

OCCUPIED

by

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Novel. Near-future political thriller

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CHAPTER ONE

Death and Kathleen Mackenzie weren't exactly lovers. But even so, after all they'd been through together, here she was again, back for another date. This time, however, this very final time, it would be on her terms.

She peered at the busy car park below. The hospital stood several storeys high. Such a great height made her head spin. She scuttled back from the roof edge and sucked in a skyful of air to relieve the vertigo. Then, plucking a neatly folded tissue from her sleeve, she dabbed her tear-stained face and graced the cloudless morning sky with her attention, as if turning to God for answers.

The lone woman seemed somewhat out of place on the roof with nothing but air conditioning ducts, defunct analogue antennae and feral pigeons for company. She was no nurse or doctor. In fact, she had no connection whatever with the hospital in a vocational capacity. But what she did have was the absolute mother of all reasons to be there.

Kathleen...

Fifteen minutes earlier...

At the bedside of her critically injured twelve-year-old son...

Hooked up to a million beeping, hissing machines, the boy lay covered from head to foot in bandages. She yearned to hold his hand, for her own comfort as well as his, but knew this could not be. One hand was encased in rigid plaster. The sheer force of the bomb blast had blown the other hand clean off.

Kathleen had spent the day of the incident shopping in London's West Zone with friends. Her son had phoned to let her know the school was releasing pupils early. Some old gumpf about a teachers' strike and not enough pro-State non-union staff to cover. Not wishing to cut short her long overdue spell of retail therapy, she'd tempted the boy with the offer of the

greasiest, unhealthiest fast food if he agreed to a rendezvous with the parent. Oh, why hadn't she instead let him head to the house? He would have only been home alone for an hour, maybe two. It wouldn't have mattered. The lad was old enough to look after himself without burning the entire street down. He was twelve years of age, for God's sake. Another four short years and he could legally have sex. And six years from now would see him gracing the bars, casinos and brothels of the Leisure Zone with his newfound adulthood. Instead, she'd forced him to alter his usual route, a variation which included walking past Hotel Centra in the city's Central Zone.

Just as the car bomb went off.

Boom!!!

The death toll of the terrorist attack had now risen to fifteen. A great many bystanders had been seriously injured by the blast, Kathleen's son no exception. The shockwaves of the explosion had sent the schoolboy flying through the plate glass window of a department store. As anticipated, many of those wounded during the bombing were now falling victim to their injuries. Permanently.

Since the boy's hospital admission, Kathleen had overheard the medics utter a million, trillion times that it was a miracle he'd not been killed instantly. This marvel alone gave her the will, the strength, the stubborn determination to keep praying. However, hope was fading fast. She knew this all too well. Whether she'd let herself admit it was a different matter altogether.

'Mrs Mackenzie, your son sustained a great many injuries in the bomb attack,' announced a poker-faced doctor. 'I'm afraid it's only life support keeping him alive.'

Kathleen's eyes began to leak tears. She knew exactly where this was leading. 'You want my permission to turn the machines off.' A pained grimace contorted her pallid face. 'I'm right, aren't I?'

‘His condition will not improve.’

Kathleen could hold back no longer, a loud bark of emotion, followed by frenzied, stammering sobs. She palmed her mouth tight in an attempt to fight back further yelps. It didn’t work. The woman’s anguish sliced the surrounding air.

Denial then struck. ‘No way, this can’t be happening,’ she whimpered. ‘You’ve made a mistake. My son will be fine. Really, he will. He’s sleeping. Yes, that’s what he’s doing. He’ll open his eyes in a minute. Just you wait and see.’

The doctor did as he’d been trained, appearing to share her grief. ‘I am so sorry.’

Upon entering the hospital this morning, she’d been advised to expect the worst. However, prior knowledge of an inevitable outcome didn’t make her decision any easier. Kathleen was his mother. She was supposed to protect him, care for him, nurture him, comfort him, not pull the bloody plug on him. She would forever hate herself for this terrible sin. Terminating life support meant terminating her only son, her pride and joy, her own flesh and blood. How could the doctor ask this of her? Did he have children of his own? Would he do the same if he was in her position? Well?

Reality began to sink in. Yes. Of course he would.

It took all her inner strength to emit two little words. ‘Do it.’

The doctor tipped a grave nod and flicked the switches one by one. The breathing apparatus was the first to fall idle, one final laboured hiss and then nothing. However, the rhythmic beep-beep of the heart monitor continued for the longest time. Glowing hope returned to the woman. Maybe her son was fighting it. Maybe he would survive after all. Maybe he –

The piercing, continuous whine of the flat-line tore through her soul with the ease of a freshly sharpened blade. The flick of a secondary switch eradicated the noise, but the haunting, ice-cold scream continued to resonate deep inside her brain. The mother knew all

too well that she would never free this nightmare from her torn, tattered mind. Her child's final moment would stay with her forever.

Rivers of tears spewed out, zig-zagging in chaotic tumbles down the contours of her wavering face. A sharp pain shot through her abdomen, as if she'd been delivered the knock-out punch of a heavyweight boxer. She felt numb. Empty. Deadened. Killing her son had essentially killed her too.

There was nobody left to share such a gut-wrenching burden. The woman was barely into her thirties, yet she'd already lost both parents to that bastard Death, one to cancer, the other a few months down the line to a broken heart which failed to mend. And her husband? Hah! He was long gone. The two-timing bastard had caught the early train with a "walking pair of tits" work colleague to Godknowswhere eleven months, two weeks and three days ago. Yes, she kept note of the exact time since the sleazy rat's middle-fingered departure with obsessive accuracy.

Kathleen now found herself alone in the world. Nobody to love or be loved by. It was all so pathetic when she thought about it. In a way, almost laughable. Only, there was nothing to laugh about. And here she stood on a breezy hospital roof, clutching nothing more than a well-used plastic carrier bag for comfort. Funny how things turned out.

She watched as a black chauffeur-driven limousine boasting flags of stars and stripes pulled into the car park below. Kathleen's cold and resolute eyes clearly indicated her role as a woman on a mission. The driver stepped out and opened the rear door. General Stratton emerged with concrete discipline from the vehicle, dressed as always in full US Army attire. He was never seen without a uniform. It was widely anticipated that the man even slept in it.

As he proceeded to head for the main building, a storm of reporters appeared from nowhere, wielding microphones and cameras like tribal weapons. Stratton offered a resigned sigh. He would have preferred to park directly outside the front entrance to avoid such

unwarranted attention, but the area was strictly reserved for ambulances only. Even a man of his notable influence couldn't relax a regulation so set in stone. England had changed beyond recognition, yet anal jobsworths were still going strong.

Like hungry birds to breadcrumbs, the journalists all jabbered at once, an urgent mish-mash of squawking and chirping, eager for fresh snippets of information about the recent bombing. However, they were wasting their time. Such an unsolicited bombardment fell upon deaf ears. Stratton failed to respond to their barrage of questions, face rigid, mouth shut, eyes fixed forward, not once giving them the time of day. He was booked to open a new hospital ward, not front an impromptu Q&A session.

Kathleen had expected Stratton's arrival. The new ward, a special emergency care unit for injured US soldiers, had been talked about on the early morning news. It was essential for Mrs Mackenzie to be here at this precise moment. This female had something important to get off her chest, and so thus needed an audience with credentials. TV crews from almost every network were in attendance. Good. Her greatest moment would be fully documented.

The woman produced a white linen bedding sheet from the plastic bag and hastily unfurled it. It sported the bold red lettering she'd painted onto the fabric a couple of hours earlier. Four loose bricks were used to aid the anchoring of the material. She then hung the makeshift banner over the roof edge for the world to see.

It was a passing member of the public who first spotted Kathleen's handiwork. He pointed upwards, egging on bystanders to take a peek. General Stratton and the reporters followed his point. They stared in open-mouthed bewilderment as they read the text on the banner.

“GO HOME. YOU CAUSED THIS.”

This had been her original plan. Create the banner, get the message on TV and hope the US Army would realise that its occupation of England had ultimately led to the hospitalisation of her darling boy, her only born, a young and innocent child. However, things had now changed. Her son was dead. Mere text on fabric was nowhere near enough. The event would soon be forgotten. This time tomorrow, it would be yesterday's news. The memory of her boy was worth far more than simply one day of coverage. No, no, no, something else was required. Something big. Something memorable. Something extreme. An act which would beat a simple slogan hands down.

Kathleen stood upright. With the faultless poise of an Olympic gymnast, she raised both arms high above her head. The woman offered her attention to the sky. A lone white cloud appeared overhead. She posted a warm smile, believing it to be her son looking down on her with double thumbs of approval.

She closed her eyes. Took a deep breath.

And jumped.

Stunned onlookers gawped in horror as the woman plummeted groundwards and landed with a deafening slam upon the roof of a newly arrived ambulance. There followed a cold, deathly silence. Nobody moved. Not a soul uttered a word. What could they possibly do or say?

Kathleen lay broken and lifeless, both arms thrown open and wide, as if about to offer her son the biggest hug ever recorded. Her glassy, unmoving eyes gazed eternally at the heavens above. One corner of her mouth found itself curled upwards. It could easily be mistaken for a satisfied smile.

Her point had been made. Her work here was done.

CHAPTER TWO

PREVIOUSLY: THE DAY OF THE BOMBING...

‘You look like shit.’

The remark threw Jonas Cain, seeing as the usually meek and restrained Matthew Samms had delivered it. But yes. The man was right. He did look like shit. Shit dragged through a hedge backwards. Shit dropped from a great height onto concrete. Shit long since abandoned by its resident flies. He really needed to do something about it. After all, Samms was not the only client of late who had complained about his vagabond appearance.

Client. Heh, the term still amused him, even after all this time. Paying customers were no longer referred to as fares or punters. Not since all taxis had become State-owned. Pretty much everything was these days. Hardly anybody owned anything anymore. It was a sign of the times.

After first brushing the faux leather surface of the back seat free of potential debris with four, five, fuck knows how many flicks of his hand, Samms entered the vehicle. Another eye-opener for Cain. This was certainly not like him. It was customary for the man to plonk himself down without checking. Many a liberally chewed knob of gum had found itself adhered to his unsuspecting back side.

Hmm, curious, without a doubt, today’s stringent pre-sit check had something to do with his unprecedented classy attire.

‘New suit?’ Cain enquired.

‘Just drive,’ Samms snapped, clearly not in the mood for idle chitchat.

Cain sighed. It was all set to be one of those days. He threw the taxi into gear and the wheels were rolling. ‘Where to? The office?’

Samms indicated to his fancy threads. 'In this get-up?'

Cain was tired already of his client's unwarranted rudeness. Who did he think he was? Scrawny little idiot, bigging it up like some kind of managerial top-nob. Samms was nothing special. An insignificant office gopher. That's all he had amounted to in twenty years of working for the same company. Sure, Cain could understand the man's frustration, but did he really need to take it out on the driver? It was unnecessary. Totally uncalled for. He was tempted to make the twat get out and walk, but forty per cent of all takings – the State got the rest – was instantly credited to his thumb implant... which was in desperate need of a top-up. Could he afford to be so choosy? No way.

If he couldn't thumb, he didn't eat, simple as that. In fact, citizens couldn't do anything these days without thumbing. The tiny implant, set into the right-hand thumb's fleshy tip, had revolutionised everybody's way of life, replacing money altogether as the only accepted method of payment. Cold, hard cash was no longer legal tender. People were paid electronically with a top-up of credit. This was then spent, placing said thumb upon the square pad of a payment console, on whatever tickled their proverbial fancy.

Cain braked at a junction. He waited for his opportunity, then joined the steady flow of traffic on the main stretch. He still didn't have a clue where he was supposed to be heading. What was this, a guessing game? The tosser in the back was certainly trying his patience. If not the office, then where? The man never went anywhere else. Samms was Mr Routine. You could set clocks by him.

Cain inspected his client via the rear-view mirror. It was obvious. Something was up with the guy. The man had been acting odd for the past fortnight or so, but today was the worst he'd ever seen him. He was jumpy, tetchy, perspiring way too much, with eyes flitting in all directions like a pair of bees on coke. He didn't look too good at all. And to think he'd had the gall to accuse him of looking like shit. The words pot, kettle and black sprang to mind.

‘Samms, how about telling me where you want dropping off?’

‘Hotel Centra. And don’t spare the horses.’

Cain frowned. Hotel Centra was the type of establishment where a guest needed to take out a second mortgage just to be able to tip the bellboy. ‘Don’t you think that’s a little out of your price range?’

‘Who are you, my financial advisor?’ Samms fished his trouser pocket for a tissue with which he mopped his sweaty brow. ‘Life’s a piece of shit, Cain,’ he began to drone in pure soapbox mode. ‘I’d like to see a return to the old days myself. Things were much better back then. Never going to happen though, is it? Look what they’ve done to this country. Almost everything bloody State-owned. What’s that all about? They’ve got the banks, the shops, God knows what else. All paid for with taxpayer’s money. Supposed to belong to us, the people. Doesn’t though, does it? Money-grabbing bastards.’

Cain took note of approaching military traffic in his rear-view mirror and slowed to a halt at the side of the road. He knew the drill. Pull over, let them pass, get on with the day. The foreboding convoy of US Army vehicles then trundled past.

Samms sneered at the sight with a hefty slice of abhorrence. ‘And they can piss off back to their own country. What the bloody hell are they doing over here anyway? They occupy our country, thinking it’s all right to take control.’

Samms extended the stiffest of middle fingers way close to the window. Cain was thankful the gesture went unnoticed.

‘We can sort out our own trouble, thanks,’ snarled the suited man.

Throwing the car back into motion, Cain felt relieved by a full set of closed windows. It was preferred that Samms’ derogatory comments travelled no further than the car interior. The last headache he wanted was trouble. It was best avoided. He only had one game plan these days. Make sure the day is as eventless as possible, earn his credit, then while away the

evening in a back-street bar in the Leisure Zone. Not a particularly remarkable way of life, but to him it was perfectly adequate.

The adult leisure industry was a massive earner for the State. Leisure Zones were huge self-contained complexes, one per town or city, consisting of bars, clubs, brothels, casinos and strip joints where clients could drink, gamble and get laid in whichever order they pleased.

Meanwhile, outside of Cain's musings, there was no stopping Samms. 'They say they're only here to keep the peace. Hah! They're not doing a very good job, are they? We've seen far more attacks since they arrived. Mostly against them. Don't they understand? Nobody wants them here. All they're doing is creating more trouble.'

'Samms. Our government fell. Somebody needs to be in charge.' Cain had no idea why he'd delivered such a defeatist line. He disliked the American occupation as much as his client. Maybe a quiet life was easier.

Samms continued regardless. 'Our leaders were brought down because of the way they pissed on their people.' Then, an afterthought. 'Hey, how come you're on their side? What's happened to you, Cain? A little bird tells me you used to be a major player for the Cause.'

Uh-oh. Cain didn't like being put on the spot. Where had Samms tasted such a juicy morsel of information? He didn't want loose lips sinking his current ship. He'd grown accustomed to a subdued existence. Save for the annoyance of the occasional bombing in the area, he was finally enjoying some peace and quiet.

'That was a long time ago.'

Samms scoffed. 'You're going soft in your old age.'

Old age? Cain was only in his thirties. 'Just keeping my head down.'

'Yeah? What's that likely to achieve?'

A raised eyebrow from Cain. What the hell was Samms on today? What's that likely to achieve? Hah, says the man who had quietly accepted his role as office dogsbody for the last two decades without so much as a whimper of disapproval. Hmm, Cain was unsure if he liked the assertive and self-important Samms version 2.0. The jury was still out on that one, and would be for some time. He was so glad Hotel Centra was now a mere stone's throw away.

'Evil flourishes where good men do nothing,' continued Samms.

Cain groaned. Here we go. Already, his passenger had reached the quotes stage.

'You need to make a stand, Cain. I will today. I'm determined to be remembered. I even got myself a new suit for the occasion.'

Cain shook an incredulous head – what the fuck was this guy banging on about? – as he pulled up and parked outside the main entrance of the hotel. It was crystal clear. Samms must have snorted a line or two before stepping into the taxi. The man's mind was evidently mashed.

The client in question leaned forward and pressed his thumb against the vehicle's transaction console.

'Payment successful,' chirped the console's friendly female electronic voice.

'Oh, just one more thing.' Samms pressed the cold steel of a hand gun against Cain's head.

What the fuck? Cain certainly hadn't expected this. It wasn't the first time he'd been threatened with a firearm, but it was certainly the most surprising. And the most embarrassing. After all the danger he'd encountered and survived in his life, was it his destiny to be put to sleep by a frustrated trigger-happy tea boy?

'You don't want to do this, Samms.' There was a noticeable tremor in his voice. No matter how accustomed he'd become to guns, Cain had never completely lost the fear of the receiving end. 'What will killing me achieve?' He truly wished to discover the answer to this question.

‘Get out of the car,’ barked the gunman. ‘And run. As fast as you can.’ He offered across a cold grin. ‘Want to know why?’

Samms unbuttoned his suit jacket. He indicated at the driver to take a look. Cain soon wished he hadn’t. Wrapped around his torso was a makeshift vest of explosives. The man meant serious business.

‘You have got to be joking.’

‘Do I look like I’m doing a stand-up routine?’ No. Samms didn’t. ‘I was told you had to die with me. But I don’t want anybody else sharing the glory. It’s my day, nobody else’s, so piss off out of it.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘For the last time, Cain, if you want to live, get out of the bloody car!’

Cain was in no position to debate the issue. Samms had been turned into a loose cannon. By whom was anybody’s guess. He was about to lose his taxi, his very livelihood, but at least he’d keep hold of his life. It was a consolation of sorts, even though, most of the time, he didn’t care if he collapsed drunk in the gutter and never woke up again. Funny how life-threatening situations changed people’s perspectives.

He shoved open the car door and leapt out. Upon his somewhat sharp exit, he peered through the glass double doors of Hotel Centra. Two heavily decorated US Army officers were walking through the plush foyer, approaching the exit. Top brass by the look of them. He glanced back at Samms in the taxi. The man leered at the hotel doors. Grinning. Watching. Waiting. Then it dawned on Cain. The two officers were his targets. Shit.

Cain dashed down the street, thrashing his arms around like a madman. ‘Get down!’ he cried at every member of the public he passed. ‘There’s a bomb in that car!’

His choice of B-word garnered much-needed attention. Several people dived for cover. Others froze on the spot. One lady started screaming. The remainder frowned in question at the running man, not knowing quite what to do, say or think.

‘A bomb’s about to go off! Get down!’

Far behind him, the taxi exploded. Ker-boom!!! Cain hit the deck. The vehicle, the hotel entrance, the local vicinity, everything was engulfed by a rampant fireball. The two US Army officers were instant toast. Windows shattered. Debris flew in all directions. People were bowled clean over by the force of the blast. And across the road, a twelve-year-old boy in school uniform, the son of Kathleen Mackenzie, was thrown through the plate glass window of a department store.

Then came smoke. The thick, billowing grey cloud smothered the vicinity. Shop and car alarms shrilled for attention. High-pitched screams of panic, pain or a fusion of both scratched the air. The wounded lay in agony on the concrete, jerking and flapping like landed fish. Terrified onlookers zig-zagged in all directions, headless chickens on speed. It was devastation with a capital D.

Cain clambered to his feet, awkward, shaky, unsteady. He couldn’t take his eyes off the sheer carnage and destruction unfolding before him. For so long, he’d been left alone to get on with his life. Until now. Oh, great. Somebody had got him involved again. But who? And why? And did that somebody really want him dead? He truly wished to seek both enlightenment and closure on all these questions, but at this point in time, one solitary word graced his mind.

Run.

CHAPTER THREE

‘General Stratton,’ began one of the many gathered journalists. ‘Are you able to give us further details about this afternoon’s bombing?’

It hadn’t taken long for the emergency press conference to be arranged. Journalists from every newspaper and magazine imaginable were in attendance, all hungry for cold, hard facts. Printed media had at last returned to its roots, telling the news. Real news. Proper news. Idle gossip concerning a has-been celebrity’s ballooning arse cheeks, waistline or breasts was no longer in vogue. The tragic events of recent times had guaranteed the tabloids consistent content to bloat those column inches, not to mention a lucrative sales rate. After all, there was always something going on to report about and somebody who wanted to know all about it.

Almost everybody purchased newspapers nowadays. They were essential. In fact, they were once again a way of life, just as they had been in days gone by. People needed a cost-effective way to be kept in the loop, especially during the harsh and unpredictable times of late. Many consumers couldn’t afford the luxury of paywalled news websites or subscription-only twenty-four-hour satellite news channels, so the thought-to-be-extinct reading of text on sheets of paper was making its humble comeback, dubbed by the media as The Paper Revolution.

General Stratton sat rigid and emotionless behind a desk at the front of the hall. Alongside the US Army officer sat Detective Inspector Cooper, much respected and affectionately labelled as one of the London Police Division’s finest. In humble mode, he’d tell the world, ‘I’m just doing my job,’ or, ‘I don’t deserve such widespread adulation,’ but he was secretly lapping up the worship bestowed upon him with an eager tongue. The policeman had banged up a lot of hardened criminals in his time, including many English insurgents. This was why

the tabloids portrayed him as some kind of superhero; the Messiah of the policing world, destined to save the public from the threat of home-grown terrorist attacks.

‘Certainly,’ began General Stratton, eager to reply to the journalist. ‘This afternoon at fourteen-zero-six hours, a bomb was detonated in a vehicle outside Hotel Centra, killing eight people, including two high-ranking officers of the United States Army. There was one body in the vehicle... what’s left of it... the identity of whom we are still trying to establish.’

‘Have you any idea which group was behind the bombing?’ called out another journalist.

‘As yet, nobody has claimed responsibility for the attack.’

‘I must point out,’ butted in Cooper, ‘that both the London Police Division and US Army are doing everything in their power to bring these terrorists to justice. Even as we speak, local CCTV footage is being thoroughly checked. We expect arrests to be made in no time at all.’

Another journalist stood up, making himself known. ‘Detective Inspector Cooper. It’s widely acknowledged that these terrorist attacks are being carried out by English citizens on their own soil. How does that make you feel?’

‘Saddened.’ Cooper offered an accompanying sigh. ‘That’s how I feel. Not to mention disillusioned by the fact that this once great nation has fallen shamelessly into such deep and murky depths.’

‘Oh, and General Stratton,’ continued the journalist, now adopting a somewhat sinister tone. ‘Could it be that they are resorting to such violence because they no longer want you people here?’

Mixed murmurs of outrage and agreement resonated throughout the hall. It was clear the meeting consisted of a rich assortment of both for and against regarding the US military presence. Having another country barge in to sort out home-grown problems was a sore point for many, while others actively supported it with the widest of open arms.

‘Terrorism is terrorism,’ barked Stratton, unable to contain his disgust. ‘There is no reason for such mindless bloodshed, other than to cause harm and misery to innocent civilians.’

The rebel dared to ask, ‘Oh? Could it not be that some people are willing to die for what they believe in?’

Gasps of shock were fired from the pro-American crowd.

Stratton scoffed, one corner of his mouth curling into some kind of disjointed half-smile. It was more than likely a grimace. ‘Willing to die for what they believe in? And what would that be exactly?’

‘With respect,’ replied the rebel, employing adequate strategic decorum. ‘This is not your war.’

‘The war on terror is everybody’s war.’

‘But this is our country,’ cried a female journalist, eager to muscle in on the act, perhaps to fast-track a long overdue promotion. ‘Therefore, shouldn’t it be our problem?’

‘I must remind you all,’ was Stratton’s next contribution, ‘the US Army is only here to keep the peace.’

‘But six months ago,’ continued the female journalist, clearly another rebel, ‘you said you’d pull out all your troops by the end of this week. Is this still likely to happen?’

‘A full military withdrawal at this stage would not be in this country’s best interest.’

‘What do you know about this country’s best interest?’ yelled somebody at the back. ‘Bugger off back where you came from!’

Stratton chose to ignore such scathing comments. ‘Sensible questions only please.’

Another journalist asked, ‘Will the Royal Family be returning home any time soon?’

Cooper intervened. ‘We will not be allowing them back into this country until peace has been fully restored.’

‘When will that be exactly?’

‘I’m sorry. I can’t answer that.’

‘What about the long-term leadership of this country?’ asked the original rebel. ‘When will a new English government be formed?’

‘Rome was not built in a day,’ said Stratton. ‘For the foreseeable future, England will continue to be led by the US Committee.’ And off murmurs of discontent, he added, ‘But we do hope to re-introduce a democratic voting system as soon as we can.’

The US Committee was made up of various US Army officers and other hand-picked American dignitaries, all huddled self-importantly around a table, thinking themselves to be kings. Oddly, but not too surprisingly, there were no native members. They had a few English advisors hovering around, including George Johnson, former Deputy Leader of the previous government, but people like him were only listened to when it suited them.

‘The last government fell,’ pointed out the female rebel. ‘What makes you so sure the next one won’t?’

Stratton ignored the query. ‘Could you please limit questions to the matter in hand, people? This press conference is about today’s bombing. It is not a vehicle for a political debate.’

The original rebel called out, ‘Detective Inspector Cooper. If you catch those responsible for the attack, where will they be interrogated?’ And with a shot of venom, ‘Will it be the Talking Room?’

Cooper tried his best to play dumb. ‘I’m sorry. I have no idea what you’re referring to.’

‘The Talking Room. That’s where all the illegal torture of suspected terrorists goes on these days, is it not?’

In a firm tone, Stratton arbitrated, ‘The Talking Room was invented by the most warped of imaginations. Read my lips, people. It. Does. Not. Exist.’

The hall was now in turmoil, a tidal wave of competing voices.

Cooper stood up and attempted in vain to wave down the angry crowd. ‘Calm down, ladies and gentlemen. One question at a time please. I said calm down.’

Sod this, in maverick fashion, Stratton produced a pistol, pointed it above his head and fired off three shots. Splinters of ceiling plaster landed on the unsuspecting heads of some people in the front row. As such, the crowd fell into a deathly hush. Even Cooper hadn’t expected it.

Stratton grinned with delicious victory. And then a serious face took control. ‘Terrorism in this country will be stamped out for good,’ the General assured them all, rising to his feet. ‘I promise you that with hand upon heart.’

His placed a palm on his chest to illustrate his words, then paused for dramatic effect, his eyes panning in a sluggish fashion across the length and breadth of his captive audience. Once satisfied that his promise had sunk deep into the minds of every soul in the hall, he concluded his speech.

‘Ladies. Gentlemen. Remember today. For this is the day that everything changes.’

CHAPTER FOUR

Donna Stone stepped aside from the doorway to allow Cain entry into her bedsit. Riding the final year of her twenties, the girl had been told all so often she had a kind face, whatever that meant exactly. However, her trademark resolute stance warned onlookers she was a lass who knew exactly how to look after herself.

‘You look like shit.’

Her comment annoyed Cain. ‘Why do people keep saying that?’

‘Because it’s true.’ She closed and bolted the door behind her guest. ‘It’s like you’ve got a season ticket for the Leisure Zone.’

Cain ignored the insult. A double bed dominated the somewhat diminutive room. This was where he chose to land his posterior.

Donna asked, ‘What made you decide to turn up on my doorstep?’

‘I didn’t know who else I could trust.’

Donna opened the fridge door. ‘Nice to be wanted, I guess.’ She held aloft two bottles of beer. ‘Thirsty?’

‘Parched.’

After wrenching off both tops with a bottle opener, she handed him a drink and remained standing. Cain took his first swig. It went down well. He’d waited hours to be refreshed like this. Since the bombing that afternoon, he’d avoided public places until darkness fell.

‘You’re looking good, Donna.’

The girl snorted a dose of indifference. ‘I’m surprised you even noticed.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘You haven’t shown your face for...’ She dealt a shrug of the shoulders. ‘Must be a year now. Where the hell have you been?’

Cain peered at the girl, attempting to read her face. She genuinely looked as though she'd missed his company. He'd kind of missed her too, although he hadn't realised how much until this very moment.

Had it really been a year? Time certainly flew by these days. Once upon a time, Cain and Donna had been close, although never enjoying a proper loving relationship. They'd simply hung out together. Oh, and fucked every now and then whenever their inner desires cried out for such a requirement. More than just fuckbuddies, but less than lovers. Somewhere very safely in-between. Of course, it was not to say that neither of them had considered getting serious and taking it to the next level. However, amid such a precarious, unstable climate, it was wise not to get too involved. They'd both lost many a good friend along the way. Bombings. Shootings. Knifings. Sniper fire. These were dangerous times. Any one of them could be next to grace the mortician's slab.

But where had the year gone? It seemed like only yesterday since the two of them parted company. He recalled Donna unable to understand why he needed to make such a sudden departure. To Cain, it was simple. Moving in such dangerous circles was bad for his health. Too many people had laid down their lives already. He didn't wish to become part of such a needless statistic. Sure, there were other reasons, major reasons, but they could in no way be discussed with the girl. Ever. Otherwise, she would never trust him again.

So where had he been these past twelve months? Nowhere much. Work, bar, home, work, bar, home, work, bar, home, plus the occasional brothel in order to break the monotony and satisfy the stubbornness of a hard-on which refused to go away, a cycle so routine and clockwork, he no longer needed to think twice about it.

'I've been getting on with my life,' came his eventual reply. What else could he say?

Donna stared at him in silence. A hollow, empty gaze. The little girl lost. Affection and desire once resided in those dark eyes, but had long since been evicted, only to be replaced by

the barrenness of sorrow. 'We've all been getting on with our lives. But a hello now and then would have been appreciated.'

Cain bowed his head in shame. 'Yeah, I know. And I'm sorry.'

Donna then checked herself, snapping out of her vacant gaze. That little girl lost was lost to the ether, substituted instead by the firmer, more together version. 'Don't be. I'll live.'

A change of subject was in order. 'Is the gang still together?'

The girl shook her head. 'Disbanded ages ago. They all went their separate ways. As a result, things have been very quiet around here.'

'Until now,' commented Cain.

'Understatement of a lifetime. I couldn't believe it when you phoned. What the hell's going on?'

'There's nothing much to tell.'

Donna let out an over-inflated scoff. 'Cain, you're all over the news. They're after your blood. How could you be so stupid, using your own vehicle?'

'It wasn't me.'

'You were seen running from the car. The news channels have been broadcasting the CCTV footage all day.'

'Somebody has fitted me up.' A bold statement, but what else could it be? 'You're looking at the scapegoat of the century.'

'Who would want to do that, and why?'

'Fuck knows.' He took another swig of his beer. 'The sacrificial lamb they used was this guy called Samms. Regular client of mine. Bit of a twat, but he was just an ordinary guy. They messed with his mind, Donna. Convinced him to blow himself up in the name of the Cause.'

Donna remained sceptical. 'Ordinary people don't suddenly become suicide bombers.'

‘Probably wasn’t too difficult to persuade him. Frustrated office tea boy all his life. Then all of a sudden, he’s given the chance to go out in a blaze of glory. Name in the papers. Face on TV. An instant legend.’ Cain emptied the bottle down his throat and stood up. ‘What I need to do now is find out who was really behind it and clear my name. Does Parker still run the club?’

‘I guess so.’

‘Then that’s where I’m heading.’

‘Are you sure that’s wise? You pissing off seriously pissed him off.’

‘I have no choice. Parker keeps his ear to the ground. If anybody knows what’s what, it’ll be him.’

‘Please don’t go,’ Donna then uttered, almost a whisper. ‘It’s not safe for you out there.’

Such a caring gesture moved him. However, resolute stubbornness took priority. ‘I’ll be back soon.’

‘Promise?’

He peered at her in silence, unwilling to make an oath he might not be able to keep. Instead, the thinnest of half-smiles was offered.

And then Cain made his exit.