

CHAPTER ONE

September 2002 - Monday morning

Would that we could choose the last image we see before death closes our eyes forever to this world.

Where had that come from?

Don Silver broke his stride momentarily, shaking his head imperceptibly as though to clear the thought, before resuming his progress up Regent Street in the heart of London's West End. A shortish, stocky man, he tended to take longer strides than necessary for his height, causing him to lean forward as he walked, his head nodding in time with the rhythm of his steps. This slightly ungainly gait did, at least, give him the appearance of being purposeful.

On this bright Monday morning it was no illusion; he felt purposeful. He was on a mission, impatient to get to his destination. Looking up, he fixed his gaze on the frontage of Broadcasting House a hundred metres or so away, headquarters of the world-renowned British Broadcasting Corporation. He had no idea where the unbidden thought about life's last image had come from. Although undeniably an interesting building, designed in the 1930's to resemble a ship sailing serenely down Regent Street, Broadcasting House was not necessarily the image he would choose as his last in mortal guise.

Silver passed through the impressive doors at the prow of the building and presented himself at the reception desk.

'Good morning, I'm here to see Geoff Alexander,' he smiled at the receptionist, before adding helpfully, 'he's a producer in the News Department.'

'Oh yes, good morning Mr Silver,' the woman replied, recognising him, 'Mr Alexander has been delayed. I have a message from Travis Neal that he would like to speak to you as soon as you arrive.' She was already tapping in the number on her phone as she spoke.

Don Silver was taken off guard. Geoff Alexander, universally known as Alex, was never late. And why would Travis Neal, Head of the News Department, take over? He was senior management; he didn't get his hands dirty actually producing programmes.

'Mr Neal will be down in a minute,' the receptionist cut across his misgivings.

Slightly dazed and disconcerted, Silver signed the visitors' book, before affixing a guest security pass to his lapel. Seconds later, Travis Neal appeared from the bowels of the building.

'Don, good to meet you at last,' he boomed, 'after all the work you've done for us, we really should've got together earlier.'

Neal grasped Silver's hand in a firm, but slightly clammy grip.

'How do you...that is yes, but there was really no...where's Alex?' Silver stammered, clearly flustered.

'Let's go get a coffee.' Neal ignored Silver's question, and briskly led the way past the security guards and into the depths of Broadcasting House.

'We'll go to the canteen, it'll be pretty quiet at this time,' Neal stated in a tone that did not invite debate. He spoke in a flat monotone, an accent that probably originated somewhere in the Midlands, Silver guessed.

Neal led the way, not bothering to make small talk or even check to see that Silver was following. A big man with an uncompromising attitude, he boasted the physique of a heavyweight boxer and, having lost most of his hair quite young, kept his head shaved, giving him a distinctly brutal air. He had a huge lower jaw and a small, rather pig-like nose. Attractive he was not, but he looked like he could intimidate at will, Silver surmised.

A few minutes later they were seated at a table in the BBC's staff canteen, each with a plastic cup of lukewarm coffee. Neal stared strangely at Silver, as though assessing him.

'So where's Alex?' Silver ventured, unsettled by the big man's examination, 'it's so unlike him to be late. I'm supposed to be appearing on the midday News; he's the producer and we need to discuss my story.'

'Ah yes, live radio,' Neal shifted in his chair, a movement that Silver somehow found threatening, 'it can be so...daunting, scary, dangerous even...'

'Not really,' Silver countered, puzzled, 'I've done hundreds of live features before it's...'

'Alexander had to go to hospital,' Neal interrupted brusquely, 'food poisoning or some such.'

'Hospital!' Silver was aghast, 'is he all right?'

'He'll be fine, he probably just needs his stomach pumped,' Neal retorted with a distinct lack of sympathy, 'we'll manage without him. Now tell me about your story, I understand it could be controversial.'

'That's an understatement,' Silver replied, choosing his words carefully, 'this will pose serious questions about how honest our politicians are – right up to the highest level...'

'You mean...?'

'The highest level,' Silver repeated, in an even tone.

'I see,' Neal responded in his flat monotone, 'this could make you a household name.'

'Oh, I don't like to think in those terms,' Silver spoke unconvincingly. The thought had indeed occurred to him.

'So tell me, what is the story?' Neal leaned forward, his heavy brow close to Silver's face.

With body language that was as submissive as Neal's was aggressive, Silver sat back in his chair.

'I...I can't say. I should only discuss it with Alex. He is my producer, and there are third parties involved I've made promises to.'

Neal leant back slightly. It did little to reduce the aggressive tension in the air.

'Alex is not here, I am and I know about your "third party". He's a United Nations weapons inspector with information about Iraq. So, he's broken ranks, well done! You got the story, and yes, it will be huge, but as the Head of the News Department, I need to give it the go-ahead. So, tell me who your source is.'

'How could you possibly know all this detail? Only...'

'...Alex knew,' Neal finished Silver's sentence for him, 'like I said, I'm the big chief round here, it's my job to know everything. So, I repeat, all I need now is the identity of your source. I have to judge if he is reliable.'

Silver mentally squirmed, trapped on the horns of a personal dilemma.

'I...I really can't. I promised the...my source complete anonymity. He could be in danger, at the very least of losing his job. Not even Alex knows, but I can assure you he is an accredited source; we've broadcast leaks from him before.'

Neal stared at Silver for what felt like an eternity, small black eyes peering out from under his protuberant brow.

'Very well,' Neal couldn't disguise the petulance in his voice. He placed both hands palm down on the table and stared at Silver through narrowed eyes before suddenly standing, a decision apparently made.

'All right then, I'll get on, leave you to finish your coffee.'

He walked off without saying goodbye, pulling his mobile phone out of his pocket as he departed. Silver watched him pass through the door on the far side of the room, already speaking rapidly into the mouthpiece.

Now that was a view you *could* take to the grave.

Nearly twenty minutes had passed and Don Silver was gazing out of the window recalling his earlier morbid thought. Situated on the top floor of the world famous building, the canteen afforded Mary Poppins-like views of the rooftops and chimneys of Regent Street and Portland Place.

The morning breakfast trade was long past and the canteen was virtually empty. Silver was vaguely aware of a slim, smartly dressed man sitting a couple of tables away, but it appeared the two of them were the last remaining customers in the mid-morning lull.

Glancing at his watch, Silver opened his briefcase and took out his mobile phone. He found the number for Geoff Alexander in the contacts menu and hit the call button.

After a few rings the connection was made.

‘Hi Alex, how are you? I heard you got food poisoning...’ Silver was so intent on his call he didn’t notice the slim man lean forward and narrow his eyes in apparent concentration.

‘So you’ll be here? That’s a relief!’ Silver continued, ‘I’ll see you in the studio. Listen, Travis Neal grabbed me earlier and seemed to know all about my story. Did you say anything to him?’

The only sound in the deserted canteen came from two of the catering staff discussing the lunchtime service plans. The slim man edged forward in his seat, as though trying to get closer to where Silver was sitting.

‘No, well I didn’t think you would,’ Silver’s one-sided conversation continued, ‘I wonder how he found out. Anyway, glad you’re feeling better. See you later.’

Silver disconnected and made to replace the phone in his bag, before stopping as a thought struck him. Slowly he turned back to his phone and accessed another number in the contacts menu.

He waited for the connection to be made. Instead, he was disappointed to hear the ubiquitous female voice informing him he had reached voicemail and to leave a message at the tone.

‘Hi Jack, Don here, listen, I’ve got a little puzzle that could benefit from your particular expertise. Does the phrase “*The Shape of Rain*” mean anything to you? I think it’s the title of a song, in which case I expect you to give me chapter and verse on it. Anyway give me a call when you get this. Thanks mate.’

This time Silver did put the phone back in his case and got up stiffly from his window table and stretched before making his way to the exit. The Broadcasting House canteen occupied virtually the whole of the eighth floor, spanning the width of the building. At either end, double doors led to a row of three elevators and he chose the east exit, generally the less crowded of the two. However, he wasn’t going to have the luxury of descending alone. There were two BBC maintenance men in their anonymous brown overalls as well as the man in a suit he’d vaguely noticed in the canteen. The four of them stood waiting in silence, gazing at the display indicating the elevator’s progress so as to avoid eye contact. It is a peculiarly British trait, Silver reflected, that we don’t like to acknowledge the existence of someone with whom we are about to share a confined space.

He looked at the slim management type. He had a really low hairline, almost like a werewolf in an old horror movie, with scarcely any forehead showing. Thinking of his own receding locks, he felt a pang of envy.

The elevator arrived and the others stood aside to let him in.

‘Floor?’ the shorter and stockier of the two maintenance men looked at him, eyebrows raised in query.

‘One, please’, Silver answered automatically, giving the floor for his destination studio. The man pressed the button for the first floor and nothing else. Silver vaguely thought it was a bit of a coincidence that they all seemed to be heading for the same floor. The doors slid silently shut and a pre-recorded female voice

announced that they were “going down”. The elevator began its descent then, to Silver’s open-mouthed surprise, the stocky man whipped out a screwdriver, prised the cover off the control panel above the buttons and inserted it with precision into the now exposed circuit board. With a flicker of the lights, the elevator shuddered to a halt. The whole action was undertaken with breathtaking speed and a confident ease that spoke of an expertise Silver could only guess at. Out of the corner of his eye he was aware of the man in the suit looking for something in his brief case.

‘What did you do...’ Silver was going finish with ‘that for?’ but never got the chance.

The stocky man turned and hit him unbelievably hard in the solar plexus. He instantly doubled over, all the residual air driven from his lungs. He couldn’t breathe. Worse, he was in excruciating pain exacerbated, if anything, by his complete inability to grasp what was happening.

The two maintenance men grabbed him, one on either side and forced him upright. Then each wedged one of their legs round his legs, and pinned his arms and torso to the back wall of the confined space. The man in the suit, moving fast, yanked open his mouth with one hand and stuffed in a wet rag that he had produced from his briefcase with the other. He kept pushing until the mouth was stretched as far as it could go and, more pertinently, it had created an airtight seal. He then pinched together the journalist’s nostrils.

Silver tried to struggle for his right to air, but he was pinned in place and couldn’t move. There was no air in his lungs, instead it felt like there was fire inside and he could feel the light-headedness of oxygen deprivation kicking in.

Through his confusion an almost detached sense of self-preservation kicked in. He attempted to thrash around and shake his attackers off balance. For a moment one of the men holding him down appeared to lose his balance, having to move his leg to brace himself more effectively. Surprised, Silver was unable to capitalise on this brief glimmer of hope. He was feeling too weak and the fire in his lungs was making any movement virtually impossible.

As consciousness slipped away the memory of his earlier, prescient thought floated through his mind.

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As Silver’s body sagged, the stocky man let go his side and flicked the trip switch that he had triggered earlier and pressed the button for the basement. The other, taller maintenance man gently lowered Silver to the floor propping him up against the back of the elevator. The smart, slim man produced a pair of opaque rubber gloves from his briefcase, the type policemen use when handling evidence, and quickly slipped them on. He carefully removed the wet rag from the journalist’s mouth and placed it in a padded envelope in his briefcase. Next, he opened Silver’s briefcase and removed the mobile phone. He briefly thumbed through the papers inside before replacing them and closing the case. He placed the phone in his own pocket with the deftness of a conjuror, before removing his gloves and returning them to the case, which he closed and locked. The stocky man replaced the control panel so that, Silver’s body aside, the interior of the elevator was as they had found it.

Seconds later the doors slid open and, with a cursory look around the three men stepped out. The basement was undergoing extensive renovation so none of the offices or studios was occupied. Behind them, in the elevator, Don Silver sat slumped on the floor against the back wall, his knees bent and his chin resting loosely on his chest, like a sleeping drunk.

Silently, the three men walked briskly past “no entry – building work in progress” signs and turned left up a corridor where all the ceilings had been ripped out. The complete absence of workman suggested the warning signs had been a shade misleading; no work was in progress that morning. The two maintenance men peeled off down another corridor to the left and made their way to a staircase which took them to the BBC’s Goods-In yard. Emerging into the daylight, they mingled with half a dozen other similarly-dressed staff. Casually, they edged over to the gate and, within thirty seconds, slipped out into the street and were gone.

The third man, meanwhile, had carried on down the basement corridor towards the front of Broadcasting House. Ducking under a heavy concrete beam to the left he found the door to a tunnel that led to the next-door building, Egton House, separated from Broadcasting House by a small side road. The long-disused tunnel ran under the road through to the Egton House basement, where there was an exit to a private car park. The man entered the car park, taking Silver’s mobile phone out of his jacket pocket as he walked and accessing the recent call lists.

He clicked on “dialled numbers”. Finding what he was looking for, he paused in the shadows of the car park. He took out his own mobile from another pocket and hit the button for one of the numbers in the phone’s memory.

After two rings it was answered.

‘Yes?’ the voice at the other end was tense and terse.

‘All done,’ the man in the suit stated simply in a low voice.

‘Good,’ the recipient of the call was about to disconnect.

‘There may be a problem,’ the caller continued calmly, ‘I need a mobile number traced.’

‘Don’t say anything else over an unsecured line,’ the voice at the other end hissed, ‘meet me in the usual place in thirty minutes.’

Impassively, the man in the suit carefully replaced the phones in different pockets, looking around to ensure he was unobserved before walking unhurriedly out of the car park towards Regent Street where he was swallowed up by the London bustle.