

Chapter 1

Sabotage and Escape

Tony Kinfrank heard a crash, and then the lights began flickering. When he heard another loud noise, he raced towards the main production area and saw a forklift ramming a large storage vessel.

As the forks retracted, the Ambronootrop base began flooding across the floor. Kinfrank was about to run toward the forklift when something hard contacted his neck, and a voice said, "Well, well, if it isn't the great Tony Kinfrank in person."

Realising that the other man was holding a pistol, Kinfrank took a step back. "What are you doing?"

The other man smiled and replied, "Why don't we go back to your office and discuss it?"

Instead of doing as instructed, Kinfrank exclaimed, "You're Alan Kerr, aren't you?"

Kerr gave him a half-smile, "Congratulations on recognising me, Tony. Nowadays, when I look at my face in the mirror, I don't recognise who's looking back."

Hearing another crash, Kinfrank said, "Why are you wrecking the plant?"

"The answer is written all over my face," Kerr replied. "Now you have a choice. You can help us, or I will kill you. So, what's going to be? Go to your office or die here?"

When Kerr cocked the gun, Kinfrank said, "Okay, okay. I'll go to my office."

Once inside, Kinfrank asked, "What's this all about?"

Kerr pointed his gun at the computer on Kinfrank's desk, "We'll talk, but first, I need you to instigate a full wipe on your computer. NOW!"

After doing as instructed, Kerr said, "I've no doubt you have cloud backup, but Keith will deal with that once he finished wrecking the joint."

Kinfrank repeated, "Why are you doing this?"

"Slash & Byrne promised us fulfilment," Kerr replied and pointed at his face, "But I don't call this fulfilment."

"Fulfilment. What's that?"

"Don't play the innocent," Kerr snapped. "You must know what fulfilment is!"

"I have never heard the term used before," Kinfrank insisted.

"Then why have you been working on a safe method of calculating an Ambronootrop/stabiliser combination."

"To make sure Ambronootrop can be used safely," Kinfrank replied.

"Can be used safely," Kerr mimicked, picking up on his accent.

"Yes," Kinfrank replied.

"Well, guess what," Kerr said, "While you have been trying to make it safe, Slash & Byrne has been carrying out dosing experiments using people like me as guinea pigs."

"Guinea pigs?"

"Test animals," Kerr snapped. "They lied to us, of course. They said the risks to our health were minimal."

"They never told me about tests," Kinfrank lied.

Kerr gave Kinfrank a grim smile, "Don't play the innocent! You must have had some idea what was going on."

"No, I didn't. Not this!"

“Okay,” Kerr replied. “Let’s assume I believe you for the time being. I’m sure you have attempted to find a safe method of calculating an Ambronootrop/stabiliser combination. It’s a logical thing to do, but”

“But, what?”

“We think Slash & Byrne decided to ignore or modify your ideas. We also believe that your suggestions were proving too expensive, so they made cost-driven modifications and brought cheap Ambronootrop base from abroad, from backstreet operations, Ambronootrop base that wasn’t purified enough.”

Kerr pointed at his face, “Ambronootrop was supposed to make us superior, but it hasn’t. Instead, it’s turned us into freaks.”

“It shouldn’t have done,” Kinfrank replied defensively. “As I just said, I worked out a reasonably safe method of calculating an Ambronootrop/stabiliser combination.”

“Then how come Keith and myself have ended up like this?” Kerr snapped. He pricked his ears up. “Sounds like Keith has finished his demolition derby. He’ll be with us shortly.”

“What are you hoping to achieve by doing this?” Kinfrank demanded.

“To slow Slash & Byrne down,” Keith cut in as he entered the room. “This is the main Ambronootrop/stabiliser production plant, and all your documentation is on the computers in here. If we put this place out of action, it will be months before they can set up elsewhere. Taking this place out will help to prevent anyone else from suffering the same fate as us. Not fulfilment but torment..”

Keith sat down; he glanced at the computer busily destroying files and let out a sigh of satisfaction. Then, he said, “The only thing we haven’t worked out is what to do with you.”

Kinfrank’s Adam’s apple began jerking involuntarily, “Do with me?”

Keith left the computer, pulled out his phone and showed Kinfrank a series of photographs, “There you are, Dr Frankenstein, have a look at some of the monsters you have helped to create.”

Kinfrank took a glance and wailed, “No! No! I didn’t think this would happen.”

Continuing to flick through the photographs, Keith said, “Yes, Yes. So this is what your wonder drug has done to some people.”

“They must have been exceeding the recommended dose,” Kinfrank bleated.

“Of course, they have been exceeding the recommended dose,” Kerr replied. “Slash & Byrne told the test subjects that to reach fulfilment, they would need to overdose. The records show that although most people on the trial succeeded, there were quite a few who ended up like us.”

Keith picked up Tony Kinfrank’s phone and transferred the images across, and added, “That’s in case you try to forget what I’ve just shown you. That’s if we let you live, of course, Dr Frankenstein.”

“So,” Kerr said, “the big unanswered question. What to do with you? Let you go or kill you?”

Keith added, “Maybe we should kill him. That way he, can never work for Slash & Byrne again.”

“Do you *really* think I want to work for them again after seeing those photographs,” Kinfrank said.

Kerr lowered his gun and said, “Now, that’s a good start.”

“The only thing is,” Keith chipped in, “Do you really think Slash & Byrne will let you disappear? You know too much.”

Searching for a lifeline in case Keith was determined to kill him, Kinfrank said, “We could go to the police and tell them what we know. We could show them your photographs.”

Keith shook his head, “We are not going anywhere. We have a job to complete.”

“Okay,” Kinfrank replied. “I could go to the police.”

This time, Kerr shook his head, “Not a good idea. We know of a few people who have tried going to the police. Whenever someone has attempted to provide evidence that could close Slash & Byrne down, Slash & Byrne was tipped off by police and civil servant insiders. To our knowledge, eight would-be informers are definitely dead, gunned down before they could make any incriminating statements. We are pretty sure that a guy called Martin Moxstroma, a so-called private detective, killed them. Two others wound up in a mental institution. Do you want to die or end up in a loony bin?”

“Of course not.”

“Then going to the police is not an option,” Kerr replied.

Keith said, “I don’t think Tony believes us.”

Kerr said, “Show him the photos.”

Keith did as instructed and began displaying images of dead bodies, and as each one popped up, he gave detailed descriptions of how they’d died. When he’d finished, he said, “Eight assassinations.”

“You’re joking! Eight people murdered?”

“I wish I were joking,” Kerr replied. “I do not doubt that Martin Moxstroma has killed a lot more than just eight. He’s probably a psychopath and enjoys killing. Either that or the Ambronootrop he’s been taking has turned him into a wanton killer. It’s one of the problems with Ambronootrop; it can trigger personality disorders.”

Before Kinfrank could say anything else, Keith opened a cloth bag. He began laying out small cylinders with timing devices on the front. Although Kinfrank had never seen a demolition charge before, he’d watched enough action movies to realise what they were.

Glancing at Kinfrank, Keith said, “We intend to destroy this entire building to make sure nothing can be salvaged. We believe it’s the only way to prevent Slash & Byrne from continuing with its program.”

Kerr added, “Once we’ve destroyed this place, they will have lost most of their production facilities, a large amount of stock and all of your research. They will want you back to help them with their madcap schemes.”

Keith said, “But if you disappear and keep your head down. Slash & Byrne might think, you’ve died with us.” Then, he waved around one of the demolition charges, “The captain went down with his ship. Well, what do you think?”

As he had no desire to die, Kinfrank said, “I could just disappear.”

“It would be a good choice,” Keith said. “Unless you want to die with us.” He picked up the demolition charges and left the room.

Kerr said, “So, if we let you go, will you disappear?”

“I just said,” Kinfrank replied, “after seeing those photographs, I want out.”

“Okay,” Kerr replied. “Let’s wait until Keith gets back and get his approval.”

Five minutes later, Keith returned minus the demolition charges, and the two men began discussing Kinfrank’s future again. Eventually, Kerr tossed a set of car keys to Kinfrank, “Take our car and get out of here. We won’t need it. And don’t hang around. In a few minutes, this whole place is going to erupt.”

As Kinfrank stood up to leave, he said, “You’re not going to shoot me in the back, are you?”

“No! I’m not going to shoot you in the back.” Kerr snapped. “Now go before I change my mind.”

Kinfrank grabbed his phone and the car keys and began to run. While he was still picking his way through the debris that Keith had created, he heard two distinct shots ring out. He guessed that the other two men had decided to die by their own hand rather than wait for the building to collapse all around them. With fears for his safety spurring him on, Kinfrank started running faster. Once out of the building, he jumped into Kerr's car and drove off.

After the car had travelled less than half a mile, the charges went off, debris shot out in all directions, and a massive plume of smoke rose into the air. Kinfrank's mind began to race. Despite his protestations of innocence, he had heard enough rumours to work out what Slash & Byrne's long term plans were and had been trying to work out how he could escape from their clutches. Glancing in the rearview at the ever-widening plume of smoke, Kinfrank realised that the two men who'd destroyed the plant had given him a way out. With any luck, he'd be presumed dead.

As he carried on driving, he heard the first sirens approaching and deliberately took a side road so that no one saw him. Then, he began thinking about what he was going to do next.

As he had nowhere else to go and needed to unburden, he set off towards his brother's house. After driving for two hours without stopping, Kinfrank swung the car onto his brother's drive and then rushed to the front door.

Simon Kinfrank answered almost immediately. Noting the haunted expression on his brother's face, he reached out, pulled Tony inside and then asked, "Want a cup of tea?"

Despite the stress he felt, Tony Kinfrank burst out laughing, "Tea is your answer to everything, isn't it?"

Simon waved towards the kitchen table, and once the tea had brewed and was poured, he inquired, "So, why have you come streaming in here like all the hounds of hell are after you?"

In answer, Tony pulled out his mobile and showed his brother the photographs of the two dead men that Keith had transferred to his phone. Then, he added, "This is what Slash & Byrne has been doing to people."

He displayed the images of all the people who'd been executed to preserve Slash & Byrne's dark secrets and explained who they were.

Simon shook his head, "You're joking."

"I wish I were," Tony replied and then swiftly ran through the happenings of the day. When he'd finished, Simon said, "I know it doesn't help, but I did warn you that these Slash & Byrne people were a nasty bunch. I've had dealings with some of them, and they play dirty." He added, "So, what are you going to do?"

"I was hoping I could stay here with you," Tony replied.

Simon shook his head, "They know I'm your brother. So this would be the first place they'd come looking."

A moment later, Tony Kinfrank's mobile began to ring. Before he could answer, Simon clamped a hand over it and glanced at the screen, "Someone has sent you a message."

Tony held his hand out, "Let me see."

Simon shook his head and kept hold of Tony's mobile, "No, you don't answer your phone from now on. You're dead. Remember?"

Simon began tapping Tony's mobile and made a test warble, "From now on, you only answer your phone if who hear that ring tone. You will then know it's me."

When Tony didn't look convinced, Simon added, "You don't answer your phone unless it's me. More importantly, you don't make any calls from now on. I once read an article which said that people can track the location of mobile phones if they know how to do it."

Going back to their previous conversation, Tony said, "If I can't stay here, where can I go?"

"I have a plan. I know where you can go," Simon replied.

"Where?"

"The Astley's who live just down the road are in Spain for some time. They have a timeshare," Simon revealed. "I'm looking after their house. I have the keys so I can go down and check it out from time to time."

"How long will they be away?"

Simon shrugged, "Probably another fortnight at least. Maybe longer. They will tell me when they're coming back."

"So I can stay there?"

"Not exactly," Simon replied. "Not in the main house, that is. This area has a very active Home Watch. Their neighbours might see you there and start asking questions."

"So where then?"

"The Astley's also have a granny flat above a garage some distance from the main house. So, you could park your car there and live in the flat above."

"It's not my car," Tony replied and explained how he'd acquired it.

"In that case, you definitely have to park the car in the Astley's garage. You can't leave it here," Simon said. "If anyone comes around, they could check the number plate; your cover is blown. So, as I said, park it under the granny flat."

Tony Kinfrank swiftly considered his options and then nodded, "The granny flat it is then."

Ever practical, Simon glanced at the lab coat his brother was wearing and said, "I'll let you have some of my clothes," and nodded towards a staircase. Once in his bedroom, Simon pulled down a battered old suitcase that had been through several generations and then began selecting clothes from his wardrobe. As he did so, he glanced back, "Luckily, we're still around the same size."

As Tony began dressing in a new outfit, Simon grabbed his lab coat and shoved it into the case, "If Slash & Byrne come looking for you, I don't want them finding any of your belongings, now do I?"

Simon went to a drawer, pulled out a box and said, "This is a cheap burner phone I bought a while ago. It was an impulse buy, and I've never used it. If you have to make calls, use this instead of your own phone."

He added, "How much money have you got?"

When his brother felt in this pocket and brought out a low denomination bill and a few coins, Simon went to a drawer and said, "There's a hundred quid as an emergency fund. A word of caution, if you have to go on the run again, don't hang around if you have to use a cash dispenser. Withdrawals are traced quickly."

Once he'd finished packing, Simon closed the case and then said, "I hope you don't mind me taking you straight down to the granny flat. I've got an itch that tells me it won't be long before I have visitors asking after you."

After leading the way downstairs again, Simon went to the fridge and began selecting one or two items, "This should keep you going for a few days."

He led the way to the car, loaded the suitcases and food parcels and reached for his bike. As he placed the bike inside too, Simon smiled, "It's not far to the Astley's place, but I prefer my bike to Shanks' *pony*."

After driving to the Astley's house, Simon directed him straight to the garage. As he moved in, Tony realised that there were two sets of doors. There were double doors on the house side and the same on the other."

Simon smiled, "As a kid, I used to play in here. In those days, they hadn't converted upstairs into a flat."

He pointed to a fixed ladder that led to a trap door, "At one time, that was the only way into the loft area."

Once out of the car, Tony pointed to the second set of double doors, "Where do they go?"

Simon opened the doors and let Tony glance outside at the unmade dirt track and said, "Around here, they call that road the bumps."

He added, "If you need to get out of here fast, go down the bumps. It runs past the back of all the houses on this road. The main road is only two hundred yards away."

Pulling the case out of the car, Simon took Tony to a newer set of stairs. Once on the external landing, he opened the door. Then, after spending a few minutes showing Tony where everything was, Simon said, "You mustn't do any more work for Slash & Byrne."

"I won't."

Simon became very serious, "From what you have told me, they are going to try to find you. They may even decide to kill you if they don't need you anymore. You are a loose end, and it is obvious they don't like loose ends."

"You are probably right," Tony replied.

Simon gave him a stern look, "If they threaten to do something to me, don't go back to them."

When Tony looked uncertain, Simon said, "Those photographs you showed me are enough for me to realise they're evil to the core. I want you to promise me that you won't go back to them in any circumstances."

"Okay," Tony replied. "I promise."

After leaving the flat, Simon extracted his bike from the car and cycled back to his own house. As he came close to a layby, he heard beeping sounds, and a police car came into view. However, Simon wasn't surprised. About once a week, the police set up a speed trap in that location.

After cycling past the police car, he continued towards his own house. When he arrived, he noticed a large black van parked on his gravel drive and movements from inside his home.

Once he'd dismounted, thinking he had burglars, Simon pulled out his phone, but before he could dial, a large man stepped from behind the van and snatched it from him.

Without preamble, the man said, "We're looking for your brother. Where is he?"

Simon Kinfrank didn't answer the question. Instead, he became accusative, "You've broken into my house!"

"No, we didn't," the man corrected and held up a key, "when we didn't get an answer, we found the key under the plant pot and let ourselves in. Now back to my question. Where is your brother?"

"I haven't seen him for weeks," Simon Kinfrank lied.

"I think you have," the man replied and stepped forward aggressively and grabbed hold of Simon's coat. Simon reacted rather than thought. The next moment the man landed on the lawn, winded.

Simon Kinfrank moved in fast and retrieved his phone, dialled the police and made a hurried report. He'd just finished making the call when Kevin Alsop, a neighbour, steamed up and shouted, "Home Watch."

By that time, the man on the lawn had recovered and staggered to his feet. Simon immediately adopted a karate stance.

For a fraction of a second, Simon thought that his assailant would ignore his body language. Instead, the man rushed towards the van, started up and then raced down Simon's long drive with the horn blaring. The van turned sharply, sending gravel flying in all directions.

The van driver hit the horn twice more, and two other men emerged from Simon's house and jumped into the van. The machine came hurtling back down the drive, deliberately swerving in Simon's direction, but he was quick enough to dive out of the way.

As the van screeched down the road, Simon made a mental note of the number plate. Then, climbing to his feet, he began to brush himself down, and glancing at his neighbour, he thanked him for his intervention.

Kevin Alsop stared back at him, wide-eyed, "They tried to run you over, you know. Are you okay?"

"I'll live," Simon said, "I've just called the police."

Seeing that Kevin had a notepad and pen, Simon took them from him and wrote the number plate details down before forgetting them.

While he was still writing, Alsop said, "That was a good throw you did on him."

Simon half-smiled, "When I was younger, I was a judo brown belt."

"It's good you can still do it," Alsop gushed.

Although Simon didn't admit it, his success against the thug had surprised him too. It had been a long time since he'd seriously practised his sport. Life had got in the way.

Kevin suggested, "You'd better check if they have stolen anything."

"Yeah, I'll go and do that", Simon replied.

"Shall I come with you?"

Although Simon Kinfrank was reasonably sure his unwelcome visitors had left, he nodded, "If you don't mind."

He collected his bike and walked towards his house. A few seconds later, they heard sirens wailing; the police had arrived.

Kevin smiled, "That was quick. Normally, it takes hours for a police car to turn up around here."

Simon recognised the officer who'd been parked up in the layby but didn't say anything.

Kevin Alsop said, "You've missed 'em they've gone. They went that way."

"How long ago?"

Kevin said, "Two, maybe three minutes ago."

The officer seemed to consider giving chase but instead put out an alert for a black van. Simon remembered he'd taken the number plate details. Once he'd passed them over, the police officer when back to his car to check it out.

Eventually, he returned and said, "It looks like that number plate matches those of a stolen vehicle."

The constable glanced around, "Has anything been stolen?"

"I've not had a chance to check yet," Simon replied. He led the way into the house and began checking around. After inspecting the ground floor and finding very few signs of disturbance, the constable said, "You were lucky. You must have disturbed them before they stole anything."

He said, "Shall we check upstairs?"

As they went up, the first thing they saw was the loft ladder. As they had left the light on, Simon immediately went up and checked.

Coming down, Simon said, "Nothing has been moved."

A look of suspicion formed on the police officer's face, and he went up the ladder. He then smiled apologetically on the way down, "For a moment, I thought you were growing cannabis plants up there. That alone would be reason enough for a break-in."

One of Simon's eyebrows hooked, "Well, I'm not growing cannabis in my loft."

"Shall we check the other rooms?" the officer replied, trying to change the subject.

While they were looking in the upstairs rooms, Kevin Alsop became "Home Watch Man" again and said, "I think we should check the Astley's house; they are away on holiday."

Fearing that his brother might be discovered, Simon Kinfrank asked, "Is it okay if I come with you? I promised the Astleys I'd keep an eye on things while they were away."

After giving his overzealous neighbour a dagger's drawn look, Simon said, "I don't think there is any reason for Kevin here to come with us, do you?"

"No," the officer agreed. "You must have things to do." Kevin left with a broad smile on his face after being thanked for being public-spirited.

Once Simon and the officer arrived at the Astley's house, the constable checked for apparent signs of a break-in. Finding none, he glanced at the garage and granny flat and walked towards it. As they crunched down a gravel path, Simon said a mental prayer that his brother would have the sense to keep quiet.

After testing the doors, the constable glanced through a chink in the garage door and said, "I presume that is the Astley's car, in there."

"Yes," Simon lied. "They never take it with them when they go to Spain. They use taxis. They don't like driving on the wrong side of the road."

~*~

Martin Moxstroma's mobile rang. As it had let out a very distinct warble, he knew it was his police contact, "Yes."

"We only found two bodies in the building," the voice said.

"No sign of the missing car?"

"No."

"Thanks," Moxstroma replied. The two pieces of information confirmed Moxstroma's original assumption. Tony Kinfrank was alive, and chances were he'd gone into hiding.

Moxstroma was about to hang up when the voice added, "Did your boys pay Simon Kinfrank's place a visit today?"

"I've no idea what you're talking about," Moxstroma lied.

"I thought you'd say that," the voice sniped, "A word of warning. You've stirred up a hornet's nest. The local Home Watch has put all its members on high alert. Curtains will be twitching if you try to go back."

"Thanks for letting me know."

"A couple more things," the voice said. "We have discovered Tony Kinfrank's mobile phone number as you requested."

"Great. You said a couple more points. What's the rest?"

"One of our officers went to Simon Kinfrank's house after the incident and got a distinct impression that the bother was holding something back. Simon Kinfrank is looking after a neighbour's house; my guess is his brother is holed up there."

When Moxstroma let out a whoop of delight, the voice added, "If I were you, I wouldn't do anything for a couple of days. You need to let the dust settle. If you're caught breaking in again, our boys will have to arrest you. I can't risk my career by sticking my neck out too far."

Moxstroma said, "Point taken. I'll hold off for a couple of days."

"One last thing," the voice said. "I'd change the number plates on the van you're using. Simon Kinfrank made a note of it and passed it on. We told him it had been reported stolen."

"Good thinking," Moxstroma replied.

