OCCUPIED

by

Mikey Jackson

Novel. Near-future political thriller

www.mikeyjackson.com

SEGMENT 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 though 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 nonsense 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 sending the schoolboy flying through the plate glass window of a clothing 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. 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 through the surrounding air.

And then denial struck. 'No way, this can't be happening. 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. 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 that 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. Oh, 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 with cold and resolute eyes as a black chauffeur-driven limousine boasting flags of stars and stripes pulled into the car park below. 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 here to oversee the opening of 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. She 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 few hours earlier. Anchoring the material with four orphaned bricks, she hung the makeshift banner over the roof edge for all 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 much debated 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 that 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-thumbed 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 though 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.

SEGMENT 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 backside. 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? 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 the bank account paired with 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 the 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. And to think he had the gall to accuse <u>him</u> 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 inside 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. He watched in silence as the foreboding convoy of US Army vehicles 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.

‘They say they’re only here to keep the peace,’ droned Samms, clearly not done yet. ‘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, for 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 came an afterthought. ‘Hey, how come you’re on their side? What happened to you, Cain? A little bird tells me you used to be a major player for the Cause.’

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 much-welcomed 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?’

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.'

Cain groaned. 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.'

It was crystal clear. Samms must have snorted a line or two before stepping into the taxi. The man's mind was evidently mashed. Cain couldn't feel any more relieved as he pulled up outside the main entrance of the hotel.

His client 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 pistol 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 performing 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 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.

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 screaming people broke into a terrified sprint. Others froze on the spot. 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, the vehicle, the hotel entrance, the local vicinity engulfed by a rampant fireball, the two US Army officers, instant toast. Windows shattered and debris flew in all directions, with people bowled clean over by the sheer force of the blast. And across the road, a twelve-year-old boy in school uniform, the son of Kathleen Mackenzie found himself thrown through the plate glass window of a clothing store.

Then came smoke, a thick, billowing grey cloud smothering 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. And terrified onlookers zig-zagged in all directions, headless chickens on speed.

Cain clambered to his feet, shaky, unsteady, unable to 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. Cursing under his breath, he knew full well that 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 very point in time, one solitary word graced his mind.

Run.

SEGMENT 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 to arrange the emergency press conference. 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 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 that 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, ‘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 against terrorism 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,’ came Stratton’s follow-up 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 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, he asked, ‘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.’

He placed a palm upon 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.’

SEGMENT 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 too often that she had a kind face, whatever that meant exactly. But her trademark resolute stance warned onlookers that she was a woman who knew exactly how to look after herself, violently if necessary. Therefore, she considered herself a game of two halves.

Donna told him, 'You look like shit.'

'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. Before him, a double bed dominated the somewhat diminutive room. This was where he chose to land his posterior.

'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 for such welcome refreshment. Since the bombing that afternoon, he'd avoided public places until darkness fell.

'You're looking good, Donna.'

'I'm surprised you even noticed.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'You haven't shown your face for... must be a year now. Where the hell have you been?'

Cain gazed 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 were close, although they'd never sailed the serious relationship route. No, they'd simply hung out together. Oh, and fucked whenever their inner desires cried out for such a requirement. More than just fuckbuddies, less than lovers, somewhere very safely in-between. In such a precarious, unstable climate, it was wiser 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 couldn't 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 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.’

‘Is the gang still together?’ Cain needed to know.

‘Disbanded ages ago. They all went their separate ways. As a result, things have been very quiet around here.’

‘Until now.’

‘Understatement of a lifetime. I couldn’t believe it when you called. 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 a fresh 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.’

‘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 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.

And then Cain made his exit.

SEGMENT FIVE

Cain never planned to get himself involved in a bar brawl, but it was always on the cards. Like the proverbial fly to the dung, or the equally proverbial lost and needy dog refusing to take the hint to piss off, violence always seemed to be attracted to him.

Smash! The wood splintered across his back, the force of the blow knocking him clean off his feet, sending him crashing through a table and painfully hitting the deck. Failing to anticipate such a vicious attack from behind, he mentally scribed a new entry into his hypothetical Leisure Zone rulebook.

Never turn your back on a woman with a chair in her hand.

This evening's venture into the big wide world hadn't started off with such a bang. Prior to a reunion with Parker, Cain had wandered in an aimless fashion through the neon-bathed streets of the Leisure Zone, attempting to plan in his head what he would say to the man. After all, they hadn't parted on the best of terms. Harsh words had been exchanged. So how should he converse with a guy who was capable of drawing a knife and slicing his throat long before the completion of the first sentence? Hmm, this was a tough one. No way was he keen on allowing the contents of his jugular to spill out all over Parker's establishment. Knowing that bastard, he'd almost certainly force him to clean up the mess before allowing him the privilege of dying. Therefore, at all costs, he needed to avoid being killed off tonight. Oh, to wake up tomorrow morning and retain a pulse would be most gratifying.

A decade or so earlier, Cain wouldn't have been able to hear himself think in this neighbourhood, what with way too many well-weathered street beggars chirping noisily at passers-by like hungry fledglings in a busy nest. However, all vagrants had long since been taken off the streets as part of a major clean-up campaign, joining an ever-increasing labour force in the workhouses, an idea rehashed from Victorian times, where clothes and other

goods were manufactured at a fraction of the usual cost price, thus boosting the economy. Employees were paid poorly, but to the ex-homeless, it was like winning a lottery.

The rules concerning the welfare system had changed dramatically. The introduction of thumb implants came hand in hand with a controversial new rule. If you didn't work, you weren't entitled to any top-ups of credit, simple as that. Thanks to the workhouses, there were plenty of jobs to go round. Furthermore, when the government had still been in power, it had expanded the workforces of every shop, factory or company it purchased, thus creating more vacancies across the country. Such a massive expansion was funded by the billions it saved by not having to dish out welfare payments to the lazy bastards who had previously refused to work.

Living off the State was no longer an option. It had been abolished, full stop. The elderly and disabled continued to enjoy financial support, but able-bodied citizens were given two choices. Work or starve. This dramatic measure was praised by the majority, especially people old enough to remember the financial chaos caused by an explosion in the number of lethargic benefits scroungers during the earlier part of the century. The irony was, it would only be a few short years after the benefits abolition when the government would be brought crashing down by those same former praisers who could no longer accept the somewhat draconian feel to the way State-owned companies were being run.

The government had launched the scheme with the best of intentions, rescuing troubled companies by buying them out, thus saving jobs and ballooning the economy. Employees felt far more secure in both career and finance than they had in years, safe in the knowledge that a State-owned company was built with stronger bricks. All well and good. The dawn of a new era. But then it all turned sour. Power went to the heads of those who occupied the top rungs of the ladder. The greediest amongst them craved more wealth, so the salaries of ordinary working people were significantly cut to enable an increase in profits. Working conditions

also suffered in a bid to reduce overheads and boost revenue. This angered the nation's workforce, but their cries of protest fell upon deaf ears. Instead, the government applied a put up or shut up policy. This naturally translated as, 'Put up with it and shut up or have your thumb implant deactivated and starve.'

This was the straw which broke the camel's back. Workers up and down the country made a stand. The initial peaceful protests and rallies soon evolved into full-scale riots. Militant and activist groups were promptly formed, bringing violence to the streets with strategic bomb attacks, and so thus were branded by the establishment as the new common enemy. England was hanging on by a single thread. This was civil war. As such, the government crumbled under such acute pressure and fell. Hard. The authorities tried their best to curb the violence, but failed to cope, so the American military decided to involve itself, causing further unrest.

Since the US Army had deployed its peace-keeping efforts, considered by the cynical as a stealth American invasion, things had died down a little. For almost two years, the US Committee had been in charge of England, overseeing the country's politics and economy. As a result, the nation's workforce enjoyed better working conditions and a modest raise in salary. Not much of an improvement, granted, but most people were better off than they had been under the previous government, so the majority of workers accepted it.

The sharpest thorns in the US Army's somewhat punctured side were the last few remaining militant groups, one of which was Parker's gang. These groups continued to actively oppose what they considered as stifling oppression. Although not as frequent of late, bomb attacks were still major headaches, especially the worrying trend of suicide bombers. Patriotic insurgents wanting England to become independent again strongly refused to cease in their actions until they got what they wanted. Ah, but alas, the weeping irony lay in the fact that these were the very same activists who had brought the English government to its knees, prompting America's entry in the first place.

Oh, how the other countries of the former United Kingdom must be laughing now, Cain thought to himself in a brief moment of political self-deliberation, rare for him. Way before the troubles, they'd all earned their independence and duly fled from what they considered as a sinking ship. Northern Ireland was given back to the Irish. Both Scotland and Wales became republics in their own right. The Scots adopted the title of New Scotland, whereas the Welsh chose the more traditional Republic of prefix. And so England, a country which had boasted an unbeatable worldwide Empire many generations beforehand was back to being the largest chunk of a small and strangely shaped island, sitting just off the west coast of Allied Europe.

At this very moment in time, however, Cain didn't care too much about the current state of the country. He'd just reached Parker's club, a reunion with the leader of his former militant gang imminent. Exactly how the meeting would go was anybody's guess.

Stepping inside, he noticed that the place was exactly how he remembered it. The establishment was a tad on the small side, but perfectly adequate for what was required of it. Dim lighting provided a deliberate semi-lit ambience throughout. Fake oak beams and rafters gave it a touch of character. And a vast array of wines, beers and spirits at the bar offered enough choice to satisfy even the most demanding palate. The main room consisted of a scattering of tables and chairs, overlooked by a modest stage where various acts, usually of the adult-orientated variety performed with zealous gusto for an enthusiastic crowd of onlookers.

It didn't look as though any entertainment had been booked for this evening. The stage hadn't been set up and the place was almost dead. This was most fortunate. The last headache Cain wanted was to raise his voice at Parker in an attempt to make himself heard over loud stripping music. It could be construed as shouting at the man. And that would not be advisable.

An over-excited man came out of nowhere and shook Cain's hand. 'Hey, I saw you on TV today. It's good to know there are still people like you out there fighting for our rights.'

Oh, here we go. Cain was being treated like a hero by a pro-English rebel wannabe, somebody who would never in a million years make the grade as a real militant. The guy probably masturbated to fantasies of being an activist, resentful, embittered and crying, 'I wish it was me, why can't it be me?' whilst flogging a log of inadequate length. Cain knew all too well that this type of mindset was dangerous. The man could so easily be manipulated into becoming a sacrificial lamb with a one-way ticket to Kaboomville. In short, a suicide bomber.

Thankfully, much to Cain's relief, Mr Wannabe Militant let go of his hand and left the premises. Cain was then reminded of Samms. He actually felt sorry for him, even though he knew it was a little late in the day to ride the sentimental wave. Okay, so the guy had been a lowly office gopher all his life, and he'd acted a bit of a twat now and then in the taxi, but that didn't mean he wasn't a good man deep down.

Oh, how quickly Mr Matthew Samms had been converted. Lightning fast. Practically overnight. It certainly proved how far the man was prepared to go to become the main topic of conversation, if only for a while. It reminded Cain of re-runs of classic TV talent shows where the saddest and most delusional excuses for human beings gathered in droves to claim their fifteen minutes of fame, only then to be cast back into the bottomless pit of obscurity.

Oh, Cain had a thought. It almost amused him. Samms had craved greatness and notoriety, but what if the London Police Division failed to identify his body from his scattered remains? If that ended up being the case, the man's self-sacrifice would have been in vain; his only shot at fame marred by his explosive choice of sudden departure.

Cain sailed over to the serving counter and claimed the spot closest to the exit. This was protocol. A get-out clause, should he find himself in too deep with Parker or anybody else

looking for a scuffle. In these darker times, it was best to expect trouble. Sailing through an evening without any form of hostility was considered a bonus.

He was met by a scantily clad barwoman, just about wearing a revealing bikini top and the shortest of shorts. ‘Hello, I’m Jade. What would you like me to offer you?’

The question was asked in the most provocative and titillating way possible, including the sultry delivery of “do me” eyes. This was the way Parker trained his bar staff to act, men as well as women. The bossman wanted to give his clients the impression that it was their lucky night. If they thought they were in with a chance, they’d stay. If they stayed, they’d spend more credit. If they spent more credit, Parker would continue to enjoy the lavish and comfortable lifestyle to which he’d grown accustomed. This was how it worked. And should this cause any difficulty at the end of the night, there were always enough of Parker’s gorillas hovering in the vicinity to help smooth over any problems in their own formidable way.

Cain ordered a bottle of beer. Jade flipped the top off the bottle and placed it upon the bar. Cain stiffened his thumb and tapped it on the transaction console. The familiar electronic female voice cheerily celebrated the success of his payment. Hmm, he wondered how many more beers he could afford after this one. Maybe he should ask how much (or how little) credit he had left. No. Bad idea. It would only depress him. Instead, he’d carry on regardless in true ignorant bliss until he could thumb no more. But first –

‘Is Parker around?’

‘Who wants to know?’

Jade’s training in the art of defensive riposte was impeccable. Knowing the somewhat dubious circles Parker moved in, it was safer to deploy a stringent vetting procedure between himself and the outside world. Cain knew all too well that people who asked for Parker by name were not necessarily friends, relatives, colleagues or lovers.

‘The name’s Jonas Cain. Former employee.’

No reaction. Nothing at all. No, ‘Oh, so you’re Cain.’ No, ‘Ah, Cain, yeah. Parker has mentioned you from time to time.’ And most fortunately no, ‘Cain? Oh, my God! Run like fuck before he rips you to shreds!’ Instead, he was met by an inexpressive poker-faced stare. It was a consolation of sorts.

‘He’s not on the premises,’ the girl eventually uttered.

‘Any idea when he’ll be back?’

‘Sorry. Can’t help you there. All I do is serve drinks. I’m not his keeper.’

‘Right. I’ll wait.’

‘You do what you have to do.’

Well, that told him. Her vetting formula was impenetrable. He doubted even the Invisible Man could get past her tollgate.

Jade resumed her previous provocative character and wiggled her hips over to the next potential victim. He was a short middle-aged man who looked as though he still lived with Mother. Judging by the flash of delight on his face, the victim had reached the sinker part of hook, line and sinker without the girl having to apply any leverage whatsoever. She hadn’t even delivered her opening line. As such, the poor soul would no doubt harbour the regret of waking up tomorrow morning alone, ashamed and skint, and he still wouldn’t have got himself laid. Idiot. He could so easily lose his cherry at one of the many brothels. Most venues held special Virgin Nights at least once a week. Ah, but Jade was clearly determined to put paid to such a notion by making him spend all his credit here instead.

Cain waited. And he waited some more. He ordered another drink. And another. It was a pity there was no cabaret to take his mind off the sheer monotony of watching the clock do its thing. A couple more hours passed. In that time, he ordered several more drinks. Parker still hadn’t made an appearance. And then he noticed. He was the sole client left on the premises, the only other bodies floating around, various members of staff. Would Parker show his face

tonight? He bloody hoped so. He needed to talk urgently to the very man who would know what the hell was going on.

‘Another beer please.’

As Cain thumbed the console, Jade handed him a fresh bottle.

‘Payment unsuccessful,’ the console asserted in a somewhat demeaning tone.

Again, he used his thumb, this time pressing it harder upon the pay panel.

‘Payment unsuccessful.’

Jade commandeered his bottle of beer. He tried to grab it back, but she held it out of reach.

‘You can’t have it.’

‘Please, just let me try one more time.’

‘You’ve run out of credit.’

Cain was most insistent, not exactly drunk, but he had indeed reached the stage where one last drink was more important to him than oxygen. He thumbed again. And again. And again. Each time, he was met by the same derisive response.

‘Payment unsuccessful.’

‘Bloody machine.’

‘Go home,’ Jade growled, forceful, in control. ‘You can’t stay on the premises with an empty credit balance.’

It was true. House rules. It made sense. A client without spends was of no use to the establishment.

However, the unproud owner of the empty credit balance was having none of it. ‘I’m waiting for Parker.’ Cain had now joined the pathetic and desperate club. Only, he didn’t see it that way. ‘I need to speak to him. It’s important.’

Attracted by the kerfuffle, a young male member of staff collecting spent glasses and empty bottles floated across. He placed the tray of assorted glassware on the bar and glared at

the perpetrator. ‘Sir, I think you’d better leave,’ the young man was brave enough to suggest, his chest puffed out like he was a force to be reckoned with.

Cain stood up, adamant. ‘I am going nowhere.’

Two meat-head thugs in monkey suits appeared on the scene. No doubt about it, things were about to turn nasty.

‘You! Out! Now!’ barked one of the thugs in machine-like monotone, grabbing Cain’s shoulder.

Big mistake. Cain plucked an empty whisky bottle from the nearby tray of glassware and swung it like a baseball bat, meeting the man-handler across the side of the head. Smash! Shards of glass sprayed in all directions, the man floored. Cain then spun around and fired a clenched fist at the glass collector. His nose exploded on impact. Another man down.

He was not so lucky with meat-head number two. This guy was quick. Before Cain could pull back his fist, the thug dealt him a solid blow to the side of the face, sending him staggering back a number of paces. The thug’s equally handy left fist made contact. Cain lost his footing, his spine thudding against the lip of the bar counter. Winded, he bounced off and landed on his knees, back arched, head down, as if in prayer. Going in for the kill, the meat-head lunged towards him. This was when Cain sprang forward, his head pounding into the man’s chest like a battering ram, the impact sending the thug falling backwards, the pair of them collapsing into an awkward heap. Three swift punches to the meat-head’s face sorted the argument. He didn’t get up. Instead, he groaned in a bewildered daze on the floor.

Cain clambered to his feet, stunned but triumphant. It was then when the chair made contact with his back. Smash! Man down. He’d failed to notice Jade jumping over the bar and grabbing the nearest available weapon.

Cain spat blood as he was assisted to his feet by the first meat-head and the bloody-nosed glass collector, the two of them twisting his arms behind his back to prevent any form of

escapology. It took a number of seconds for Cain's dazed eyes to focus. Once he'd regained suitable vision, he discovered the bloodied and bruised second meat-head now standing before him. To say the man looked pissed off was the understatement of the year.

'Finish him off,' demanded Jade, as if cheering on her favourite opponent in a boxing match.

Cain lobbed the girl a shocked double take. 'For what reason? Unable to afford that last drink?' Hmm, he wondered what the punishment would be for a serious misdemeanour.

Meat-head number two then drew a knife. Shit, so this was to be his demise, huh? A post-fight stabbing. Not exactly the death he'd expected.

'Lights out, you bastard,' the thug seethed, pressing the cold blade against his victim's throat.

Cain slammed his eyes shut. For sure, this was the end.

'Enough!' boomed a voice he knew only too well.

Everything ceased. All heads turned to face the entrance. A silhouetted figure stood at the doorway. He stepped forward a few paces until the light illuminated his presence. It was Parker, stylishly clad in a retro Fedora hat and a dark blue three-piece pinstripe suit. He always dressed in this particular manner. He'd read about twentieth century gangsters in a history book and adored the fashion enough to feel the need to emulate the style.

'What's the story?' Parker enquired, not best pleased.

'This man was causing trouble, Mr Parker,' explained Jade.

As he approached, Parker narrowed his eyes in the dim light to grab a view of the prisoner. Then came amazed recognition, closely followed by a leering grin. 'Well, well, well, this is a surprise.' He eyed Cain's two restrainers. 'Let the man go.'

One meat-head felt the need to protest. 'But sir, I –'

'I said let him go!' snapped Parker, his grin lost.

The men did as they were told. There was no room for debate.

'Now piss off,' Parker ordered. 'Cain and I have things to discuss.'

Jade and the three men dispersed, leaving Parker and Cain alone in the room. For what seemed like a hundred years, they exchanged a duel of hard, silent stares, as if sizing each other up.

It was Parker who broke such a deathly hush. 'For what do I owe the pleasure?'

Cain wiped away blood from the corner of his mouth. 'I need answers.'

Parker raised his eyebrows. '<u>You</u> need answers? I'm not the crazy fucker who gave Hotel Centra a facelift. What the bloody hell were you playing at? This is my manor. I say who or what gets taken out around here.'

Parker was right. It was his manor, his patch, his jurisdiction. Who, where, why and how were all up to him. As well as the leader, he was the coordinator of the team. He made things happen, all carefully arranged in meticulous detail. He was also behind all necessary funding, the man with the bread, a credit balance most people could only masturbate about. If the gang required anything, he'd get it sorted, no sweat.

'It wasn't me behind the bombing,' announced Cain. 'I've been framed.'

'Yeah? Who by?'

'That's what I was hoping to find out from you. Figured you might be able to shed some light on it, seeing as you know everything that goes on around here.'

Parker lifted the counter flap and waltzed round to the serving side. 'Believe me, Cain. First I heard of it was when I saw the TV footage.'

Cain felt disenchanted by his words. Parker, the man who knew everything knew nothing.

The bossman, meanwhile, noted Cain's unsteadiness on his feet, a fusion of the booze and the man's newly acquired war wounds. 'You'd better sit down before you fall down.'

Cain rested his posterior on the nearest available bar stool.

Parker produced a bottle of whisky and two glasses. ‘Drink?’

Cain nodded without hesitation. Of course he wanted a drink. Not two minutes ago, he’d been fighting for such an honour. Right now, he needed a shot of alcohol more than anything else in the world.

Parker filled both glasses and slid one over to him. ‘I’m not happy about this bombing. It means somebody’s trying to muscle in on my patch.’

‘What do you suggest we do about it?’ asked Cain, using the word we to create some kind of allied unity between the two of them.

‘It’s something I’m not willing to take lightly.’ The gangster necked the slug. It didn’t even touch the sides. ‘Especially as the gang’s got a big job coming up. This kind of hassle could seriously undermine our plans.’

‘The gang? Donna said you’d disbanded.’

Parker seemed surprised to hear her name mentioned. ‘You’ve spoken to Donna?’

Cain chucked the whisky down his throat. ‘Yeah. Earlier this evening.’

‘We haven’t crossed paths in...’ Parker mused for a moment. ‘...must be ten or eleven months now. I do hope she’s well.’

‘She’s fine.’

‘That’s good to hear.’ Parker blessed both glasses with more liquor. ‘So yeah, we did go our separate ways. Not long after you pissed off actually. The dynamics were never quite the same after you left. But we’re reforming. Should be an interesting reunion.’

‘Where’s everybody hiding out?’

Parker shrugged his shoulders. ‘Could be anywhere.’

‘How are you supposed to reunite them if you don’t know where they are?’

‘There are always ways and means.’ He knocked back his drink, then refreshed the glasses yet again. ‘So. Tell me what you know.’

Cain rubbed his face with the palm of his sweaty hand. It suddenly dawned on him what a shitfuck day he'd endured. Both his car and his living had gone up in smoke, he'd been smeared all over the media and branded a terrorist, he'd got into a fight over one (yes, one) bottle of unaffordable beer, and to top it all off, he'd found himself the width of a flea's penis from being killed. Twice. Most people's shitfuck days were simply bad shifts at the workplace. Oh, how he envied normality.

'The man they used as the lamb was one of my regular clients,' Cain explained. 'Name of Samms. You should have seen the kit they got him to wear. Enough explosives to take out a bloody plane, let alone a car.'

'Sounds to me like you were in the wrong place at the wrong time.'

'This was no coincidence, Parker. I was specifically targeted.'

'What makes you so sure?'

'Samms told me. Just before he did the business. I was supposed to die with him. Those were his instructions. But he let me go. Reckoned he didn't want anybody else sharing the glory. Looking back, I think the poor sod was using the last grain of humanity that hadn't been brainwashed out of him.'

Parker didn't take kindly to the brainwash remark. 'You know how it works, Cain. The Cause will always need sacrificial lambs.'

'Yes, but Samms wasn't fighting for the Cause. He was just a normal guy, getting on with his life. And this Cause, it's a load of bollocks anyway. The goal posts are always changing. The movement was set up to get the government out. Now it's to get the Americans out. When will it all end?'

Parker's initial reaction, several long, lingering seconds of poker-faced, purse-lipped silence. The delivery of such a pregnant pause always unnerved Cain. He never quite knew what Parker was thinking inside that head of his. The man was unreadable.

‘Is that what you’ve been doing for the last twelve months? Playing the normal guy? Leading an ordinary life? Thing is, Cain, normality can’t be done. Not by somebody like you. You’ll never settle down and lead a regular life. Wife. Dog. Two-point-four children. It’s not your style. You’re a rebel. A fighter. You always have been and always will be.’

‘You’re wrong there, Parker. Things are different now. All I want is a quiet life.’

Parker’s subsequent chuckle had “yeah, right” written all over it.

Leading Cain to moan, ‘I didn’t ask to be involved again.’

‘Ah, but the point is, you are. You were always destined to return to the fold.’

Cain snorted his utmost disagreement.

‘You know what they say, Cain. You can take the man out of the Cause, but you can’t take the Cause out of the man.’

‘No. You’re wrong. That’s not me.’

‘Are you honestly trying to tell me you’ve changed?’

‘I think I have. I’ve got plans.’

‘Such as?’

‘For starters, pissing off out of England. There’s nothing here for me anymore.’

The revelation tickled Parker. ‘And go where, huh? United Ireland doesn’t accept any immigrants, especially the English. And you have to be one hundred per cent squeaky bloody clean to get into the Republic of Wales.’

Cain knew his next sentence would sound dumb, but he said it anyway. ‘I was thinking of New Scotland. Shacking up on a remote island somewhere.’

Parker laughed. ‘Good luck with that one. Believe me, you’ll never get past the Hadrian Border. And besides, you said goodbye to your livelihood when your mate Samms turned your taxi into a fireball, so how do you plan on financing your little trip? You have no occupation, no credit, no nothing. What chance have you got of starting a new life?’

Cain exhaled. Parker was right. He was trapped within the four walls of his drab existence, disallowing even the remotest prospect of reaching out to pastures new. The grass was most certainly greener on the other side, but he'd never get to walk the green capet. There was no new life waiting for him. This life was all he'd ever know. And who was he kidding anyway? Only himself. There was nobody else to fool.

Then came the line from the bossman which could change everything. 'Of course, I might be able to help you out. That new life you want so badly. I could make it happen.'

It was like a dream come true, but... come on. Things were never that simple. Not where Parker was involved. There was always an ulterior motive.

'But you'll need to run a few errands for me first.' And there it was. 'Nothing too heavy. Firstly, I need a package picking up. I'll pay you handsomely for the job.'

The last headache Cain wanted was an employment offer from the likes of Parker. But he had no choice. He was broke. 'All right, fine. When and where is the pick-up point?'

'Tomorrow night. A brothel called Delicious. Know where that is?'

Cain gave a nod. He knew exactly where it was, but he'd never actually set foot in the place. It was way out of the price range of a humble taxi driver. Delicious was mainly frequented by high class clientele such as Whitehall top-nobs, diplomats and US Army officers. He knew this because he'd delivered these very clients to its door on many an occasion.

'That's where you'll meet a girl,' continued Parker, 'who goes by the name of Clandestine.'

This was not pronounced like the word itself. Instead, adopted as a name, its diction had been given a makeover of sorts. Instead of the sharp "clan-destin," it was now a softer, more feminine "cland-esss-steeeen." Rather like Christine or Constantine.

Hardly any working girls ever used the names their parents bequeathed them. Most ladies used an assumed forename, but the more creative among them preferred to adopt a dictionary word as their professional title, the more memorable the better. This would act as their advert, giving clients a fairly accurate indication of the type of woman they were about to be pleasured by.

‘Thumbing the transaction won’t be necessary,’ Parker explained. ‘The appointment will already be arranged and paid for in the name of Smith. Once you’re inside Clandestine’s room, she’ll give you the package. Oh, and whatever else you desire, if you know what I mean.’ The man dealt a man-to-man wink as an accompaniment.

Cain was hardly in the mood for sampling the delights of a call girl. Brushes with death had an irritating habit of extinguishing sex drive. ‘I’d rather just do the pick-up and leave.’

The man’s unforeseen statement amused Parker. ‘Oh, believe me, Cain. When you meet Clandestine, you will definitely want to stay a while.’