

Chapter 1

An amber light began winking on the truck ahead, so Walid lifted his foot from the accelerator and flicked on his indicator to follow. His eyes ached from brake lights and headlights, and he was fed-up with reading the Dutch number plate since following the truck from a services stop on the A14 ten kilometres back. Both trucks pulled into the lay-by together and Walid stopped barely a half-metre from the Dutchman's rear door. Cars and lorries swished past but the rain had stopped. He climbed from the warm cab into the strong cold northerly wind and zipped his thick dark-grey jacket all the way to his chin. The Dutchman met him between the two vehicles.

'You have the rest of my money?'

'We will see the goods first.' Walid shivered, already hating England's climate. He would like to kill this witness but Karim had warned against attracting unwanted attention. They could trust this man. Walid hoped they could.

The Dutchman put the padlock in his pocket and pushed the rear door upwards, raising it all the way after climbing onto the truck's rear bed. 'This is your package. Look, your woman put her initials in the corner. Where is she?'

Walid also wondered when Mayada would arrive. Without her, the exchange could not take place. 'Get it down.'

'Not without my package. The company would take my job if I delivered a load that did not match the manifest.'

Headlights lit their feet and Walid walked to the curb to peer behind. Moments after the lights dimmed, a large woman walked towards him carrying a brown box. He took

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the box from her and rested it on the truck's floor. 'Now, the package.'

The Dutchman pulled back the pallet wrap, gritted his teeth and tugged at a box. Mayada took it from the large hands and Walid passed up the identical replacement which they had previously swapped before boarding the ferry.

'Here's the rest of your money,' said Walid as he handed over a thick envelope. 'Euros, in used denominations of five hundred and below.'

Mayada grabbed the Dutchman's hand so that the envelope crumpled. 'Remember. The first payment was for bringing our goods through customs and this payment is for keeping quiet. No one betrays us and lives.' She released the man's hand just as he tried tugging free.

He glared at her before stuffing the envelope into a pocket. Without a word, he closed and locked the door, gave them another withering stare, then returned to his cab. The two Palestinians climbed into Mayada's car where they checked the box and its contents. Inside were ten large aerosol cans, printed the same as a household product but with an additional seal around the cap. Walid lifted one out and weighed it in his hand. 'Only ten. We will have to use them wisely.'

'Each contains enough botulism to kill everyone in a large office block, but in the open air...' Mayada let the sentence hang and shrugged her massive shoulders. 'Release them at the right time in underground tunnels and we could infect thousands of travellers plus any who are in the street near the air grilles.'

Walid glanced at the two large flasks and licked his lips.

‘Any left in those?’

She laughed so hard that her ample bosom wobbled beneath her jacket. ‘You would not like their contents. These contain all the anthrax that Karim managed to salvage after the bombing. Here,’ she said, passing him a bottle. ‘Araq.’

He took it and smiled, swallowing the first gulp but savouring the second mouthful and enjoying the aniseed flavour. ‘These English will not even know we have struck a blow against them until the next day. Alas, the Israelis have left us with little. One crop sprayer with this strain could have killed everyone in London overnight.’

‘The English are not stupid, Walid.’ Mayada took the bottle back and placed her hands on the steering wheel. ‘They have already shot down one private aircraft for straying too close to London. We can still cause damage. This strain of anthrax is resistant to seven antibiotics. The Russians only managed five.’

Walid slid a cell phone from his pocket and pressed buttons. ‘The packages have arrived safely.’ Without waiting for an answer, he switched the phone off and tossed it onto the back seat. ‘Dump it.’ He saw Mayada’s frown. ‘Karim’s orders. The security guard at the house will give instructions on the use of all telephones, and these we dump after each call.’

‘Where is Karim?’

‘Babysitting.’

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‘I know you’re a big girl but, oh all right, you can put the

kettle on.' Jennifer McDonald locked the car in the drive of the six-year-old house she had bought when new.

She had despondently watched the fields sink under the weight of concrete foundations and narrow curving cul-de-sacs, but had known she wanted to live here when the first residents made the estate look lived-in. Within weeks of those first families moving into this latest extension to Bradwell, everything changed. Lawns surrounded by neat flower beds and watched over by rotary washing lines outside white plastic conservatories soon covered the builder's rubbish to transform the site. Acquaintances had commented that the only excitement in her road was when someone allowed their dog to foul the pavement, but she always told them to watch what they wished for. Peace suited her. During her holiday next week, she wanted to clean the last boxes and junk from the garage so the car could have a long-overdue home too, even if she had to use a shoehorn to get it in.

She pushed open the front door, careful that the chilly wind blustering from the coast did not slam it against the wall. Kirsty ran past her heading towards the kitchen. 'Be careful.'

After closing the door, she picked up the mail and dropped the car and house keys into the blue china Japanese dish on the narrow hall stand. A glance through the letters showed they were all circulars. Jennifer turned on the lounge light as Kirsty made a surprised sound in the kitchen. She held her breath. Nothing crashed to the floor. Breathing again, she threw her handbag onto an armchair and kicked off her shoes. While putting the unwanted mail in the bin, she saw a khaki duffel bag and a long orange case covered with stickers, like those used for offshore drilling equipment, in the corner.

‘Mummy, Uncle Martyn says he’s staying for a few days.’

She spun round and saw a man holding her daughter. He looked the same age and height as her. ‘Who are you and how did you get in? Don’t bother, just get your bags and leave now or I’m calling the police.’ Her voice faded at his thin smile.

‘Kirsty is a bright five-year-old. I’m sure her mother would like to see her mature, at least until her sixth birthday.’

The room seemed to grow darker and coldness compressed her heart. She had to swallow to allow her throat to work. ‘Who are you?’ Now she noticed his hands resting on Kirsty’s shoulders, but the fingers were too near her throat. Strong hands. She expected to see “LOVE” and “HATE” tattooed on the fingers and that of a dagger on his thick biceps. Although rugged-looking, he had no tattoos and wore no jewellery. More disturbingly, no warmth flowed from his brown eyes.

‘We’ve never met, so why not take off your coat and we’ll sit like normal people to discuss this.’

Almost subliminally, she noticed the locked double-glazed windows, and that the man stood in the only exit from the room. Although he was small, probably one-metre-seventy-five, and slim, she saw wiry strength beneath the T-shirt and designer jeans. His square jaw showed determination and his gaze never wavered. Then she noticed his ears which the crew-cut dark hair left exposed. They began to fascinate her as she looked from one to the other. His right ear had no lobe. Finally, she found her voice. ‘Don’t hurt her.’

‘That’s up to you. Try anything and she suffers.’

‘All right,’ she said, holding out her hands with the palms

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towards him. 'Everything's fine. Just stay calm.'

He smiled but his eyes remained like gun barrels pointing at her. 'Sit.'

Slowly, she shrugged off her coat and hung it over the back of the armchair. She pushed her handbag into the corner and sat.

'Take off your coat and make that coffee, Kirsty. Mummy and I have a few things to discuss.'

They watched her walk from the room, Jennifer noticing wariness mixing with her daughter's initial excitement at finding a new uncle. She turned her stare onto Martyn and he glanced away before coughing. Her fingers found the mobile phone in her bag and she opened her mouth to say anything to cover any noise from the buttons as she turned it on, but he held out a hand towards her and spoke first.

'Give me the bag.'

'Why? I think you owe me an explanation.'

He immediately stepped up to her, thrust his hand towards her hip and yanked the bag away. Without thinking, she tried clawing at his face while kicking his shins. Strong fingers gripped her throat. She couldn't breathe. His hand pressed her head into the chair's back and she couldn't swallow or speak. All she could do was to grip his wrists.

'Listen to me. I will say this just once.'

His grip loosened enough to allow her to grab a cupful of air into her burning lungs. Now she knew exactly how strong he was. His hard eyes swam in her misty firefly-filled sight and his voice growled on.

'I don't want to terrify a young girl, but try something like that again and she'll start losing body parts.' Something sharp

and shiny appeared next to her eye. 'If you behave then all Kirsty need know is that her uncle came to stay for a few days. Do we have a deal?'

Fireworks exploded inside her skull. She tried nodding. Her head felt like it would fall off. He released his grip and her head fell forwards. She rubbed her throat and tried breathing through the sore constriction. As the blood and oxygen began flowing properly again, she realised her feet throbbed where she had kicked him and now wished she had kept her shoes on. The curtains swished as he closed them. Her eyes watched the faded red brocade stiffly unfold, and promised to treat herself to a new pair when funds allowed. His voice jerked her back to reality.

'Now, are you listening?' Stiffly, like the curtains, he moved to the settee and sat on the end closest to her. He waited for her nod before continuing. 'I will stay here with Kirsty for about five days then you'll not see me again.'

'You'll kill us anyway.'

He shook his head and tried smiling. 'Only if you do anything stupid or get in my way. Play by my rules and Kirsty will never know anything was wrong. You're old enough to put this behind you and get on with your life. What about the school?'

'Half-term. They broke up today.' Her throat was too dry. She needed a drink or she'd throw up. He seemed to read her mind.

'Let's help with the drinks.' He rose but Kirsty entered the room, taking tiny steps while trying not to spill the coffee. The mugs were full, and dark brown fluid dripped from them at each step despite Kirsty using her protruding tongue to

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help keep her balance. Martyn took the mugs from her. 'You've done this before.'

'First time,' she chuckled. 'Mummy only lets me put the kettle on. I haven't made much mess either.'

'Good. Why don't you play in your room until dinner?' Guiding his feet around a doll and its discarded clothes, he passed a mug to Jennifer. 'It's hot and wet. Probably tastes like shit, but what the hell?'

Jennifer sipped at the hot mud and decided to show Kirsty how to make a proper mug of coffee real soon. 'I'd be grateful if you watched your language. I'm used to hearing it at work but I don't want Kirsty exposed to it.'

'That's how I speak, so if you don't like it, then tough. So, she's on holiday. What about you?'

'I'm at work tomorrow, then have next week off.'

'Who's looking after Kirsty tomorrow?'

'You are.'

'Don't get funny with me. If anyone shows up, well, you know what will happen.'

'All right. A neighbour picks Kirsty up from school and looks after her until I get home from work. She was going to have her tomorrow.'

'That didn't hurt, did it? Call this neighbour and tell her that your cousin has arrived and will look after Kirsty. How about family and friends?'

He tossed the mobile towards her and she started dialling. 'My family lives in Peterborough and I don't expect any friends to call.'

When she finished the call, he snatched the phone from her hand. 'What about boyfriends?'

She looked at him more closely, trying to see what he knew. 'My husband will arrive home soon.' Her fingers lightly touched the red marks appearing around her throat and she grimaced at the tenderness.

He sighed. 'Your husband died six months ago, so stop the bullshit and answer my questions.'

'Yes, dammit! He volunteered to help in every disaster and died trying to save others. Everyone saw him as a local hero. A building in Damascus collapsed when a gas tank exploded. Before that happened, he had found thirty-two people in the rubble after the earthquake. Maybe he was only a fireman, but I loved him. You should try saving a life sometime.'

Martyn shook his head, grinning. 'You didn't love him that much.'

She looked away. 'I don't have any boyfriends,' she answered softly. When she glanced up, his eyebrows rose and his eyes stared past her pupils directly into her mind. Her body trembled. 'What are you going to do?'

'Have dinner, I hope. Then make another drink, this is really awful.'

The laugh came from nowhere. 'Yes it is.' Then the tears welled in her eyes. She tried wiping them away but they just kept coming. A shadow fell across her and a hand pulled at her elbow.

'Let's start dinner,' he said softly.

She shook him off. 'Just keep your hands off me and my daughter.' Her knees didn't want to work but she forced the legs to move her stiffly into the kitchen while Martyn followed closely. The kettle stood in a pool of water and dark brown stains dotted the worktop. Sugar lay like a beach over

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everything but she calmly washed her hands before cleaning the mess. After rinsing her hands again, she selected some vegetables and chicken pies from the freezer. The work distracted her enough to stop the unwanted tears. 'I'll need to go shopping soon. I hadn't counted on an extra mouth to feed.'

'Do it tomorrow after work. Don't forget, Kirsty will stay with me.'

'So you keep reminding me. God, you're so macho threatening a little girl. I wonder what you'd be like if faced with a real man.'

'I'd kill him.'

She didn't like his confident grin but couldn't stop her anger. 'All talk. You've probably not even been in a punch-up for years.'

'If you must know, I've killed seven men, women and children. Now, would you like to hear how each one died?'