

London, England

“And to close, gentlemen . . . the question many of your fans have asked over the years. Are we ever going to see Sean Reilly and Cotton Malone together in a book?”

It was a late September Saturday, and the two authors were seated side by side on a small podium in a quiet corner of the Olympia Conference Centre, the exhibition hall that was hosting the first London ThrillerFest. At a slight angle to them was their host for the Q&A session, a veteran British journalist who also wrote thrillers, albeit using a pseudonym. It had been a pleasant end to an enjoyable day. The interviewer, by virtue of being an insider, had asked questions that were engaging and challenging. The journalists and a few dozen fans in the audience, many of them clutching copies of both authors’ novels, had evidently also enjoyed the session.

The attendance had been gratifying, given the heavy rain that had been drowning the city all week. Summers in London were schizophrenic, the weather often fluctuating wildly from day to day, sometimes going so far as to dip into all four seasons within the same day, if not the same hour. September was usually a more settled, calmer month—usually. Not this year, though. This year, September clearly forgot to take its meds.

“Here’s the thing,” Steve Berry said. “Raymond and I, we’re all for it. But we can’t get Reilly and Malone to agree on the story.”

“They can be real jerks sometimes,” Khoury added.

The audience chuckled.

“And why is that?” the interviewer asked, playing along.

“You know how these guys are,” Berry said. “They’ve got massive egos. Each of them wants to be the genius that figures out how to decipher ‘the big clue’”—said with air quotes—“take out the bad guy and save the day.”

“Whenever we bring it up,” Khoury added, “they’re like, ‘why does he get to do all the cool stuff,’ or ‘I should be the one doing that.’ Petty, right?”

“Then there’s the whole issue of the cover.”

“Whose face is on the left, whose name comes first in the blurb on the back cover. Downright embarrassing.”

“And yet, they seem so noble and mature on the page,” the interviewer said.

“That’s just the way we weave our magic,” Berry said, deadpan.

More chuckles.

“It takes prodigious talent, to be sure,” Khoury threw in. “Years of carefully honing our craft.”

“Frankly, gentlemen, I’m surprised,” the interviewer noted. “I mean, surely you can get them to behave.”

“You’d think, right? I don’t know where they get it from,” Khoury quipped, turning to Berry. “Do you?”

“No clue,” Berry said with a smirk. “Might have to write some therapy sessions into the next book.”

“So I take it we won’t be seeing them together anytime soon?” the interviewer asked.

Berry looked at Khoury, paused—then they both turned to their host and smiled.

“You’ll need to ask them,” Berry said.

The audience chuckled again, and with that, the host ended the session by thanking his guests and the audience.

After some brief chit-chat with a few fans who had approached them with books to sign and further questions to answer, the writers made their way through the vast, crowded hall.

“So, tell me something,” Berry asked Khoury as they ambled towards the exit. “Ten years later ... anything you’d have done differently with your book?”

It had been ten years since the two authors’ Templar books had first come out, hitting the shelves within a few weeks of each other: Berry’s had been *The Templar Legacy*, and Khoury’s, *The Last Templar*. Both had been huge bestsellers. The synchronicity of the two works was entirely unexpected; each author had written his own book without knowing anything about what the other was working on. The end results, while dealing with the same theme, were very different, and instead of competing with each other, the books ended up fuelling the other’s success. They also seeded what became a close friendship between the two authors.

“Ten years,” Khoury mullied. “Damn. Where’d they go?”

“Sitting at our keyboards, mostly.”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “Typing away our fantasies instead of living them. You ever think about that?”

“What, me working for the Justice Department? Can you imagine?” Berry chuckled.

“Maybe if they have a department that investigates restaurants with overpriced wine lists.”

“That I could do. But seriously ... looking back at it now, ten years later. You wouldn’t change anything in it?”

Khoury chortled. “Tons.”

“Really?”

Khoury reflected on Berry’s question for a second, then said, “Well ... the ending, maybe. Tess tossing that page from the diary into the sea. I’m still in two minds about it.”

“Yeah, I agree. It sucked.” Berry said, deadpan.

Khoury turned to him, mock-surprised.

Then they both laughed.

“Just for that, you’re buying—and I’m choosing the restaurant,” Khoury said.

“Done.”

They stepped across the large foyer and out into the early evening downpour, popping open their Festival umbrellas.

“We’re going to have a hard time getting a cab in this rain,” Khoury said, pulling out his phone. “Let me see if there’s an Uber around.”

“Hang on,” Berry said, pointing ahead. “That’s us.”

Khoury looked up. A black Ford Galaxy people carrier, the kind commonly used as minicabs in London, was parked by the curb, waiting. A man in a black suit was standing beside it. He was holding an open umbrella in one hand and a white card in the other. The card said, “Berry/Khoury.”

The driver, a tall, stubble-bearded man in a loose-fitting black suit but no tie, beckoned them over with a welcoming nod, as if he’d recognized them.

Khoury looked quizzically at Berry. “You order that?”

Berry shook his head. “No, but, whoever did we can thank later. Let’s get in.”

They walked up to the mini-cab.

“Mr Berry, Mr Khoury?” the driver asked courteously, and before waiting for an answer, he swung the rear door open and motioned them in. “Please.”

Berry glanced at Khoury, shrugged, and stepped up to the car, closing his umbrella before climbing in.

Khoury followed suit.

And just as the driver shut the rear door, the opposite one opened and a man hustled into the car, shoving Berry into the middle of the rear bench as he closed the door behind him.

“Hey, buddy, it’s taken—”

Berry didn’t finish his sentence. The sight of an automatic handgun in the intruder’s hand, leveled at his gut, stilled him.

Khoury interjected, “Whoa, what the—?”

The man swung the gun so it was now facing him. “Shut up.” Then he glanced over to the driver, who was now in his seat.

“*Yalla, imshi,*” he said.

The driver nodded, put the car into gear, and drove away.

Berry looked at Khoury, visibly worried.

The meal would have to wait.

New York City

Sean Reilly was in a lousy mood.

The day hadn't started badly. Quite the contrary, in fact. Saturdays were easily in his top-two favorite days of the week. Waking up to hints of sunlight that infiltrated his and Tess's bedroom through cracks in the blinds—much better than the ramblings of an overly-caffeinated DJ on the clock radio. Cuddling in bed instead of scrambling to get to work. Enjoying the morning paper in actual, old-fashioned print and not on an iPad, and good coffee in an actual china mug with steam rising out of it into the open air. Savoring waffles and maple syrup instead of gulping down a cold bagel while rushing into town.

Yes indeed, the signs had been good. Even the weather—sunny with a little edge to it, a lovely New England late summer day—was cooperating. A nice, relaxing weekend split between quality time with the kids, and Netflix and chill with Tess, was on the cards. Until the phone call.

The ominous phone call summoning him to 26 Federal Plaza.

A call to duty.

“London? Today?” Reilly asked, frowning.

Ron Gallo, the Assistant Director in Charge of the New York Field Office of the FBI and Reilly's far-from-beloved boss, leaned back and spread his arm wide, palms open. “According to the intel, that's where the action is. There's a flight leaving Newark in an hour. You'll need to be on it.”

Reilly's frown deepened.

The intel was thin, no doubt. It had originated in the UK the night before, courtesy of GCHQ's massive eavesdropping and metadata surveillance programs. It involved a bunch of unknown hostiles planning something that involved “the books,” making a move on some unspecified “American specialists” that weekend, and targeting none other than the great Satan, of course—terrorist-speak for the US.

Par for the course in terms of the kinds of intel the FBI and various intelligence agencies look into on a daily basis, intel which mostly turns out to be bogus. In this case, however, one of the voices belonged to a person of interest who MI5, Britain's domestic counter-intelligence and security agency, had heard before, but had so far failed to identify, all of which meant that the chatter was taken seriously. The Feds would have probably left it to the spooks at MI5 to deal with on their own while keeping the Bureau in the loop, except that one of the goons happened to mention the dreaded T word.

The one that meant Reilly would be dragged into this.

Templar.

Reilly nodded, to himself, doing a mental fast-forward through what the weekend was probably going to look like.

“I guess I'm off to London then,” he grumbled.

“Hey, don’t look so disappointed. I’ve always wanted to visit, and you get to do it on the Bureau’s dime.”

“Terrific,” Reilly said with a slow, ponderous nod. He wasn’t really thinking about Big Ben or the London Eye. He was more worried about how he was going to keep Tess from wanting to stick her nose into this and tag along. If she heard something involving the Templars was going down, she’d insist on being part of it. She’d been dragged into these nasty affairs twice before, and the last thing Reilly wanted was for her to get in harm’s way again.

No, he’d make sure Tess wouldn’t get involved. But he had an idea of someone else who should—assuming he’d want to. Someone who knew the world of books, rare ones in particular, better than anyone he knew, and who also possessed the necessary lethal skill set that might be needed if things turned ugly.

A quick call to Copenhagen was on the cards.