

Fire in the Dark

Michael Oldham

extract

Chapter 1

Ringstead Bay, Dorset, England – 15th October 2003

It was about an hour before sunset when the car, a nondescript grey saloon turned off the main road and climbed the winding narrow country lane to the top of the coastal ridge. Across the bay, silhouetted against the sea and the sky, a shimmering backcloth of silver light, the Isle of Portland appeared dark and foreboding. Overhead, clouds were subtly transforming into broad, ragged, multi-coloured remnants that stretched inland over the chalk downs as far as Dorchester. Day was slowly conceding to approaching night.

The road ahead took an abrupt turn to the right to begin a steep descent towards the sea. The car carried straight on, leaving the road and heading east along a wide, pot-holed farm track, towards an open five-barred gate. It rattled noisily over a deformed galvanised tubular steel cattle grid and entered a large grassy field where there were already several cars randomly parked. There were still a few walkers about, as well as a couple of paraglider pilots who were kneeling on the ground carefully folding up their brightly coloured wings.

Below the field, past the gorse-covered escarpment over which the paragliders had flown that afternoon, a small group of farm buildings sheltered in a hollow. Beyond, a collection of houses and a wide shingle beach stretched out beside the bay.

The car slowed and stopped at the far end of the field, parking near to a hedge, well away from the other vehicles. The occupants remained in their seats for a moment, observing their surroundings, and then, after exchanging no more than a glance, they got out of the car and opened the boot. They each extracted a pair of walking boots and a camouflage waterproof jacket. After changing their footwear, they each placed their shoes in the boot and removed two small backpacks. Then, the man who had driven the car, locked the doors, and placed the key in the grass behind the rear offside wheel.

They were swarthy, stocky men of medium build, with a meagre growth of stubby hair on their shaven heads and their unshaved chins. So similar were they that they could have been brothers, possibly even from the same litter of pit bull terriers who they most closely resembled.

Still silent, they turned and headed for a wooden stile by another five bar gate. After leaving the field they set off at an easy pace, following the coastal footpath towards a distinctive white chalk headland, a feature on Dorset's Jurassic coast, that was already tinged pink by the setting sun.

Initially, they continued to follow the farm track that wound its way through a thicket of gorse, bramble, and stunted ash. It was just wide enough for a vehicle. In the centre of the track, a narrow ridge of grass and weeds stretched between two well-worn wheel tracks. Unlike committed walkers, the two men carefully skirted the areas where muddy water lay stagnant in the ruts.

The light was beginning to fade and the air temperature suddenly dropped as a cool breeze whistled through the undergrowth. Startled by rustle of dried leaves in the thicket one of the men anxiously looked to his left. His partner turned and smiled, shaking his head; he sympathised with him, knowing that his companion was probably on edge. And he wasn't surprised, adrenaline was already coursing through his veins.

After emerging from the thicket, the track turned and descended to the right towards two large houses perched near the top of the cliffs. Surrounding woodland partially concealed the dwellings; it was just as had been described to them. It was reassuring. It was where they were eventually heading, but not immediately.

Leaving the farm track, they climbed over another stile, picking up the coastal footpath that rose gently towards the headland. Ten minutes later, when they arrived at the headland, they stopped. One of the men slipped off his rucksack and removed a pair of binoculars. The first and larger of the two houses was their target and the man took his time to make a careful observation before passing the glasses to his colleague. They needed to be sure, as well as careful; they knew that there would be little margin for error.

They concurred that the house was empty. There were no lights on and, more importantly, there wasn't a car parked on the drive. It was as they had hoped. They would have time to set themselves up comfortably before the arrival of their target. With luck, they would not have long to wait. Above, in the gathering twilight, only dark gloomy tatters remained of the clouds.

It was rumoured that Winston Churchill had stayed in the house in the early years of the war. It had a commanding view of Portland Harbour across Weymouth Bay. Constructed of brick and Portland Stone, it retained much of its original character. A south-facing stone terrace, with a brick colonnade, led out onto a large flat lawn. At the edge of the lawn, the ground fell away sharply to a short steep grassy slope that gave way to a thicket on top of the cliff. Woodland enclosed the two other sides. Near to the property's rear entrance was a collection of outbuildings grouped around a large parking area. It was in this location where they had searched with the binoculars for the car and found that it wasn't there.

As night fell, enveloping the landscape and destroying its features, the two men started their descent, retracing their footsteps along the coastal footpath to a point where it forked. The junction was hardly discernable in the gloom. The path was narrower, less frequented, and more overgrown, but it led directly towards the woodland on the east side of the house.

When they arrived at the trees, they stopped and opened their packs. Moments later, after pulling black balaclavas over their faces, they each put on a miniature walkie-talkie headset and carried out a check by gently tapping a finger on the microphone. They nodded to each other in confirmation. Around their waists, they strapped on belts equipped with a long-bladed hunting knife, a small torch, and a mace atomiser capable of temporarily blinding and disabling an opponent in seconds. Over their shoulders, before replacing their jackets, they both slipped on a compact machine pistol. After hiding the rucksacks under a bush, they parted, each going their separate ways to take up their predetermined posts. They had rehearsed their plan, they understood their mission, they knew exactly what they had to do, and they were ready to undertake it.

The first of the two men crossed the drive into the woodland on the far side and made his way up the hill to where the woodland edge met the chalk down. There, next to a cattle grid, he positioned himself in the undergrowth. The second man approached the house and concealed himself in the courtyard close to the property's rear entrance next to where the target's car would normally be parked. He noted with satisfaction that the information about the house was accurate and concluded they had been well briefed. They had memorised drawings of the house and grounds and studied low-level aerial photos.

The strategy for their mission was simple and straightforward. The first man positioned in the undergrowth was to advise on the arrival of the car, or cars. Should there be more than one car, the mission would be aborted immediately and the second man would withdraw before the cars arrived. If the mission wasn't aborted, the first man's role was also to ensure their safe withdrawal, especially if his colleague was injured. He was also the backup in the unlikely event that his colleague failed. It would become his responsibility to complete the job.

As they waited, each felt a heightened sense of awareness as adrenaline increased the tension. But their wait was long; much longer than they had anticipated. It was two hours before the car eventually arrived, its approach heralded by headlights shining along the ridge. As the car turned to descend the track towards the house, the lights rotated in an arc, like a lighthouse beam. It was alone.

As it approached the woodland edge, the car slowed down. A deer, which had been browsing in the adjacent field, startled by the sudden glare of the headlights, sprang, alarmed, into the thicket at the woodland edge. Almost immediately, it leapt back into the field, apparently confused and then ran snorting alongside the woodland towards the settlement by the coast.

Seeing a deer wasn't unusual; they came out of the woodland in the evening and at night to browse at the field edge. What was odd, the driver thought, was that having sought safety and concealment in the woodland, the deer jumped out again towards the potential danger that it had initially endeavoured to avoid. Something must have startled it. What

was it - a dog, or a fox perhaps? The driver considered the puzzling behaviour as the car began to cross the tubular steel cattle grid that separated the drive of the house from the track. His nostrils flared, his awareness was suddenly sharpened, and the hair on the back of his neck stood up. Why? He had no idea, but suddenly he sensed danger. Automatically, his mind began to race as he assessed the most likely possibilities.

It was strange. He had become lulled into a sense of false security believing that he now lived in quiet anonymity with little to fear or irritate him, other than the demands of the Inland Revenue, or the occasional obstinate rambler, who thought that he had the right to roam wherever he wished. He wondered if perhaps he had overreacted, but determined, as he had been trained, to remain calm, observant, and above all, patient.

First, he decided, he shouldn't park in his normal place. There were still two hundred metres of drive before the house. Stopping on the drive offered no particular advantage. Driving past the house to the lawn provided better possibilities. Quickly, he decided on the latter. He switched on the CD player and turned the volume up.

When he reached the lawn, he switched off the headlights, but left the engine and the CD player running. Then, after feeling under his seat and pulling out the small pack that he kept there, he switched off the engine and slipped out of the car on the side away from the house. Deliberately, he left the door of the Land Cruiser slightly ajar, the internal light on, and the CD playing. Slithering quietly down the slope at the edge of the lawn, he made his way quietly into the woodland.

He paused and looked back. He had a clear view of the car, the lawn, the west side of the house and the parking area by the outbuildings at the rear. He needed to give his eyes time to get accustomed to the dark and lay down feeling somewhat stupid, wondering once again if he had overreacted. Still, better safe than sorry, he mused as he controlled his breathing. Then, from the small pack, he removed a set of night vision goggles. They took only seconds to put on and very quickly, his eyes became accustomed to the artificial monochromatic light. Taking care to make no sudden movements, he began to observe the house.

Everything seemed normal. Perhaps he had been wrong. Perhaps he had just been spooked, like the deer. He waited two or three minutes - still nothing. Opening the pack again, he put his hand round the grip of the automatic weapon. Wrapped around it was an elastic shoulder harness with a holster for a noise suppressor. The gun, a 9 mm Beretta 92FS, was less bulky and lighter than a .45 calibre weapon; it also had the advantage of a large magazine - fifteen cartridges. He removed the silencer and screwed it onto the barrel of the gun and waited. Then, he removed a light camouflage net and slowly concealed himself under it. Finally, he removed his spare car keys from the pack and waited.

The distracting sound of the music emanating from the car irritatingly penetrated the darkness. The man hiding by the outbuildings listened carefully waiting for the noise to stop and his target to emerge. Perhaps his target was just listening to the

music enjoying the view of the bay. Perhaps he had a girl with him. That would be an unpleasant and unforeseen complication. He waited and tried to relax. He had a job to do for which he would be very well paid and he needed to take his time.

Looking at his watch he saw that thirty-five minutes had elapsed. Fifteen minutes later the music stopped. Silence. His ears pricked and his mouth went dry as he anticipated the slam of a car door. Nothing. Then, then the music started again. He cursed. Cautiously, he edged out of his hiding place.

Less than twenty-five metres away, on the edge of the woodland, the movement was noted. From underneath the camouflage net, the intruder was observed moving hesitantly around the rear of the house, edging towards the corner of the building and the parked car.

More frustration, the tall headrests made it impossible to see if there was anyone in the car. Nevertheless, he noted that the light was on, and that suggested that there must be someone in it. It was enough to give him the courage to advance a little further.

Approaching slowly, holding his machine pistol at the ready, he switched on the red spot laser sight. It would increase his accuracy in the dark. Unwittingly, however, in approaching the car, he also reduced the distance between himself and the man concealed in the woodland who was still observing him with great interest.

First, it was clear to the man in the woodland that the intruder could not be operating alone. The small headset that he was wearing over the balaclava gave that away. Second, the weapon he was carrying was not something to take on a picnic, or a duck shoot. It was an Israeli Micro-Uzi and was a seriously dangerous piece of kit. It had an exceptional fire rate designed to rip the guts out of people at relatively short range. Third, the red spot laser sight was on, indicating that the man intended to use the weapon. He had no need to analyse the situation further; the knot tightened in his stomach. Hadn't he left all that behind him? Evidently not! Someone was going to die tonight that was clear! But not him, not if he had anything to do with it!

The intruder could now see a narrow chink of light emerging from the driver's door. It was slightly ajar and an awful doubt crept into his mind. Was the target still in the car? If he'd gone, he could have left nearly three-quarters of an hour earlier and, if so, where would he have gone and why? Perhaps, he was in the wood observing him. The man suddenly felt very vulnerable and crouched defensively, straining to see into the darkness.

Then, suddenly, the automatic locking system on the Toyota Land Cruiser was activated. The noise, and the flash of the rear indicator lights in the darkness, drew him instinctively. He cursed as his eyes were suddenly blinded and dropped onto one knee, turning to face the woodland as his heart pumped harder and more adrenaline surged into his system. The red laser beam arched uselessly through the undergrowth and he knew instantly that he had already lost this battle of wits.

'Putain merde!' he cursed under his breath.

It was the last thing he thought. Not very elegant, but dying like that is not very elegant either. The bullet hit him in the face, smashing the cheekbone and destroying the left eye before being deflected slightly to the right and upwards in its trajectory, passing through the brain and taking out a large section of the cranium as it left his already lifeless body. The shock of the impact knocked him over backwards to leave his corpse sprawled on the lawn behind the car.

For the intruder's colleague, still patiently waiting in the wood near to the drive, the event was also confusing. After a sudden and initially indistinct noise on the voice-activated radio, he thought that he could hear music in the background, then a dull thud, and then it all went quiet again. He was hallucinating, he concluded, and patiently resolved to continue waiting, despite the time.

On the lawn behind the car, the dead man was relieved of his blood-spattered walkie-talkie after it had been disconnected from the transmission unit. The UZI machine pistol was taken from him and hidden under the front seat of the Toyota, the CD player switched off, and the car locked up. The corpse, having been quickly searched, was dragged to the edge of the lawn rolled down the slope into the thicket below; now to find his colleague, or colleagues, or even perhaps, their car!

The man reasoned that they must have had a car nearby; it was too remote a location to mount an entire operation on foot. There could be three of them, but three would be overkill. There were two options, become the stalker rather than the stalked, or sit tight and call for assistance. There was really no question about it, he chose the former.

Had he been setting up something like this, he would have had the second man close by, in the wood probably, near the track. That might have been why the deer had spooked. If the backup man were there, it would be quite impossible to creep up and surprise him, too many dried leaves and twigs at this time of year. So, the answer was to find the car and find it as quickly as possible. Where would it be, in the field at the top of the hill, or in the beach car park? The top of the hill was more likely; it was nearer to the main road. It was a quicker escape route.

Using the night vision goggles to assist his progress, he traversed the woodland to the west towards the open fields. After the woodland, he followed the hedge line until he reached the base of the hill. Then, after skirting the farm complex, he followed a dirt track that climbed the hill to the ridge to the upper car park. There were only three cars left, and with luck, it would not take too long to discover if one of them belonged to the intruders. He checked his watch; it was already 11.30 p.m.

Below, the lights of Weymouth and Portland stretched out around the bay like a string of sparkling pearls, their reflections in the calm sea magnifying the spectacle. Above, it was a dark moonless night and the stars in the Milky Way sparkled majestically in their millions.

The windows to the first car appeared opaque, steamed up from the inside - a courting couple, no doubt. He gave it a

wide berth and moved on to examine the two remaining cars, starting with the one at the far end of the field. Somehow, it seemed the most likely.

As he approached the unoccupied car, he assessed the distance to the stile; less than ten metres. Then, he searched behind the wheels for the key and found it. Quickly, he opened the door and looked inside. It was strangely bare - no maps, no tapes, no sweets, no CDs, no scraps of paper, no rubbish, nothing. He checked the boot. Inside were two pairs of shoes and two sports jackets. In the pocket of one of the jackets, he found a large wad of bank notes and a few coins, but nothing else. This was their car; there was no doubt in his mind and there were only two of them. It was as he had suspected and eventually, the second man would have to come back. All he had to do was wait.

So, after locking the car, he concealed himself under the camouflage net at the base of the hedge near to the stile and settled down to what might be a long, cold, and rather uncomfortable night.

* * *

Time passed very slowly for the backup man who was waiting patiently at the edge of the woodland. He had hardly moved for nearly four hours. He waited another two hours before deciding to try to contact his colleague on the walkie-talkie. It was contrary to instructions; the radios were to be used only in an emergency. However, as he knew that the job should have been finished long before, he whistled quietly into the microphone. There was no response to his signal, but the call was noted. It was heard emanating from on the blood-spattered headset under the camouflage net.

The backup waited another ten minutes before he tried to contact his colleague again. Again, there was no response. It was a bad sign and he knew it. Instinct told him to abort the job, but ego and greed; the size of the fee that would now be doubled was too tempting.

He decided on a circuitous route to the house making an approach from the woodland on the west side. It took him an hour and a half moving slowly and carefully to arrive at the edge of the lawn. By then it was 2.30 a.m.

The Toyota was parked beside the house on the lawn, not where he had expected to see it. As he approached the house, heading for a ground floor window, he looked inside the car. It revealed nothing. He moved on to the house.

Using the narrow steel blade of his knife, he slid back the catch of one of the sash windows and snaked inside. As he made his way cautiously across the tiled floor aware suddenly that the sole of one of his boots was sticky. Bending down to examine it with his torch, he saw that it was blood. An uneasy feeling gripped him and he reflected once again on aborting the mission. He resolved to search the house first and then reconsider his position. It was a poor decision.

The exercise took him another hour and revealed nothing. He searched the outbuildings with the same diligence and was rewarded with the same result. The torch was giving out and tiredness was beginning to overtake him. He had found no evidence of a struggle other than blood on the sole of his shoe. Either his colleague or the target had been injured, or perhaps even both. Perhaps the target had been injured and had escaped and been pursued by his colleague? Perhaps they had confronted each other again away from the house and they were both dead or seriously injured? No, there were too many possibilities, too scenarios to consider. The mission had to be aborted.

Back near the drive, he searched under a bush to retrieve their packs. He removed his equipment belt, and stashed it away. Slipping the machine pistol over his right shoulder, he nestled the weapon comfortably under his armpit. Afterwards he replaced his coat, zipping it up to conceal the weapon. Then, he rolled up his balaclava, adjusted his radio headset, put the pack on his back, and set off along the coastal footpath, climbing back up towards White Nothe. By then, it was just after 6.00 a.m.

By the time he reached the rock promontory, there was just a glimmer of light in the eastern sky. It was noticeably colder on the high ground of the headland and he shivered. The night had seemed interminably long and their mission had evidently failed. He was furious. It had been disappointing and frustrating. All that effort for nothing!

A light breeze stirred the long grass as he stooped to take the binoculars out of the pack. He had waited an hour before the light was good enough to see their car. It was still parked where they had left it, in the field. It looked safe and he began to feel more relaxed. It was time to go.

As he descended from the headland, retracing the route that he and his colleague had taken the previous evening he reflected uselessly again over what might have happened? Where was he? Why hadn't he called? Was he dead? Was the target dead?

Along the track, where it passed through the thicket, he no longer tried to avoid the muddy pools; he was too tired. Nevertheless, as he neared the car, his sense of alertness increased. Cautiously, he climbed over the wooden stile, lingering for a moment on the top step to make a wide visual sweep across the field. It looked clear, there was no one in sight. Reassured, he stepped down into the field and began to walk towards the car.

In the early morning shade of the hedge, under the cover of the camouflage net, the man saw the movement to his side and moved the walkie-talkie near to his mouth. He spoke into it quietly.

'Good morning, campers.'

The walker stopped abruptly. Swinging round, quickly unzipping his jacket and extracting the machine pistol in one fluid movement. In his panic, he attempted a short burst of fire. He was too slow.

The impact of the 9 mm bullet mid-chest, at no more than ten metres distance, knocked him backwards off his feet as he pulled the trigger, firing ineffectively into the air. In his dying moments, his shocked eyes stared upwards towards the heavens as the first rays of sunlight shot across the sky in a kaleidoscope of colour, but it seemed that the colours were fading fast. It was his last vision and considerably more confusing than the last night of his life, which had been confusing enough.

The man under the cover of the camouflage net breathed a sigh of relief.

After bundling the body into the boot of the car, he carefully collected all the spent cartridge cases and put them in his pocket. Then he opened the field gate, started the engine of the grey Peugeot, and drove down to the house. He parked the Peugeot next to the Toyota. Inside the house, he made one call. It was to an answer phone.

‘This is Tregay, Marcus Tregay. There was a messy sort of a party here last night. I think you’d better send a team down here to clear up.’

He put the phone down and slumped in a chair. He was exhausted.

Chapter 2

Geneva, Switzerland – 16th October 2003

In a small, but very exclusive apartment overlooking *La Rue du Puits Saint Pierre*, near to the Protestant Cathedral of Saint Pierre in the centre of the old quarter of Geneva, an attractive petite brunette in her mid-thirties was waiting for a telephone call. It was a call that she had been expecting for a couple of days.

Pas de nouvelles, bonne nouvelles - no news is good news, she kept telling herself, trying to believe that there was some truth in the old dictum, but failing always to convince herself. Something must have gone wrong. She called her secretary in the office on the outskirts of Geneva.

'*Salut Delphine*, it's Sophie, there haven't been any calls or e-mails for me this morning have there?

'No, I don't believe so. I'll just check downstairs if you like.'

'*S'il te plaît*,' Sophie said.

A Mozart minuet played on a synthesiser took over whilst Delphine phoned the office in reception. While she waited, Sophie played nervously with the fine silver chain that hung round her long elegant neck. She also listened to the music and wondered if it was rather tasteless. Thankfully, it suddenly ended as Delphine's voice came back on the line.

'*Rien de tout*, no, nothing at all, sorry Sophie.'

'Thank you, Delphine.' Her secretary registered disappointment in Sophie's voice. There was a pause, and then Sophie added, 'Look, I'm going to stay here for a while. I will be in later this morning. If anybody wants me, tell them I'll ring back this afternoon. *D'accord?*'

'*D'accord*,' Delphine replied. Sophie replaced the wireless telephone on the work surface next to her computer and gazed out of the window.

She waited all morning. The telephone never rang; there were no e-mails. Nothing. It was as if her operatives had simply disappeared off the face of the earth.

Chapter 3

Ringstead Bay, Dorset, England – 16th October 2003

It was just after 10.30 a.m. when they arrived. They had come from Poole in a long wheel based Land Rover. On the side of the vehicle in large letters was written - BOMB DISPOSAL. Attached to the Land Rover was a trailer, over which a tarpaulin was tightly stretched. There were four of them in the vehicle and they were all dressed in plain camouflage military fatigues with no indication of rank or regiment. They parked behind the Toyota. The soldier next to the driver got out and approached the front door of the house while the others began to unload some of their gear. Before he reached the front door, it had opened and a tall, middle aged, athletic looking man stepped out.

‘Morning, sir,’ the soldier said, saluting. Marcus Tregay regarded him closely, studying him intently. He concluded that he was not someone that he knew; much too young, he surmised. He had been warned of the arrival of the team and he was relieved that the response to his call had been reasonably rapid.

‘Had a bit of trouble?’ the soldier asked, half smiling.

‘You could say so,’ Marcus replied laconically.

‘Do you want to tell me about it?’

Marcus didn’t much care for the way in which the soldier posed the question – it was a bit like a doctor asking his patient to describe an embarrassing symptom. It was inappropriate in any event. Marcus ignored the question.

‘Before you start, perhaps you could show me your ID, just so I know whom I am talking to.’

‘Of course, sir,’ replied the soldier, putting his hand into the breast pocket of his fatigues. From it, he produced a small wallet. Inside the wallet were an identity card and a folded letter. Marcus examined the identity card, looked at the photograph, and then regarded the man in front of him. He was a captain in the Royal Marines. He knew the Marines well; he had been one. Opening the folded letter, he saw that it was on Admiralty notepaper and signed by the Chief of Naval Staff. It simply stated that Captain Rodney Howell, Royal Marines, the name corresponded with the identity card that he had just inspected, and his unit, unspecified, were seconded as and when required by the Ministry of Defence, to assist in operations, also unspecified, pertaining to national security. Well, that seemed to cover most of what he needed.

‘What do you know so far, Captain?’

‘Very little - in fact, we were simply given directions on where to find you and to carry out a cleaning up operation.’

‘Exactly so.’

‘We also have instructions’, the captain continued, appearing a little uncertain of the likely response, but unconcerned nonetheless, ‘to take you back with us.’

‘That figures,’ Marcus replied. ‘As it happens,’ he added, looking over the captain’s shoulder to see what his men were doing, ‘I would be delighted to come with you.’

‘Good, so what do we need to do, sir?’ The captain enquired, relieved that his task was not going to be more complicated than it needed to be.

Marcus explained about the corpse in the Peugeot and the other at the bottom of the bank in the thicket. He also gave instructions to search the immediate area of the house for any other clues that might be useful, but he realised that this would be limited. This unit would not be capable of undertaking a detailed forensic survey. That might have to follow.

Whilst the unit started its gruesome work recuperating the bodies, Marcus returned to the house to gather a few essentials that he thought he might need for the immediate future. The rest could be collected later if it was decided to move him. He offered to make coffee for the unit but the captain explained that they were well equipped and could look after themselves, so he left them to it. When they were ready to leave, the captain came back and knocked on the door.

‘Where are you based?’ Marcus asked, moving his packed bags nearer to the front door.

‘My unit is part of the First Assault Group at Hamworthy, Poole. It will take us about an hour from here. Perhaps you could follow us in your Land Cruiser. One of my men will come with you, or drive, if you would prefer, it’s up to you? One of the others will drive behind your car in the Peugeot.’

‘And the bodies?’

‘All bagged up in the trailer, sir. The one down the bank was a bit difficult to get out of the thicket, heavy bugger, but apart from that, no problems. We found your cartridge sir. Looking at the distance between you and the blood stains, he wouldn’t have known what hit him.’ There was a certain professional appreciation in his voice. ‘Nice shot – clean, quick.’

Marcus ignored the comment. ‘Shall we go?’ he said, moving his bags out to the Toyota to load them into the back of the car whilst the captain made a gesture indicating that the mission had been completed and that his men could return to their vehicles.

As the Land Rover moved away, Marcus reversed the Toyota into the parking area by the outbuildings. He wondered what might have happened if he had parked there the previous night. It wasn’t really worth thinking about, he concluded. It was providential that he had been so well prepared for such an eventuality, especially so because, despite the warnings he had never really expected it. An icy feeling enveloped him and he felt the hairs rise on the back of his neck again. Pushing the thoughts out of his mind, he took one brief last look at the house and pulled out of the drive. He had been there only six months. For the most part, he had enjoyed it, but it was

unlikely that he would ever return; of course, whether he would want to, would be quite another matter.

The convoy slowly climbed the hill away from the house and crawled along the track that ran along the coastal ridge, through the car park in the field, before joining the road.

The chalk downs of the Dorset countryside, in the clear atmosphere and the sparkling light of a bright autumnal day were neatly defined, but Marcus paid no attention to them. After Winfrith, they took the Wareham road, skirting Poole to the north, cutting off left at the first junction towards the Royal Marine base at Hamworthy. It was years since Marcus had been there. It was where he had done some of his training with the Special Boat Service. It seemed odd to be going back there, almost surreal, and especially strange as a civilian.

There had been little exchange of words with his passenger on the way to the base. Marcus had been absorbed in his own thoughts and the marine who travelled with him was clearly not of a talkative nature. So much the better, Marcus thought, he would have found trite conversation particularly irritating that morning. At the entrance to the base, the sentry asked for their passes. Marcus gave him his identity card, one that he still carried since he had left the Department, as well as the pass belonging to his passenger. The marine looked at them both

‘Thank you, sir.’ He said, as he passed the cards back to Marcus. Looking into the car, he said to the passenger, who might have been one of his *oppos*. ‘You are to take the Colonel directly to Block 8, and then return to your unit, Taff.’

The marine looked slightly surprised when he heard the guard refer to Marcus as ‘Colonel’ and was about to say something, probably an apology, when Marcus interrupted, stalling him and said, ‘I’m retired.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said the marine, relieved, but still uneasy.

In front of them, the Bomb Disposal Land Rover pulled away and then veered off to the right. Before his passenger could tell him not to follow the Land Rover, Marcus accelerated, continuing straight ahead.

‘I know where Block 8 is,’ Marcus said, ‘I trained here. This was my home for a while.’ His passenger was about to say something and then thought better of it. He was wondering why he was being taken to the other end of the camp. He would have a long walk back.

In the rear view mirror, Marcus watched the Peugeot veer off behind them following the same route as the Land Rover. After two hundred metres, Marcus turned left towards a small administrative block on the edge of a large tarmac area. Beyond it was the Wareham Channel, a tidal reach of the River Frome. Across the broad stretch of river, an area of woodland stood out in the sunshine. The trees were just beginning to change colour; the leaves of the ash and the willows were already yellow, reflecting brightly in the slowly moving water. Autumn was quickly succeeding summer.

‘You can park here. The entrance to the building is straight-ahead, sir,’ indicated the marine, pointing in the direction of the door, forgetting that Marcus knew where he

was. Marcus parked the car as instructed and they both got out. 'I don't think that you will be needing me anymore, sir,' the marine said, his accent betraying his origins in the Rhondda Valley.

'No, I don't think I will. Thank you,' Marcus said, and then added, 'sorry, I was not very good company; a bit distracted.'

'Sir.' For an instant, the marine stood to attention and saluted. Marcus automatically acknowledged his salute before they parted company.

In the lobby of the building, he was asked to show his ID card again before he was escorted to a room on the first floor overlooking the river. The room faced south, but despite the bright sunlight, which improved its ambience immensely, it was still bleak. A few chairs were dotted around and there was a small desk next to an easel with a pad of paper clipped to it. On the far wall was a blackboard and next to it a portable screen. A projector stood on a trolley close by. By one of the windows a man stood looking out, his hands clasped together behind his back. Marcus recognised him instantly. His heart sank.

* * *

'Hello, Marcus,' said the man, without bothering to turn round. 'What on earth's been going on? I was curled up in bed this morning with this randy little waitress when I got a call from Elliot telling me to get down to Poole a.s.a.p. to dig you out of some kind of hole. What's happened? I thought you'd retired?'

'I have retired, Lewis. I retired six months ago. I retired because I was sick of playing these silly fucking games. I thought no one knew where I was living. It was supposed to be a safe house, wasn't it? Two goons arrived last night with the very clear intention of killing me. Do you know what's going on, because I haven't a clue?'

'I was hoping you might be able to tell me,' Lewis said, turning round to face Marcus. 'Did you recognise either of them?'

'No, I fucking didn't, otherwise I might have invited them in for a beer!'

Normally he would have remained calmer, but with the lack of sleep and the events that had unfolded during the night, the sight of Lewis just irritated and depressed him. If Lewis was going to be in charge of this inquiry, he might as well jump out of the window now; it would be quicker, less painful, and certainly much less tedious. Why the Department kept this idiot on the staff was completely beyond him. He had always been a security risk, he had some dubious practices, which involved both sexes, he was a heavy drinker, and he was lazy. They said he was good at languages and ciphers, he was a lateral thinker, and he had a good mind. Even Elliot had said that he was an

invaluable asset to the Department. Marcus despaired. What next?

‘Calm down Marcus, I’m sure we can get to the bottom of this. The Department is duty bound to put as much resource as is required towards protecting you and solving this affair.’

Experience had taught him that such a statement could not be trusted. The Department didn’t have the resources to look after him, never mind the will. What resources it did have would probably be already heavily committed elsewhere. Of course, they had responded quickly. They were here to clear up the mess because it was in their own interests. They wouldn’t want the local police snooping around, asking questions, and ferreting about on a trail that might eventually lead back to them. Politically, something like this could get very difficult, to say the least embarrassing, especially if the press got hold of it so they knew that they had to mount a clean up operation; but after that, what? Evidently, something had gone seriously wrong. Was it a major breach of security, or a simple act of negligence?

Marcus was already convinced that their ability to solve the matter would be half-hearted and that could well leave him in a somewhat delicate position. Sending Lewis was indicative of the kind of support he would get and the thought dismayed him. Marcus had worked with Lewis in Bosnia before they were together in London. Unfortunately, he knew him only too well. There wasn’t anyone else in the Department that he could think of who was consistently so negative. Then, after all, he reflected, he had retired now; he was probably expendable. In fact, his pension came out of the Department’s overall budget! Financially, it would be in their interests if his demise were not too tardy. Marcus recognised that he also was being negative; it was unlike him. He let the thought go.

‘So, what’s your brief, Lewis?’ he asked, hoping to be surprised with something constructive.

‘Well,’ Lewis started, pushing his glasses back up his nose, ‘collecting information to begin with. I have arranged for forensics to send a group down to the house this afternoon to go over everything. You know, see if we can find a clue that might lead to finding out who they were and where they came from. As for you, after you have told me everything you know, I’ve been told that we are arranging to send you to another safe house. Elliot insists that you go there. He believes that you could still be in some danger. We have a cottage on Dartmoor, near the Royal Marine Barracks at Bickleigh Camp. I was talking to Elliot whilst I was waiting for you. We think it best if you leave your car here. Whoever they are, they probably know your car anyway, keeping it would be a mistake. We assume that given a chance, they will try again. So, we need to keep you safe until we can resolve this thing. Do you have any idea what it’s about?’

Marcus thought about the car bomb in Sarajevo and other threats on his life emanating from Iraq and Pakistan. It could be related to any one of a number of threats, none of which he had ever taken that seriously. That anyone should try to track him down in England seemed completely loony.

‘Wouldn’t I be better just losing myself and then no one would know where I was?’

‘Elliot still thinks it would be better, at least as a transition, to stay in another ‘safe house’ and be properly equipped for any eventuality,’ said Lewis. He was trying to be as encouraging as possible although Marcus remembered when he had first gone into a ‘safe house’ Lewis was sceptical.

‘You were the one who thought that the idea of a ‘safe house’ was completely over the top. You said - *why bother?* Didn’t you?’

‘Well now, yes.’ Lewis replied, his Welsh accent suddenly becoming more dominant. ‘But Elliot was the one who insisted you should go there.’

‘And what do you think now then?’

‘Well, maybe Elliot was right.’

‘Yes, well, maybe Elliot was right! At least it appears that he was a damn sight closer to being right than you were!’

Marcus knew that he was playing on Lewis’s discomfort, but at the time when Elliot had first suggested it, he had also thought that the dangers were rather exaggerated. Despite thinking about it half the night and all the morning, he still didn’t really understand the motivation assassination attempt. It was that which eluded him. Who wanted to kill him? For what purpose?

Admittedly, as a military attaché, he had been in some delicate areas in the world and met some nasty people, some of whom had threatened to kill him, but it had always been in the heat of the moment, when tempers were raised. There was no one he could specifically think of who harboured a long-standing hatred of him, or wanted revenge. He didn’t have money stashed away from illegal dealings, or jewels, or access to sensitive documents. So, what was it? Why did they want to kill him? He reflected on his various tours of duty in the Middle East and Pakistan and the people he had dealt with. He could easily draw up a short list, which would include Serbian nationalists, the Mafia and Islamic Fundamentalists, but it still didn’t make any sense.

Lewis sat down at the table, extracted a tape recorder from his pilot’s bag, and placed it in front of him.

‘Sit down, Marcus, this will probably take us some time.’

It did. The debriefing with Lewis took most of the day. From time to time Lewis’s mobile phone rang and he sidled over the other side of the room to have a murmured conversation with the caller. He also made some calls, one of which was to order some sandwiches and beer. To be fair, Marcus thought, although Lewis continually irritated him, he was very thorough. He asked the right questions, made copious notes as well as recording their conversation. During the afternoon, they broke off to go to look at the bodies. They had been laid out in the medical unit ready for an autopsy.

‘I know I asked you if you recognised either of the men, but I’d like you to take another careful look at them again,’ Lewis explained.

The bodies were naked, still slightly curled up in grotesque postures on two adjacent tables. Rigor mortis had set

in and stiffened the muscles in the positions that they had lain in following death. There was a Medical Officer in attendance, appropriately dressed and ready to carry out the messy business of the autopsy. A couple of assistants lurked in the background setting out kidney bowls, preparing instruments and plastic bags. There is something particularly awful about autopsies, Marcus thought, his stomach churning. Death he could face. Cutting up cadavers? No. Each to their own!

Marcus approached the first corpse. It was the man that he'd shot through the head. The right side of the face was a mess. His head had a large chunk of skull and brain missing behind the left ear. He didn't recognise him, or the other. Both of them had tattoos on their arms and legs, typical of soldiers, but none of them he recognised as relating to any particular regiment or army. Some of the tattoos had possibly been done in the Far East, but it was difficult to be certain. The growing cult in the west for body piercing and tattoos had expanded the trade enormously and all sorts of designs had been imported from East Asia.

'No.' Marcus stated positively. 'No, I don't recognise either of them.' He examined the tattoos again. 'It might be worth photographing these. You might discover their origin. Could be useful,' he proffered. Lewis made a note and looked at the Medical Officer, who was hovering, clearly eager to get on with the business in hand.

'Thank you, Doctor,' he said.

They left.

'They both look European, don't you think, Lewis? They could've served with one of the NATO forces,' Marcus said. 'On the other hand, they could equally well be Serbs, or Russians, Secret Service, or the Mafia.'

Lewis agreed. It didn't take them very far.

It was early evening when they were beginning to tie things up. Marcus was feeling exhausted. He needed to sleep; he had been on the go for nearly thirty-six hours.

'So, where do we go from here?' he asked Lewis, watching him closely, wondering what words of wisdom might come forth. After all, however frustrating Marcus found it, he was largely in Lewis's hands.

'First, as I said earlier, we are going to move you up onto Dartmoor. Tomorrow we've arranged for a helicopter to take you over to Bickleigh. Today we bought a car for you in Plymouth, it's a second-hand Toyota Land Cruiser, different colour, slightly newer, but higher mileage. If you will sign over the logbook of your car downstairs to this name, he passed across a piece of paper; the Department will arrange to sell it. If we sell it for more than the car we bought today, your account will be credited.'

'And less?' Marcus asked wearily.

'We'll send you a bill.'

'That figures.'

'I'm joking.' Lewis chuckled. 'Elliot tells me that the Department will stand the loss.'

'Generous.'

It was generous. Normally, they wouldn't put themselves out so much for someone who had retired. He wasn't really their responsibility any more. Elliot was obviously looking after him, as he had often done in the past. They went back a long way.

'What else?'

'We'll close your bank account, cancel your credit cards, mobile phone accounts etc. and provide you with new ones. They will all be in your name. We don't want to go through the whole process of giving you a new identity, not yet at least. However, as it appears that there is someone on your trail, we think it better that we take these preliminary precautions - it might at least slow them down. I have all the necessary authorisations for you to sign with me.' Lewis reached down into his pilot's bag and brought out an envelope.

Marcus stared at Lewis; the words *at least slow them down* resonating in his head. What did that mean? Slow them down – yes, OK, but for how long?

'You will have to organise a new mobile phone for yourself. When you've got one, give us the number; Elliot is also insistent on that - he wants to be sure that we keep in touch,' he droned on, although much of what he said made sense. A feeling of desperation born out of exhaustion enveloped Marcus again.

'Another thing,' Lewis continued, 'don't try to contact any relatives or friends, at least for the moment.'

Marcus reflected. Did he have any relatives or friends? Few of either, he concluded. It was symptomatic of the kind of life that he had led, particularly recently, but he did acknowledge that it was also partly from choice. He was, he admitted, a bit of a loner, or at least, he had become that way of late.

There was a knock at the door. Lewis got up to answer it. A marine entered carrying a large red plastic box.

'Forensics have finished with these, sir. They asked me to bring them over for you.'

'Thank you,' Lewis said, taking the box out of the marine's hands. The marine saluted and closed the door.

'Well, let's see what we have here.' Lewis placed the box on the table. Marcus got up to have a look.

The contents of the box were no great surprise to Marcus. There were the two Micro UZI machine pistols disengaged from their magazines, one full, thirty-two rounds, the other partially discharged, twenty-three rounds, the laser sights, the tactical lights, and the noise suppressers. In addition, there were a set of car keys, two identical belts with knives in scabbards, the mace atomisers, various tools for picking locks, two Gerber 800 Legend Multi-tools, the compact radio headsets, a wad of bank notes, Sterling and Euros, and a few coins.

Marcus picked up one of the machine pistols. 'Interesting choice of weapon,' he said, 'Israeli, not very accurate, but considerable firepower. These have been modified to add the laser sights and the tactical light to the short

barrel. I wonder who modified them. It would be useful to find out who the supplier might be.'

'I'll see what we can do. I have asked that their clothes should be bagged up and taken back for a more thorough examination.' Lewis said, while removing a brown paper envelope from the box. He removed one A4 piece of paper and quickly scanned it.

'This is an inventory of the complete haul,' he said. 'There was nothing else found on either man. The labels had been removed from their clothes. Apparently, they had nothing with them that would help to identify them. They must have left their papers in a safety deposit box somewhere. If the key hasn't been discovered already, I doubt whether we would ever find it. The report states that they were both white European males, as we said, probably in their mid to late thirties. Both died as a result of a single gunshot wound,' he paused, 'but you know that anyway. So, I guess we will start with their dental records and circulate them through NATO to see if they can be identified as having been serving soldiers with any of the member countries. Not much to go on. If they were from Eastern Europe, the chances are that we will draw a blank.'

'What are you going to do with this lot?' Marcus was looking into the box. A thought was entering his mind about some of the contents.

'The box will go into stores.'

Marcus considered their possible value to him for a few moments.

'I have a proposition for you', Marcus said, adding, 'bearing in mind my present, and you might agree, somewhat uncertain predicament.' Lewis could already see where this conversation was leading and did not like it in the least. It would be highly irregular and he would not want to be placed in a position where he would have to authorise it. It was not in his nature to put his head on the block and he could already imagine the possibility of an official inquiry.

'You are no longer officially part of the Department and I don't have any authority to...'. Marcus cut him short.

'Look, we both know the Department is going to be hard pressed to commit resources to protecting my arse, never mind resolving what this affair is all about. I know you will go through the process of trying to identify the intruders. Even if you strike gold and find out their identities, they were most likely mercenaries and there will not be a trail leading back to their paymaster. So, we can presume that I'm not going to get much help from the Department and, at the end of the day, we both know that I'm going to have to look after myself. Agreed?'

Lewis did not reply and they both looked at each other, whilst Marcus removed some of the items from the box and laid them on the table. One Micro UZI machine pistol, two magazines, one red spot sight, one suppresser, one tactical light, one weapon laden belt and a large wad of notes. Marcus gestured at the box.

‘I think you will find, Lewis, that those are the contents of the box.’ Marcus insisted, showing Lewis the depleted contents.

‘But, you can’t’ Lewis started, shocked and confused. ‘We can’t have people wandering round the country armed to the teeth.’

‘I think you will find,’ concluded Marcus, seizing on the point and flicking the sheet of paper in Lewis’s hand, ‘we already have!’

‘But,’ started Lewis again nervously, ‘Look now, I don’t...’

‘I think you will find those are the contents of the box,’ Marcus repeated more threateningly and more forcefully. He was gambling on Lewis’s laziness and his unwillingness to become involved in a conflict that he knew that he was going to lose.

‘I will have to inform Elliot.’

‘Go ahead, you can inform Elliot, I’m confident that he will understand,’ he suggested. In truth, he was not at all confident, but it was worth a gamble. They could always relieve him of the kit later, but for the moment, he had decided that he was going to hang on to it and now this was also absolutely clear to Lewis.

Withdrawing from the table, Lewis slumped in his seat. ‘I don’t like it,’ he whined. He could see he was going to get it in the neck when he got back to the Department.

‘To be honest with you Lewis,’ Marcus started, he was going to say *I don’t like you* but he knew he might need his help in the future and there was little point in alienating Lewis more than he needed to. At least, his experience working with the diplomatic corps had taught him a little tact.

‘To be honest, Lewis,’ he repeated, ‘I don’t like it either, but you do understand the danger don’t you?’ The question demanded a response and the only one that Lewis could give was to nod in agreement.

To avoid further confrontation, and because he too was tiring rapidly, Lewis decided to call it a day.

‘I think we’ll draw stumps there,’ he said. What a typically English phrase, Marcus thought.

‘Oh, one last thing, or rather two,’ Lewis started again, ‘your post will be redirected to Bickleigh Camp. You will have to retrieve it unless you can come to some arrangement with the CO to have it delivered, and secondly, you will be issued with a new driving licence in the next couple of days. It will be false of course, the address will be phoney, but we don’t want DVLA having your real address on their computers, its hardly secure.’ He chuckled to himself - very little was secure these days, even the most sophisticated systems could be hacked into, he knew, he did it all the time! It was one of the reasons they employed him!

‘That’s it then,’ declared Lewis, as he put his papers and his cassette recorder and cassettes in his pilot’s bag. ‘I think this lot will probably fit in there as well,’ he said, as he transferred the depleted contents of the red plastic box to the bag.

‘If you would like to follow me, we will go back to the gatehouse and I will leave you with the duty officer who will no doubt sort you out for the night. If you take all your stuff out of the car, you can leave it by the gatehouse and we will deal with it tomorrow. OK?’ Marcus nodded thinking he would be glad when Lewis just got the hell out of there.

‘What about the rest of my belongings?’ Not that there was much, Marcus thought.

‘The house has already been cleared. It’s all being moved to Dartmoor. It’ll probably arrive before you do.’

A room was found in the officer’s quarters for him that night. Marcus showered, thought about eating, decided against it, and went straight to bed. He fell asleep almost immediately. On the whole, it was not a good night. He slept fitfully, disturbed by vivid dreams, in which he was pursued relentlessly. Exorcising the events of the previous night from his mind would inevitably take some time and he resigned himself to more disturbed nights.

Chapter 4

Hamworthy, Poole, England – 17th October 2003

Marcus had already washed, shaved, and finished dressing when there was a knock on the door. A marine entered with a tray. Laid out on the tray were a cooked breakfast, toast and marmalade, a pot of tea and a jug of coffee.

‘We weren’t sure which you would prefer, sir,’ he said, laying the tray down on the table. Marcus was not sure either, he was still feeling slightly dazed, having slept so badly, the events of the previous day still preying on his mind.

‘The CO will come over and see you at 9.30, sir, and the transport is arriving at 10.00 a.m. The CO said he would prefer it if you didn’t leave the building until you are ready to go. You will be ready to go, sir?’ It was phrased more like an order than a rhetorical question, and explained why he was being served breakfast in bed.

‘Thank you, corporal, I’ll be ready to go,’ Marcus said, noting the stripes on the marine’s arm. The marine saluted and left the room closing the door behind him. After picking at his breakfast and repacking his bags, he spent the next couple of hours lying on the bed staring at the ceiling, contemplating his uncertain future.

The Commanding Officer arrived exactly on time. The meeting with him was largely a formality dealing with the arrangements for the car he was leaving behind. It was principally a courtesy visit although he had the impression that the CO would be pleased when Marcus had cleared off the site. He certainly looked relieved when he heard the noise of the Lynx Helicopter arrive. It had flown in from the base in Somerset at RNAS Yeovilton. As soon as it had landed, his kit was loaded into the aircraft.

He shook hands with the CO, greeted the aircrew, and climbed into one of the two seats behind the pilot and observer, putting on the helmet that had been placed there for him. It was already plugged in. He chose the seat on the starboard side of the aircraft on the basis that they would probably fly down the coast. At least he would have a view of the land rather than the vast expanse of sea.

After the pilot had made his final checks, the pitch of the two 900 horsepower Rolls Royce turbines increased, hauling the helicopter off the ground, climbing and turning in a wide, ascending arc towards the Purbeck Hills. It passed inland over Swanage and Ballard Down, passing close to Corfe Castle before tracking southwest towards the coastal cliffs. Then, the helicopter veered west to starboard to fly along the Dorset coast.

Marcus could see the surf breaking at the base of the sunlit cliffs. There were flocks of sheep in the small green fields behind the cliffs and walkers all along the coastal footpath. It was a sunny day and the sky was clear, apart from slight cumulus developing inland. They were flying at about 150 knots, 600 feet above sea level, passing over Lulworth Cove towards White Nothe.

They flew over the house where he had spent the last six months. It was gone in a flash, much like the time he had happily lived there. It existed no more. It was confined to the past, but unfortunately not yet a distant memory - on the contrary, far from it. It was part of his life experience, vestiges of which would reappear unexpectedly in dreams for some time to come.

The helicopter crossed Weymouth Bay and the causeway linking the Isle of Portland to the mainland and on to Lyme Bay. It continued southwest flying along the Devon coast to the Exe estuary. After turning inland, it descended and put down briefly in order to refuel at the Commando Training Centre CTCRM Lympstone, where Marcus had done some of his initial training as a Royal Marine officer. Then, it took off again to fly across Dartmoor heading for the Royal Marine Camp of 42 Commando at Bickleigh.

There he was met by the Commanding Officer who briefly explained the new arrangements. He handed Marcus the keys to his 'new' car, gave him details of how to find the cottage, and sent him on his way. Marcus arrived at the cottage just after midday, and let himself in, dropping some of his bags in the hall. Pushing the door open to the sitting room, he could see that the sun was streaming in through the windows. Perhaps he could relax now, begin to reorganise his thoughts, and possibly even start to reconstruct his life?

'Hello, Marcus.'

The cultivated voice with a slight Welsh lilt floated across into the sitting room from the dining room. It was Elliot. He was sitting at the dining table.

What the hell was Elliot doing here? From what he had heard, Elliot hardly ever left the office these days except on Ministerial jaunts to NATO or EU parties in foreign places. If Elliot was here, it must be serious, why else would he come? Marcus's heart skipped a beat as he entered the room; immediately, any ideas of relaxation were put on hold.

Chapter 5

Geneva, Switzerland – 17th October 2003

Sophie Lefèvre looked wistfully out of the window. She had gone to her office at Meyrin early that morning. Uneasy, still contemplating how she was going to present the situation to her client, she had woken up early that morning and mithered about the problem. First, she needed to verify, as best as she could, if anything had actually gone wrong. She had not heard from her operatives since they had departed for the west of England six days earlier. She had expected to hear from them that the services that her firm had been contracted to provide had been successfully undertaken, but she had heard nothing and that was what was concerning her.

For the moment, Sophie felt she must presume that something had gone wrong, however difficult it was to believe. It hadn't been a complicated assignment but it was recognised that there were dangers. She began to speculate whether there might have been a problem with immigration or the police, whether her operatives could now be in custody, but it seemed most unlikely. Surely, she would have been contacted. Someone would have phoned and the matter would have been cleared up quite quickly. Perhaps her operatives had been involved in a car accident. These things happen. However, she needed more information before she would feel it appropriate to contact her client. Inevitably, she would simply have to wait until someone got in touch with her to explain the reason for the empty silence. In the meantime, the wait was extremely frustrating. She felt impatient, she was not used to waiting, and this matter was beginning to worry her.

Her father, Christian Lefèvre, had started the business in the late 1940s. There were a lot of weapons around after the Second World War and purchasing and supplying them to new end users was a business opportunity he thought worth investing in. After several small deals involving some Jewish acquaintances in Geneva supplying arms to Israel, he bought a small factory in Meyrin on the western side of the city, near the small international airport of Genève-Cointrin.

The factory was mostly used for storage of merchandise although it had a small workshop that was ideal for manufacturing or modifying equipment, as well as for packaging orders. The business had originally offered to supply small arms and ammunition, but it had expanded as his client's demands also grew. The firm developed, importing and exporting a wide range of products and services associated with security and surveillance. By the eighties and nineties, his firm was one of a growing number of private security companies that were beginning to expand rapidly all over the world and whilst

competition was sometimes fierce, he had the advantage of a well-developed client base.

His firm did well; it was highly respected in the industry. It was inevitable, with the contacts that they had, that they were able to put certain people - new clients, ex-clients, suppliers, and operatives, including mercenaries, in touch with each other. Over the years, their reputation for reliability and responsiveness, providing a quality, client-orientated service grew, and they began to act also as agents; recruiting personnel and equipping them for specific operations. For the most part, Africa had provided a predominant part of their market, but with the collapse of the Soviet block and the abundant supply of illicit weapons from Eastern Europe, as well as the contacts that this brought with it, the balance of trade began to change.

At that time, his wife Clara had also helped to run the business. As the granddaughter of a wealthy émigré family of White Russians who had escaped from the Soviet Union in the early years following the Communist Revolution, she was fluent in Russian and this was particularly useful in their negotiations. Clara ensured that their daughter Sophie was also reasonably fluent in Russian, as well as English, French, Italian and German. This gave their business a definite edge on some of their competitors, especially when dealing with the eastern bloc.

Sophie joined the business after graduating in Business Studies at the London School of Economics. When she joined the business, her father changed the name of the firm to Myrmidon SA, naming it after the legendary warriors that followed Achilles at the siege of Troy. He had received a classical education and somehow, it seemed appropriate. In any event, he now wanted to withdraw his family name from the business. Thus, the business was re-formed as a *Société Anonyme*, a limited company with two directors, his daughter and himself, with a Company Secretary, his wife Clara. By then, they had over three hundred employees worldwide as well as twenty-five working with them at their base in Geneva, where they dealt mostly with finance and administration. In the adjacent factory unit, there were five personnel, two involved in packaging, and three in research and development.

Sophie did not particularly like the business but it was a business she had grown up with and one that she knew and understood. It was very profitable and it gave her the means and the opportunity to indulge herself in the things that she liked - fast cars, sailing, winter sports, and travel. She rationalised that she simply traded in security services and that was that. In 1998, Christian Lefèvre died suddenly following a stroke. Clara never recovered from the shock of his death and over the next two years declined rapidly. She retired from the firm soon afterwards and began to lead a more sedentary life in an apartment overlooking the lake at Montreux.

Sophie was just thirty-four. She had to work hard after her father's death to keep on top of the business. Previously, she had been predominantly concerned with the financial management of the firm. Doing deals, agreeing contracts, and marketing were all rather new to her. So was recruiting. She

had sought to bring someone else into the firm, possibly as a partner or co-director. Someone who was more experienced with weapons, gadgets, and that sort of thing. However, despite employing a couple of people with the right background who looked promising, she had not managed the leap to share the business with someone whom she really trusted. The people that she had taken on at management level were helpful in running the business, interested in the profits and bonuses, but not prepared to take on the responsibility of buying into the business.

The project that was now beginning to occupy her thoughts significantly, was entirely her responsibility. She had no one to lean on and she knew that she alone would have to carry the can, if something had indeed gone wrong. Sophie was not happy. In fact, she was beginning to become very anxious about the whole exasperating matter. Even before she had agreed to take on the project, she had to admit that she had harboured some suspicions. Anything emanating from the Balkans was bound to end up in a mess - it always did, history had demonstrated that. Nonetheless, the contract price had been very tempting and the risk to her company, seemingly small. Now, she rued the day when she had accepted the commission. She should simply have turned it down.

The operatives had been paid one-third of their fees in advance; the balance was to be paid on completion of the operation. Her percentage on the first third would cover all her costs in setting up the operation. The client wouldn't lose a huge amount of money if the project proved unsuccessful for some reason or other, and should have appreciated that such an operation, in any event, was not without risks. However, Sophie had quickly concluded after her first meeting with him that her client was quite an odd character. Instinctively, she had disliked him from the outset. He was disagreeable, rather awkward, and had left her with a feeling of vulnerability. Sophie's discomfort with the situation was such that she preferred not to risk confronting him until she had much more information.

Accordingly, it was the uncertainty that troubled her as well as the increasingly likely possibility that she might be obliged to report failure to her strange client. Sophie felt completely in the dark and desperately hoped for some news. Even bad news would be a relief - at least it would resolve the issue. No doubt, she thought, she would learn something soon, but when?

Chapter 6

Dartmoor, Devon, England – 17th October 2003

‘I didn’t see your car!’ Marcus said, sounding somewhat surprised as he crossed the room towards Elliot.

‘Round the back’, Elliot replied shiftily, looking up from the papers spread out on the table in front of him. ‘Force of habit, you know; better out of the way.’

Elliot quickly arranged the mess into a neat pile and got up to greet Marcus. Marcus thought that Elliot looked tired, harassed even and he seemed surprisingly older than the last time that he had seen him only six months earlier.

‘Good to see you again, Marcus,’ Elliot said, gripping Marcus’s hand tightly. ‘What happened? From what I’ve been told so far it seemed like a rather desperate affair.’

‘It was,’ Marcus confirmed.

‘Regrettably, it suggests that we have had some kind of security failure.’

‘Those were exactly my thoughts.’

Elliot sighed. ‘I know that you have already given a full report to Lewis, but I would appreciate it if you went over it again with me. I want to know everything - don’t spare me any detail.’

So Marcus related once more an account of all the events that had taken place during the previous forty-eight hours. Rapidly, he recounted the first part of his story. Elliot listened carefully and attentively and asked only a few questions. Marcus then went on to describe his debriefing with Lewis. This took much longer. Elliot repeatedly interrupted him querying certain points and going over the same ground several times. Elliot seemed particularly interested in learning more about the two assassins, their origins and their pedigree. To his disappointment, Marcus was unable to help with this and they were forced into various speculations that each led nowhere.

When they had concluded, Elliot suggested lunch at the local pub and then, looking at his watch realised that it was already too late. They would probably have stopped serving meals at 2.00 and it was already 3.00 p.m.

‘Perhaps another time, Marcus, I had completely lost track of the time,’ he excused himself, getting up from the table. ‘Look, I’m sincerely very sorry about all this. It really shouldn’t have happened.’

‘It’s not your fault, Elliot!’

‘Yes, I know, you’re right, but I feel culpable all the same.’

‘You’ll do everything you can to sort this mess out, won’t you?’

‘Yes, of course we will. Look, I’m going to have to get back to London pretty smartly now - evening meeting with the Minister.’ Elliot paused, fidgeting slightly, clearly embarrassed. It was unlike him, Marcus reflected, he was usually more relaxed. Elliot collected his papers and slid them into his briefcase, avoiding eye contact. Marcus was convinced that he was holding back on something.

‘Look,’ Elliot continued, still avoiding looking in Marcus’s direction. ‘Inevitably, it’s going to be a bit difficult over the next few days. In all our interests, I think you should stay put here for a while, keep your head down. Go for a few walks on the moor, that sort of thing, get the events of the last couple of days out of your system. We’ll start our wider investigations as soon as we can and see what we can come up with. If we have any news, you will be the first to know. We’ll keep in touch. OK? Can we contact you by phone?’ he asked. ‘You still have a mobile?’

‘I’ll have a new one tomorrow probably. I’ll let you know the number when I have it.’

‘Good. Laptop?’

‘Yes.’

‘Don’t use it for surfing the web, use it sparingly, don’t use it at home to send messages – too easy for someone to obtain a general location.’

‘I’ll take your advice.’

‘Good. Well, we’ll have to leave it like that then for the moment.’ Elliot looked at Marcus and smiled. ‘I must say that it’s very reassuring to know that you are still as resourceful as ever. It wasn’t luck that saw you through this - it was skill and experience. It was a great pity that you decided to leave the Department.’

‘I had to.’

‘I don’t suppose I could persuade you to reconsider.’

‘No chance.’

‘No, I suppose not. You never really settled down in London after what happened, did you.’

‘No.’

‘The best advice I can give you is to stay here for the time being, at least until we have something to work on. OK?’

‘Yes,’ replied Marcus vacantly; he was thinking about the deer. Elliot was wrong; luck had played a significant part in his survival. Then he thought of the small booty that he had retrieved from Lewis.

‘Oh, there is one other thing that you should be aware of.’

‘What’s that?’ Elliot looked alarmed.

‘I borrowed a couple of things that belonged to the men who were killed. I thought they might come in useful. They are on the inventory that Lewis compiled.’

‘Anything that I should know about in detail?’

Marcus thought for a second. Elliot would find out anyway very shortly. He would read the reports and talk to Lewis who would no doubt try to exonerate himself of any responsibility concerning the weapons.

‘Probably not,’ Marcus said, deciding on the instant not to beleaguer his former boss with a difficult decision.

'I doubt it's a problem then,' smiled Elliot. They shook hands.

'Could I ask you one more thing?'

'Go ahead,' Elliot looked fidgety again.

'Why did you give Lewis this case?' Marcus asked, hoping Elliot would throw some light on the reason behind his choice of Lewis to conduct the inquiry.

'He knows you. You were together in Sarajevo and he's good at ferreting.'

'Yes, but you know that we don't exactly get on together and you also know that he's a lazy bastard. He's not exactly someone who inspires confidence, Elliot!'

'Perhaps you're right Marcus, but he is the right man for the job and besides, I haven't anyone else I can spare just at the moment. You know what it was like before you left and anyway, since nine/eleven we hardly have time to think. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is.'

Marcus didn't reply; his expression was enough to show his disappointment.

'Anything else?'

'No,' replied Marcus.

'Then I really must go. We'll be in touch again shortly,' Elliot said, his Welsh lilt unmistakable in his voice. The two men shook hands again as Elliot let himself out of the front door.

Marcus closed the door behind him. As he stared out of the window of the sitting room, Elliot's car, a black Jaguar, crossed the gravel in front of the cottage and disappeared down the drive leaving a small whirlwind of dust behind it. Marcus had a sinking feeling as the dust began to settle and wondered if that would be the last he would see of Elliot. He turned, looking at the modest pile of cardboard boxes in the room, the sum total of his possessions. He didn't have much to show for his life so far.

That evening, Marcus wandered down to the local pub to have a couple of beers, and a meal. When he returned to the cottage it was already 9.00 p.m., so he showered and went straight to bed. He fell asleep watching the television and slept soundly until 6.00 a.m. the next morning.

* * *

At the same time precisely, although it was 7.00 a.m. in Geneva, Sophie had already showered and dressed. She looked out of the window. A dense, impenetrable mist hung over the lake. It was typical mid-autumnal weather, she thought. It was the microclimate. The cold air of the mountains trapped the slightly warmer moist air above the lake. Sometimes it just sat over the lake and the city all day. Other days, it burnt off during the morning, bathing Geneva in warm autumnal sunlight during the afternoon. But, when it didn't, and it wasn't that uncommon, it was depressing, and although warmer than the mountains, the clinging dampness made it seem colder in the city and more inhospitable.

..... read on!