some extra money. Bogdan hired me to take Sayeed around because he didn’t want to take the risk, I think, and afterwards sent a hit squad to the hotel. I missed them by a minute. I was to be a one-day expendable employee.’

‘And Turkey? How did you know where Doyle was?’

‘I was following Sayeed and saw the handoff.’ Mick turned to Doyle. ‘Very professional.’ Facing his inquisitor, he said, ‘And I followed Doyle to the boat.’

‘I’ve not seen a better field agent in my career,’ Doyle told the German with an amused smile.

‘How did you get off the boat?’

‘I set the gas cookers to blow and swam across the bay, about a mile. The next day I stole a speedboat and crossed to Rhodes at night.’

‘And defeated our three men,’ the inquisitor finished off. ‘Why kill Becker?’

‘I found his name on a document, gave it to Constantine,’ Mick said with a shrug.

‘What else does Constantine know?’

‘Just this villa, one called ... Tishkent I think, and that’s it. I don’t have your names, but I don’t know what Becker might have said under interrogation. Constantine said that he was interrogated at length.’

The German faced Doyle. ‘And how much of this do you believe?’

‘The British would never use someone like him – if they knew what he was up to, that’s for certain. Nor the CIA. I know the facts he stated are correct, some of which he could not have found out otherwise.’

The German faced Mick. ‘You move from country to country with no trace. How?’

‘Constantine provides Russian passports with visas, so I use them once or twice and throw them away. I have other IDs from a forger in Amsterdam.’

‘That would get him arrested by the British,’ Doyle said. ‘Even if he was working for them.’

‘Tie him in the cleaning room for now, I will talk to the others,’ the German said as he stood.

Mick found himself tied to a large gas tank, sat on the floor, the smell of fabric softener pervasive, a dead cockroach for company. They had taken his phone and wallet, even his cigarettes. Getting comfortable was difficult. His back was to the wall, but the position of the pipe that his hands were tied to meant that he had to lean forwards just enough to be uncomfortable.

With nothing else to do, other than a little ironing and folding - available hands permitting, he started on the knot with his teeth.

* * *

Returned to their hotel, Roger and Jim washed quickly, changing clothes and grabbing extra cash in case they needed it. Back in the car, they set off for Estapona Marina - and Flora.

Roger’s phone bleeped; a text message. Opening it, it was from Mick. ‘What time are we meeting?’ he read out.

‘Has he escaped?’ Jim asked.

‘We ... were supposed to meet at 3pm back down here,’ Roger puzzled. ‘I think it’s them.’

‘Ignore it,’ Jim suggested.

Ten minutes later the phone rang. ‘Pull over, stop the engine,’ Roger urged. ‘They want to trick us.’

Jim pulled up, being tooted from behind.

‘Maxims?’ Roger announced.

‘It’s Michael Canuck.’

‘Was the girl OK, sir?’

‘Uh ... yes. I don’t remember if I booked her again for tonight?’

‘Booked her? You can’t book our girls, sir. You take who is available.’

‘Really? I forgot. I’ll see you later.’ They hung up.

Jim and Roger exchanged concerned looks.

‘I just convinced them that my number is a brothel,’ Roger said, shrugging. They set off again.

* * *

Doyle entered Mick’s temporary prison with Brabos.

‘Lunchtime already, is it?’ Mick asked.

‘We’re going to call Constantine on speakerphone. And, your life depends on it,’ Doyle said with a sadistic grin.

‘Fair enough,’ Mick responded. ‘It’s the only Russian number in there.’

Doyle selected the number and pressed green.

‘Hello?’ came a voice in Russian.

‘It’s Mikhail.’

‘Mikhail?’

‘The man who returned Mister Constantine’s vase in perfect condition.’

‘Ah, you. Wait.’

‘Hello?’ came a minute later.

‘It’s Mikhail.’

‘How’s it going?’

‘I found the villa, your men can move on it in a day or so, Brabos is inside.’

‘How do you know it’s him?’

‘People at the casino know him. Listen, I counted up the money you let me have, in the holdall. It came to over three hundred thousand Euros.’

‘You keep it. It’s worth it to get that dog Brabos.’

Mick made eye contact with Brabos, who was now boiling. 'Thanks. I'll see you soon.' Mick lifted his eyebrows to Doyle, who cut the call. 'See.'

Brabos kicked Mick in the ribs and stormed out.

'I believe you, but they don't,' Doyle mentioned. 'Still, you'll have an uncomfortable night.' He stepped out and closed the door.

'Untie me, and I'll do some ironing for you,' Mick muttered.

* * *

Jim received a text message, his phone handled by Roger as they drove. 'Where are you?' it said. Roger text'd back: 'At the hotel waiting for you. When you back?' No response came back, no further text messages, or any calls.

Arriving at the quayside, they parked up and walked briskly around to Flora's hired yacht, welcomed aboard by the staff in their odd blue and white striped shirts.

Flora was still in her pink tracksuit, holding her dog. 'I got two shotguns and plenty of ... you know, shell things.' She handed over a piece of paper. 'Go to that address and ask for Bill, tell him you're going to the shoot, you know ... clay pigeons.'

'Thanks, Flo, you're a star,' Roger offered.

'You just get Mick out.'

Driving away in a hurry, checking the map, Roger said, 'If we do this and it goes wrong ... well, it'll be the end of us.'

'I know,' Jim said, blowing out. 'But I know he wouldn't leave me in there.'

'If they move him, my minibus will easily knock out a car, and then all we need do is threaten them with the shotguns, blow out a tyre or two.'

By 5pm, Jim was armed and above the villa, Roger armed and sat in his minibus below the villa. Jim moved to where he could see people leave the villa, a commanding view of the rubble at

the back of the villa plus a view of the ditch, then just plonked down next to a bush and waited as the light faded, crickets for company.

* * *

When Colette called Mick's mobile, the phone was brought in by Doyle and answered whilst on speakerphone.

'Mick, can you talk?' Colette asked.

Mick made eye contact with Doyle. 'A little tied up just now, but fire away.'

With Doyle smiling widely, Colette said, 'Any progress?'

'I think I found where Brabos may be. Don't know the link yet with him and the others, but hope to find out.'

'Well, good work anyway. Be interesting to see how they all link in. Talk tomorrow.'

Doyle hit the red button.

'I told you the truth,' Mick insisted, shaking his head.

'You haven't updated London, have you,' Doyle realised.

'Why? They'd just hand the task over to proper agents. This way I drag it out, and get expenses.'

Smiling widely, Doyle left Mick to his lonely dead cockroach. Mick stared at the upturned insect. 'I wonder if the smell of fabric softener killed you?'

Looking up at the small window that the room offered, Mick figured it was after 5pm. He also figured he'd probably be dead by morning. It was time to act.

His hands had been tied around a pipe leading from the gas tank to the outside, a large nut joining two parts of the pipe. Struggling to untie the rope knot, Mick had moved the nut slightly. Certain that the disconnected pipe would release his hands, as well as fill the room with gas and kill him, he applied a little pressure to it, turning it half way around. A gentle hiss altered the room's fragrance from fabric cleaner to cooking gas.

The door to this room could not be locked, that's why he was tied to the pipe he realised, so a way out was certain – also

certain that there'd be an armed man on the other side of the door. Yanking on the nut, the hiss increased. Kicking with his foot, Mick knocked over a tall blue plastic basket, clean clothes tumbling to the floor. Dragging a towel with the side of his foot, he manoeuvred it close enough to grab, placing it over the leaking pipe to soften the noise.

Stopping to listen for any movement, Mick yanked the nut around with all his strength. It loosened, and he now used both hands to force it around, the hiss increasing despite the application of the clean and soft blue towel.

The pipe into the wall moved slightly as his elbow impacted it, the aim now being to yank it out to free his hands, hopefully before he asphyxiated. The nut now turned freely, the cold gas gushing as he frantically tried to increase the rate of turn. It had only been a few seconds since he started, but the room was small, and filling with gas quickly.

Feeling the intake pipe loosen, he yanked it back and freed his hands, trying and failing to stuff the towel into the gushing pipe, knowing he only had seconds. Standing, he banged on the door and stood back. The door opened, and a nose appearing as Mick kicked the back of the door for all he was worth. With his hands still tied, trying desperately to free himself, he grabbed the door handle and opened it to find a guard sat again a wall with a bloody nose, pistol in hand.

Mick took one step with his left foot and kicked the man in the throat with his right foot, dropping to his knees immediately and landing on the man's thighs, grabbing the dropped pistol. Getting a hand on it and scrambling back up to his feet, Mick stepped forwards one pace and turned to the left, remembering where he had seen a door.

Reaching it, he awkwardly tried to open the latch with his left hand, his right holding the pistol, his wrists still tied. Getting the door open, a burst of bright sunlight blinded him momentarily as he gulped a huge lungful of air.

'Hey!' someone shouted from behind.

A dog barked off to the right. Mick turned and fired, hitting a blurry image of a man in black as he squinted against the bright sunlight. Running across the well-tended short grass, all Mick could see was a curved wall, a high wall, and no gates. What he did see, however, was a brick barbecue set positioned in front of the wall.

Running as best he could with his hands tied, he jumped up onto its brick sidewall, lunged upward again and got his elbows on the villa wall, his head, his hands and the pistol over the wall. Swinging his left leg up, ignoring the searing pain from the jagged wall top taking his weight, Mick got a leg on the top of the wall as more shouts and dog barks registered from behind him.

Lying level on the wall, he moved his legs over and let them drop, now facing the opposite way, large parts of elbow skin torn by the movement. Seeing men emerging from the door, Mick fired a round at the first man, knocking him backwards. Adjusting his aim a few degrees, Mick took a second to aim carefully, squinting against the bright sun and grimacing in pain, and fired at the high window of the cleaning room, shattering it.

Nothing exploded. More shouts and dog barks suggested that flight was the best option, but Mick carefully aimed, and fired again at the windows.

Jim jumped up when he heard the shot, thinking that they were firing at him. He levelled the pump-action shotgun, nervously checking the immediate area, jumping around like a demented commando.

Shouts reached him, dog barks, and a second echoing shot. People were running around the garden, many around the house and towards the front, some leaving through the patio doors to reach the pool. Jim stepped forwards, his shotgun aimed ready.

Mick's world became silent. Sky, ground, orange roof, sky, ground. He impacted the side of the road and rolled, coming to

a halt face up in this new and oddly silent world, a world where a chimney was coming right for him. Rolling away, the chimney impacted the road, orange roof tiles raining down, their impacts with the ground felt rather than heard.

Realising that he was now in the foetal position and covering his head, he dared to peek upwards, seeing now only billowing black smoke, the side of his face feeling as if it had been sandpapered down to the bone.

Jim had fallen over in shock, not from the blast, and released a cartridge towards the villa. Scrambling back up, he could see debris raining down, the roof gone, people lying on the grass, one in the pool, others bent double or crawling around.

Without knowing why, he started forwards, certain that Mick had been killed in the blast. Jim was dazed and confused, but also on autopilot. Twenty-five yards from the rubble, at the rear of the villa, he could suddenly see men and dogs moving towards the rubble, and right towards his own position. There was nothing for it. He fired towards them.

Men spun around, others held faces or body parts, all peppered with pellets from the shotgun. But they kept coming towards him. Jim reloaded with a clunk and fired three times in the general direction of the villa. The men got the message, many crawling and hobbling away from the rear of the villa and back towards the smouldering wreck as Jim frantically reloaded, grabbing the empty cartridges off the ground and pocketing them. With four fresh cartridges in the shotgun, he fired all four into the villa's garden in quick succession.

Mick wondered just where the fucking gun battle was going on, trying to orientate himself as his hearing returned. The blurry outline of a man appeared, a round fired, the man falling as a car shot past.

Roger had heard the blast, panicked, and now drove towards the villa at speed in his fifteen-seat mini-bus. With the villa in sight, what was left of it, smoke billowing, he saw two men

jump into a Mercedes, two seconds later heading straight towards him. Roger floored it and moved into the middle of the road, a game of chicken initiated. With a grimace, and growling, Roger drove straight at the Mercedes.

The Mercedes was outdone in size, and swerved. Roger counter-served and took their back end off, spinning the car into the ravine and seeing it land on its roof. Jumping out with his shotgun, the echoing of gunfire coming from somewhere, he fired once at the upturned car as its wheels raced, before running towards the villa and re-loading.

Around the first bend he found Mick on the floor, someone emerging from the villa. Firing from the hip he knocked the man down as he ran sideways to Mick. 'Mick!'

Mick looked up to see Roger kneeling, accepting a hand up as Roger kept the shotgun levelled on the villa. 'That ... way,' Mick said, pointing towards the dried riverbed.

Jim could see Roger's minibus approaching, hearing the crash and registering the gunshot firing a moment later. Roger was in trouble, and in a gun battle. Jim moved in closer, wide-eyed, covered in sweat, and panting.

With Roger helping, Mick hobbled as best as he could past the villa and into the ravine, soon walking parallel to the villa's walls and up towards Jim.

'Jim is up there,' Roger shouted as they progressed along the dusty river course.

Firing could be heard. Jim was in trouble, and they quickened their pace, Mick still with his hands tied.

Jim stood on the rubble, clearly seeing now what he estimated were ten men lying down, a few crawling and hobbling. He levelled the shotgun and fired at those moving, four rounds in quick succession before reloading.

With the final cartridge in, he spotted movement to his right, turning and firing, right over the heads of Mick and Roger. They dived down.

‘Jim, it’s Roger! Don’t fucking shoot!’

Jim slid down the sides of the ravine and landed in a heap, covered in dirt. ‘Mick?’ he gasped.

‘I’m alive. Just!’ Mick forced out. ‘Get this fucking rope off me!’

Roger untied Mick as Jim stood panting.

Finally untied, Mick said, ‘That way. Up.’ He nudged Jim forwards.

They trio set off along the dusty gully, Jim and Roger helping Mick limp along, all the time checking over their shoulders.

‘Where’s your car?’ Mick asked Jim as they clambered along the riverbed.

‘Around the hill.’

At the start of the goat trail they all looked back, the sounds of sirens in the distance now registering. Mick raised his pistol and fired into the villa’s garden, and at the men lying there. With the pistol now empty he threw it into bushes and turned.

Reaching the car, Jim opening it, they put the shotguns in the boot and clambered in, Mick testing the blood on his face with a hand as Jim pulled off. They crossed the small bridge that spanned the dried riverbed, turning left and heading downhill.

‘Slow down,’ Mick encouraged. ‘Don’t attract any attention to us. Anyone got a cap and sunglasses?’

Roger lifted a cap from the back seat and placed it on Mick’s head, placing his own sunglasses on Mick’s bloodied face. ‘You won’t pass close inspection.’

At the first junction, Jim had to halt as a car sped past. ‘That was Doyle!’ Jim said. ‘Covered in blood.’

‘Get after him!’ Mick urged, Jim screeching off in his white hire car, scraping the manual gears and soon behind Doyle as expensive high-walled villas shot past, glimpses of pools and green lawns.

‘He’s driving like a bloody loony,’ Roger put in.

‘Ram him if you can,’ Mick suggested, dabbing his face with his shirt’s sleeve as they took bends on the wrong side of the road.

Doyle nearly caused a crash at the next junction, two cars screeching to a halt, loud horn-anger expressed by those involved. No sooner had the angered motorists caught their breath than Jim screeched past.

A puff of smoke signalled Doyle braking hard in his own small hire car, turning left and now heading up a hill, Jim not having to brake and catching up as he cut the corner, the car’s windscreen speckled with water from lawn sprinkler systems.

‘Ram the fucker if you can,’ Mick again urged from the rear seat as they closed in on their prey.

‘The shotguns are in the damn boot,’ Roger noted. ‘Or I could have shot his fucking tyres out!’

Mick pulled the plugs out of the back seat as they raced around a corner, easing forwards as he pulled the seatback down. Reaching in, he tore an old leather partition, revealing the shotguns. Getting a hand to the butt of a gun, Mick pulled it awkwardly through, soon shoving it past Roger’s head and through the open window. Roger moved aside and turned his face away.

At the next junction, in a dip, Doyle slowed and turned left again, Mick firing and blowing out a side window of Doyle’s car.

‘Almost,’ Roger shouted. ‘Let me have a go.’ He grabbed the shotgun and eased it forwards, leaning out of the window at an odd angle as Jim screeched around the next corner, throwing up stones. Approaching a small café, people seen moving about, Roger aimed at the rear of Doyle’s car and fired, smashing the rear window. Screams rose from the café’s patrons, tables ducked under as the two cars roared past.

‘He’s turning into the golf club,’ Roger shouted, his words distorted by the fact that his upper body was hanging out the car. ‘It’s a no-through road!’

Doyle weaved around other cars, causing oncoming traffic to brake and swerve, posh Mercedes and BMW's inconvenienced. Entering the parking area, Doyle had no choice - the left and right exits blocked - and now being closely pursued. He bumped over the pavement and through low bushes, and onto the green. Jim followed.

'Fucking hell, Jim!' Mick shouted as golfers jumped to the side, Mick's head bouncing off the car's roof.

Doyle adopted the central buggy route as a road, Mick staring wide-eyed at golfers and they stared back at Roger and his shotgun. Roger fired again, spattering the rear of Doyle's car as they flew along the pathway.

A loud crunch signalled an impact, a white golf buggy edged by Doyle and spun around, ending up on its side. Jim swerved to miss them, tearing a deep groove into the green as he tried not to lose control. Doyle approached the edge of the green, swerved left, then right, but continued on, disappearing from view.

'Slow down!' Mick shouted, and Jim eased down a little as they passed over the crest, the far side of which was unseen and unknown. Doyle had demolished a thin wooden fence, now bumping over scrubland towards a half-built apartment block. 'Follow him.'

Keeping on Doyle's exact course, the small hire car bumped up and down, only a matter of seconds before the suspension would go or the tyres would burst. Loosing sight of Doyle for a second, they soon found themselves heading down a steeper slope, their hire car being beaten by shrubs, Doyle's car back in view.

'One cartridge left,' Roger shouted.

Nearing the start of the grey and unfinished apartment complex they could see no one working on it, its floors left awaiting some attention, cement coloured buckets lying on their sides. Doyle was still going flat out, and hit a wire fence. He went straight through, but the fence dragged, Doyle's car

somersaulting. Jim slowed, bouncing through the fence and skidding to a halt as Doyle's car landed the right way up.

Mick jumped out, grabbing the shotgun off Roger. Hobbling quickly across to Doyle's car, Mick peered in, seeing Doyle semi-conscious and covered in blood. 'Where's the Uranium going? Mick shouted. 'I'll get you a doctor, I'll get you out of here. Where the Uranium going?'

'Bag ... Baghdad.'

Mick leant inside the car. 'Why? Why Baghdad?'

'Water ... supply.'

'To poison the water supply?'

Doyle didn't answer, his head now on his chin. Mick eased out. Placing the barrel an inch from the side of Doyle's face, he fired.

With Mick back in the car, Jim pulled off, through the side of the building works, knocking a ladder down on top of their car, and out the front, a padlocked gate negotiated head on. On the quiet street he turned left.

'Head for Flora's villa, use the back streets,' Mick instructed. 'Roger, you know the way.'

'Left here,' Roger told Jim.

'Roger,' Mick called from the back. 'Your prints may be on the hire van.'

'They're not on record down here,' Roger stated. 'Or ... anywhere else come to think of it, not since you altered my old Interpol file.'

'I did that?' Mick puzzled.

'Yeah, years ago. You concussed?'

'No, I always fucking look like this.'

Time to heal

1

Three days later and Colette was shown into Flora's villa by Jim, Roger not around today. Mick lay on a sun lounger, his head, arm and knee bandaged.

'Christ, Mick,' Colette let out as he sat, the maid offering a drink. He asked for a lemonade, then sat facing Mick. He waited.

'Brabos spotted us watching the villa, so grabbed me. They held me for a day, torturing me for what I knew; burns, cuts, the works.'

'Jesus,' Colette softly let out.

'Then Constantine's men turned up, a gun battle – some fucker hit the gas supply and blew up the house, and I crawled out the wreckage to a ditch. I crawled for nine hours to evade the police.'

'We're going to sanction some compensation, but ... we'd like to know if you ... blame us?'

'No, I don't blame you, it was my fault for being spotted.'

'But doing our work,' Colette insisted. 'I think I can get you a hundred and fifty thousand pounds.'

'It all helps, I won't be doing much of anything for a while.'

'The information you overheard whilst captured, it turned out to be very valuable. The Uranium was seized in the Shatt al Arab waterway. It was low grade, but enriched Uranium from Niger, West Africa – no links to Sayeed so far. Americans are going crazy, thinking someone wanted to create a dirty bomb, maybe al-Qa'eda. It helped them save face after they boarded the other ship. Do you know what it was to be used for?'

Mick shook his head.

'Well, it's a closed case, and Sayeed will be watched like a hawk in future,' Colette reported. He glanced over his shoulder. 'How's ... Jim holding up?'

'Fine, he didn't get caught up in it all.'

‘They took eight bodies out of that villa, and nine wounded men. Brabos has been confirmed dead, and five prominent Germans – some difficult questions being asked there. Local residents say that there was a gun battle going on ten minutes, machineguns, all sorts.’

‘Well, you know what these Russians are like.’

‘Any identity on the people holding you?’

‘I was hooded, apart from when they were cutting up my face,’ Mick lied.

‘Something odd happened down here, the day of the explosion at that villa. A car chase ended in a man having his face blown off, false British ID. The Director has closed the file and banned anyone from looking at it. Any ... clues?’

‘I was getting my face stamped on, boss.’

‘Yes, well, you get better, and we’ll sort that compensation.’

‘Good of you to come down,’ Mick offered.

‘Don’t take this the wrong way, but I wanted to get out the office.’

Mick laughed. ‘Ease back, have a beer, take the weight of the world off your shoulders.’

2

Jim thanked the waitress as she placed down a beer. Facing Mick, he said, ‘It’s odd, not being the one doing the serving.’

Mick took in the view of St. Paul’s Bay, Malta. ‘Got a buyer for the bar?’

‘Yes, but it’s not a great offer. Still, it’ll cover what I paid for it, and then I’m rid of it.’

‘And then?’

‘I’m on a health kick, losing weight, getting fitter,’ Jim listed off. ‘The job made me two hundred and fifty grand, the bar will fetch one-fifty, so ... so I might just bum around for a decade or two.’

‘And if I call you with a simple babysitting job?’

‘I’d shoot you myself.’

Mick laughed, taking in the view. 'I'll try you in a few months, see if you're bored by then.'

'Mick, are you going to tell me who you work for, really work for?'

'I told you, I work for myself.'

Rostov-on-Don

1

Mick pulled into a driveway, the concrete cracked, the garden's grass long. Easing out into a cold rain with arms full of bags, the house door opened, a six year-old girl bursting out.

'Papa, papa!' she called as she ran across the damp garden.

Mick knelt, the girl throwing her arms around his neck, a woman appearing on the porch. 'Have you been a good girl?' Mick asked in Russian.

'Da!'

'Then I have some gifts for you. Here, carry this small bag.'

On the porch, he kissed a twenty-eight year old attractive woman. 'Missed me?' he asked her.

'Some,' she admitted. 'Marko is here.'

Mick nodded, handing over the bags. Inside the warm house, Mick opened a bag and handed over a hundred thousand dollars.

'Ill-gotten gains,' the woman noted.

'It's how the money is used that matters, not where it comes from.'

Mick entered the lounge, a grey haired man standing, a younger man remaining seated in the corner. They kissed each other's cheeks.

'Mikhail, have you healed?' Marko asked, still holding Mick by the shoulders and inspecting the scars.

'I'm fine, so stop being an old woman and pretending you care. I might start crying.'

They sat.

'We got the Russian guards in Baghdad, those linked to Brabos. They were ... most cooperative after we offered to leave them in Iraq, unarmed, with no papers and no money.'

'That'll do it.'

‘Constantine is getting the blame for the gun battle at the villa in Spain, but he doesn’t seem to care. It ... enhances his reputation.’

‘Fine,’ Mick said.

‘You’ve spoken to him?’

‘Yes, he sent me some more money. I explained that Brabos was about to leave and that we had to act quickly to take the villa.’

‘And in ... reality?’ Marko nudged.

‘I got caught by Doyle and held. I broke the pipe to a gas cylinder and blew the place up, my associates using pump action shotguns to take down the guards.’

‘And Doyle himself?’

Mick took a moment. ‘I blew his face off with a shotgun, so that he wouldn’t be identified.’

‘But he was identified, I think, by the British, who have kept it quiet,’ Marko pointed out.

‘Can you blame them?’

‘I suppose not. But it would have been nice if *we* ... could have gotten hold of Doyle.’

‘I wouldn’t have assisted with that. Nor would I hand one of yours over to them.’

‘As I have come to respect, Mikhail. You are a whore with rules.’

Mick smiled as his daughter bound in and up onto his knee. ‘Best way to be,’ Mick told Marko. ‘Now, stay for some food, a drink, and a long chat, yes?’

‘Of course. Where’s the vodka?’