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SHADOW TAG

Raymond Khoury and Steve Berry

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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.

The room was, all things considered, better than expected. A large, windowless space, bare and unfurnished except for a couple of bare mattresses on the floor. Plain concrete block walls, painted white. Neon ceiling lights that buzzed slightly. Not cold, but not warm either. A bit damp, and that was pretty much it. Not exactly a suite at the Ritz, but at least it didn't have blood or anything vile staining the mattresses or walls.

Berry and Khoury had no idea where they were. They'd had their phones taken away as soon as the Galaxy had driven off, then they'd had black hoods pulled over their heads. The ride had been uneventful. Not less than half an hour, not more than an hour, most of it in traffic. Nothing spoken that they could build on. Just a silent unease coursing through the two of them, coupled with total bafflement about what the hell was going on.

Once at their destination, they'd been hustled out of the car, marched inside some kind of structure, ushered down some stairs, and locked in that room.

"It's got to be some kind of joke, right? We're being punked," Berry said.

"I don't know, Steve. This feels very real to me."

"That's the whole point, isn't it? No point punking someone if you're not going to do it right."

He was pacing around the room, deep in thought, while Khoury was sitting on the mattress, his back to the wall.

"I bet you it's Lee Child," he added. "Lee or Jim Rollins. They're behind this, I know it. We talked about what we could do to make the first UK ThrillerFest something special. I bet you this is it." His eyes squinted as they scoured the upper edges of the walls. "They must have hidden cameras all over this place."

Thrillerfest was the premier event for thriller novelists. Hundreds of writers from all over the world had come to participate in panels, interviews, and discussions. And a bit of mischief among the attendees was not uncommon.

"You think that's it?" Khoury asked.

"I'm telling you. It's right out of Lee's playbook. The man's sick. Every one of the Reacher books is testimony to that. Between him and Jim, it's just the kind of thing they'd come up with."

"Okay, if that's the case," Khoury said, "I hope they've got some decent catering set up, cause I didn't have lunch."

Just then, the lock rattled as a key worked its tumblers, then the door creaked open.

Two men walked in.

They were the two men who'd brought them there: the driver, and the guy with the gun. The driver was still in his suit, the gunman still in the same shabby jeans and cheap leather jacket. They both had olive

skin, black, greasy hair and hadn't shaved for a while. More of note was that they both had automatics tucked under their belts.

Berry winked at Khoury.

"Here we go," he said, smiling. "Showtime."

Khoury mimicked a fearful shiver and smiled back.

Then a third man walked in. He had the same broad ethnic mix, but looked a bit older than the first two, somewhere in his forties. He also had more presence than the others. He also looked more serious in his grey suit, charcoal semi-shiny shirt, black laced shoes and no tie. He wasn't smiling. Not that the other two were, but his expression was loaded with portent.

The driver shut the door behind him as the new goon stepped further into the room, then stopped.

Berry took the lead and stepped towards him, playing the part. "Okay, I assume I'm supposed to say something like, I don't know who the hell you are or what you think you're doing, but if you don't want to get fast-tracked to Guantanamo, I suggest you let us go right now and we all forget this ever happened."

The man just stood there, studying Berry. Then he panned across to take Khoury in, scrutinizing him in silence before turning back to Berry.

"Alternatively," Khoury added, "we don't mind sticking around a bit longer, but we'd both love it if you could get Deliveroo to bike us over some food. Maybe some burgers and fries from GBK? Blue cheese for me, medium." He turned to Berry. "You want a shake with yours? They do a killer Oreo one."

The man didn't react. He just kept staring at them in silence. If his face had any expression on it, it was merely a hint of disdain.

Finally, he spoke.

"I don't think you're taking this seriously enough," he said.

Khoury couldn't quite place his accent, but the man had definitely spent a long time in the UK.

Without taking his eyes off them, the man reached behind his back and pulled out a handgun. With one fluid move, he chambered a round, then he aimed the gun straight at Berry's head. He held the gun there for a few seconds, then his arm swiveled across to line up on Khoury's face.

The two writers didn't move.

Then the gunman flicked his gun slightly away and pulled the trigger—once, twice, three times.

The walls shook with the echoes of the detonations as the mattress Khoury was sitting on exploded, bits of springs, foam and cotton flying into the air.

Khoury was on his feet in a flash, staring at Berry, who was equally shaken. The gunman lowered his gun, studied the two men, then nodded.

"Now that you know I'm serious ... how about we get down to business?"

Reilly gave Cotton Malone an acknowledging nod as he spotted the agent-turned-bookseller emerge from the customs area at London's Heathrow airport.

He hadn't waited long. Reilly's flight from JFK had landed just half an hour before Malone's short hop from Copenhagen, where he'd lived since handing in his creds and leaving the Justice Department over a decade ago. It was just enough time for a cup of coffee, a croissant and a quick trawl through e-mails and intel updates before they were reunited and driven into London in a car the embassy had sent for them.

"Templars, huh?" Malone asked.

"I thought that might pique your interest."

"I'm a bit rusty on the subject," Malone chortled. "It's been a while."

"Ten years. For us both."

Malone stared out the window for a moment as the car barreled down the M4 towards the city. Cloud cover the color of slate squatted overhead, threatening to unleash a torrent at any moment, but for now, the rain was holding off. In the distance ahead, a swathe of pink was livening up the horizon.

"Weird, wasn't it?" Malone asked.

"What?"

"Both of us getting sucked into two totally unrelated Templar situations within a few weeks of each other?"

"And both having to do with ancient writings related to the origin of the faith?"

"Seriously, what are the odds?"

Reilly let out a small chuckle. "You couldn't make it up if you tried."

"You had another run-in with their legacy a few years ago, right?"

Reilly grimaced, remembering the events in Rome and in Turkey that followed Tess's kidnapping at the hands of a particularly savage Iranian agent a few years after his first misadventure. "Yeah, lucky me. And there I was thinking there's no way I could possibly get dragged into another Templar plot."

"And yet, here we are."

"Yep," Reilly nodded. "Thanks for doing this."

"Anytime, buddy. So where are we with this anyway? Anything new since we spoke?"

"No. You saw the transcripts." He handed Malone the printouts of the relevant chatter. "We have no idea what they're planning. But these guys are up to something, today, somewhere here in London."

Malone went over the transcript, his eyes pausing at something Reilly had already mentioned to him in his call to action. "'The books?' You think they might be after another old stash of gospels?"

"Maybe."

Malone rolled his eyes. "I thought Constantine had them all burned back in the 4th century."

“His minions clearly didn’t do a great job with that. I don’t think we’re ever going to hear the last of them.”

“Great,” Malone groaned. “Okay, so where do we start?”

“A Lebanese restaurant on Edgware Road,” Reilly said. He pulled out his smartphone and showed Malone an image stored on it. “The three phones GCHQ got the hits off are burner phones, they aren’t registered to anyone. But by tracking their cell movements over the last week, since the SIM cards went live, the eggheads came up with something.”

Malone studied the map on the screen. It was a city map of London and had three lines of different colors snaking around the city. He pointed at where the lines intersected. “This is the place?”

“Exactly,” Reilly said. “All three have been there at some point in the last week. Not at the same time. But they’ve all been there.”

“Which doesn’t mean they’ll be going there again. Unless ...”

Reilly smiled. “Exactly. You’ve been out there. You know how addictive a great shawarma wrap is.”

“And not easy to find.”

“I’m betting these guys get hungry again. And when they do, we’ll make sure it’s their last supper.”

Malone gave him a dubious look, pained by the pun.

“I know, sorry,” Reilly concurred. “Anyway, we should be there in about fifteen minutes. Are you carrying?”

“Can’t. Not officially.”

“Here you go.” Reilly handed him a Glock 17 handgun, along with an extra magazine that housed seventeen nine-millimeter rounds. “I signed it out in my name. Try not to make too many holes with it.”

Malone checked it, then tucked it in under his belt. “No promises.”

“You’re probably wondering why we brought you here.”

“The question did pop up,” Khoury said.

Their captor ignored the remark. “It has to do with your work. You see, we need you to come up with a new idea. A new plot. Something ... epic.”

Khoury and Berry looked at each other with evident confusion.

Khoury asked, “You’re, what—a rival publisher?”

“It’s not for a book.”

“A TV show then, or,” Khoury’s eyes lit up, “a movie?”

“Either way, you really need to go through our agents,” Berry offered. “That’s the way it’s usually done.”

“Yeah, I mean, look, we’re flattered, we appreciate your putting up this whole song and dance to impress us, but, seriously—”

The man twirled his gun playfully before letting it settle with its barrel lined up on the author’s face.

Khoury lost his grin. “Maybe I should let you tell us some more.”

“It’s not for a movie or a television show. It’s for us to do. In real life.” He paused, clearly wanting to watch the confusion on his prisoners’ faces morph into fear.

“To do?” Berry asked. “You mean—”

“I mean I want you to come up with a great plot, something really bad that we can do to cause a lot of death and suffering.” His tone took on a dark, messianic fervor. “Something spectacular, something that hasn’t been done before. Something that will bring America to its knees and shake the whole world. Something that will never be forgotten.”

Berry and Khoury were speechless.

The man seemed to be enjoying the effect of his words on them.

Berry asked, “You want us to plan something for you?”

“Exactly.”

Berry considered his reply for a moment, then calmly added, “Why us?”

“Because we keep getting caught. Every time we try something, every plan my brothers out there come up has failed. Since 9/11, every time one of our groups has tried to attack America, it’s ended in disaster.” His eyes narrowed. “We need you to come up with something foolproof. Something unexpected, but that will work. Because you’ll have thought of everything that can go wrong and planned around it. In this story, you’ll make the bad guys win.”

“That’s a twist, for sure, but ... why us?” Khoury asked.

“You’re writers,” the man said. “You do this every day.”

“Yeah, but I mean, why us, why me and Steve? The kind of thing you’re talking about, terrorist-counter-terrorist stuff—it’s not really what we do. You need someone like, I don’t know, Brad Thor. Or Kyle Mills. They’d be your best bet.”

Berry added, “Or Terry Hayes. Have you read *I Am Pilgrim*? He’d be perfect.”

“Or maybe someone like Howard Gordon. He did *24*. And *Homeland*. What you’re talking about is right up his alley.”

“No,” the man barked angrily. “No dirty bombs, no suitcase nukes, no viruses. I want something original. Something ... unique.” His eyes tightened, along with his jaw muscles. “Something that will make me even bigger than Bin Laden.”

Khoury thought for a second, then said, “Have you considered Dan Brown?”

“Or Lee Child,” Berry suggested. “He’s really twisted, and he’s in town. The stories I could tell you.”

The man’s face broke into a narrow, sadistic smile as he shook his head slowly. “Sorry, my friends. You’re it.”

“Look, this is nuts,” Berry protested. “You can’t seriously expect us to come up with a way for you to kill people.”

“Oh, I do expect you to, believe me,” the man countered. “Right now, it’s only the two of you. But it wouldn’t be hard for us to grab your families. If you need more ... inspiration.”

Berry looked over to Khoury, whose expression now mirrored his own growing sense of doom.

Khoury asked, “This is insane. Whose brilliant idea was this anyway? Yours?”

The man smiled. “Actually, your government thought of it first.”

Both authors’ jaws dropped. “What?”

“I was reading up about Bin Laden, trying to inspire myself into greatness like his, and I found out that just after 9/11, your government brought together a bunch of top producers and writers from Hollywood and asked them to brainstorm how someone might try to attack America. And it got me thinking that I should do the same thing.”

“Brainstorming ways to save people’s lives over a weekend in some nice Malibu beach house is a bit different from ... this,” Khoury protested.

The man gave them a sheepish shrug. “Sorry. Best I can do.” Then he clapped his hand, hard. “Okay. Enough wasting time. You have your assignment.”

He snapped his fingers.

The goon in the leather jacket reached into an inside pocket and pulled out a couple of small black notebooks and two pens. He tossed them onto the mattress closest to Berry.

“Let me know when you have something,” the lead goon said.

He turned to go when Berry blurted, “Wait, hang on a second.”

The man turned.

Berry asked, “You seriously expect us to come up with a brilliant plan for you, just like that?”

“Your lives and those of the ones you love most depend on it.”

“How do we even know you’ll let us go if we do this,” Khoury asked.

“I have no use for you once it’s done,” the man said. “And letting you go will only help fuel my legend. Besides, it’s not all bad. Think about it. After this, you’ll become global celebrities. Anything you write will sell a zillion copies.”

“We’ll be the most despised people on the planet,” Khoury objected.

Their captor wasn’t moved. “I’ve always read that any publicity is good publicity, no?”

Khoury exhaled and looked over to Berry. They seemed equally exasperated, outraged, despondent. But then Berry gave Khoury the tiniest of nods, firing up a kernel of resolve inside him.

“Get to work,” the man said.

He turned to go, and again, one of the authors interrupted his exit.

“Wait,” Khoury said. “We need more. To work with.”

“What do you mean?”

“Any decent plot starts with the antagonist.”

The man seemed confused.

“The bad guy,” Khoury explained. “These stories are only as good as their bad guy.”

The man said, “Fine. That’s me.”

“So we need to know about you.”

The man laughed, then wagged a finger at him. “Clever. Trying to get some information out of me?”

“No, I’m serious,” Khoury said. “It’s all about character motivation. It has to be solid. So we need to know, why are you doing this?”

“Where does this lust for blood come from?” Berry added. “Why are you angry at America? Was it something in your past? Maybe you blame us for something that happened to you or your family? Someone you cared for?”

The man thought for a moment, then shrugged. “No.”

The writers seemed thrown by his answer.

“Okay,” Khoury said, “you said you wanted to be bigger than Bin Laden. Where does that come from? Were you bullied at school? Or maybe at home? Did anything happen that changed you, that turned you into, if you don’t mind my saying it, a raging psychopath?”

The man considered the question, then shook his head. “No.”

The writers exchanged a perplexed look.

Berry asked, “So why are you doing this?”

“It’s more fun than driving an Uber.” He grinned, then fired them a look that said they were done and headed for the door.

“Wait,” Berry said.

The man exhaled loudly, dropped his shoulders, then turned around grudgingly. “Now what?”

“We need a name,” Berry said. “Something to call you.”

Khoury added, “Ideally, something with a strong ring to it.”

The man nodded, then proudly proclaimed, “My friends call me *El Assad*. The Lion.”

Khoury glanced at Berry, then shook his head.

“What?” the man asked.

“Can’t use it,” Berry said. “Nelson DeMille already used it. Twice.”

“Then there’s the Syrian president. He’s really taken the shine off that name.”

“True.”

The man frowned.

“What about Dr. Evil?” Khoury asked sheepishly.

“I’m not a doctor,” the man said.

Khoury gave Berry a discreet grin. “Worth a shot.”

“Call me *Abul Mont*,” the man proposed, his face darkening with the words.

Khoury’s face sank. Which Berry noticed.

“What?” Berry asked.

“It means ‘father of death,’” Khoury said.

Berry looked over to their captor. “Not bad,” he said. “*That*, we can work with.”

“So get to work,” the man said somberly.

“And about the food ...?” Khoury asked.

The man’s tone rose with irritation. “I’ll get you some damn food. Anything else?”

“It’d be good to have an internet connection,” Berry said. “You know, for research.”

The man glared at him, half-amused. “Nice try. Get me something, soon. You’re not leaving here until you do.”

Then he walked out, his fingers snapping his minions to follow suit, leaving the two authors locked in their cell.

Reilly had no idea how capable his targets would prove to be, but as he took another bite of his chicken shawarma wrap, he was certain of one thing: when it came to Lebanese food, these guys knew where to go.

“Unbelievable,” he said, watching as Malone layered some tabbouleh along the spine of a lettuce leaf.

“I really miss this in Copenhagen,” Malone managed between mouthfuls. “Can’t get decent Lebanese food there. Nothing like this, anyway.”

Reilly dipped a triangle of thin Arabic bread into the plate of humus, then studied the restaurant again as he savored the bite.

It was a long, narrow room. Along one side of it ran a bar made of a slightly garish, richly-veined marble. Behind the bar were the two shawarma stands, huge, fat cylinders of meat—one lamb, the other chicken—that was layered onto a skewer that rotated slowly in front of a gas fire. There was also a wide, narrow horizontal charcoal grill that was used for kebabs, and a wide preparation area where the three chefs added the various condiments and garnishes to the sandwiches or plates. Eight customers, all men, sat on tall stools facing the bar, eating. A couple of them seemed chummy with the chefs and were chatting away with them between bites. A dozen small tables lined the other wall, which was clad with large mirrors. Reilly and Malone occupied the table closest to the door, facing the shawarma stands, where a couple of other men waited for their takeaways. Judging by the uninterrupted flow of such pick-ups, and of diners coming in and out of the place since the two Americans had been seated there, the restaurant was evidently doing a brisk business on all fronts.

No one in the place stood out though, but then again, Reilly and Malone didn’t have an ID on any of the bad guys. All they could do for now was sit there and wait in the hope that one of the phones would go live again and that GCHQ would pick up its trail, a trail that, with a bit of luck, would lead to a target walking into that very restaurant. Until then, they could only wait—and enjoy the food.

Reilly took another sip of his Coke, then checked his phone again. He had a strong 4G signal, but nothing had come in yet from GCHQ.

He was reaching over for another dip at the humus bowl when a new customer walked in. He was dressed in a dark, loose-fitting suit—nothing expensive—and no tie. He hadn’t shaved for a few days and had dark circles under his eyes. Something about this guy attracted Reilly’s attention. He glanced discreetly at Malone. He, too, had sensed something. Agents—good agents—noticed the most minuscule details. Sometimes, it was something you could actually pinpoint: the way a person’s attention flits around a room when they walk in; the tension in their shoulders, in their gait. Other times, it’s a subconscious awareness. Nothing tangible they can point out, just a combination of tiny observations coupled with an instinct that’s been honed through years on the job.

This was one such moment.

The two agents carried on eating as the man walked up to the cashier at the far end of the bar and placed his order. He was too far for them to hear, but judging by the time it took and the cash he forked out, he was ordering more than just for himself. The cashier handed him a small printout slip, then the man walked back towards the front door and gave the slip to one of the chefs.

Reilly and Malone observed the man start chatting with the chef. The man was clearly a regular. He and the chef were enjoying a good chat while the chef shaved pieces of chicken and lamb off the fat, cylindrical skewers onto a small steel tray. While still chatting, the chef then tipped bits of meat onto a row of wraps that were laid out in line. From where they were sitting, Reilly and Malone couldn't see exactly how many sandwiches the man had ordered, but the chef's arm movements indicated there were ten of them. The chef then put the tray down and started adding the garnishes to the sandwiches: sliced tomatoes, onions, pickled cucumber and beetroot for both lamb and chicken sandwiches, then garlic for the chicken and tahini—a sesame seed-based sauce—for the lamb.

As he was doing it, the chef asked the man something. Reilly's basic knowledge of Arabic was enough to understand what he was saying: the chef was asking the man if he wanted garlic on all the chicken sandwiches. Reilly knew this was a typical question: not everyone wanted to reek of garlic, which, in these sandwiches, was potent.

The man Reilly and Malone were watching said yes at first. Then he had second thoughts and said something that caused Reilly's pulse to spike. Malone saw it reflected in the tiny reaction in Reilly's eyes. Reilly gave him an almost imperceptible confirmation nod.

The man said, "*Hott ketchup ala arba'a minon. Hadol Amerikan, ma byijbamo shi.*"

As in, Put ketchup on four of them. They're Americans, they don't know these things.

The man said it with evident mockery, causing the chef to laugh. The chef then asked if he should add some mustard too, which the target laughed at before building on it with another comment that Reilly didn't quite catch but that caused more merriment.

It didn't matter. Reilly had heard enough.

The sandwiches were for Americans. And the chatter had mentioned targeting some "American specialists." Added to the fact that the man had lit up both agents' internal goondars, this suddenly looked promising.

Then the man turned, and his gaze lasered onto Reilly, then Malone—and something effervesced in his own eyes. Just for a second, two at most.

Then he bolted out of the restaurant.

"Go, go, go," Reilly said, as he and Malone catapulted out of their seats and charged after him.

Khoury was slumped on the damaged mattress, his back against the wall. His fingers twirled around bits of cotton that the lead goon's gunshots had kicked up. "You think anyone's looking for us?"

"I don't know," Berry replied. He was laid out similarly, on the opposite wall. "Elizabeth is in southern France with a couple of her girl friends. What about Suellen?"

"She's on a canal barge with her dad in the middle of nowhere."

"So they might not notice we're gone for another day or two?"

"It's possible."

Berry nodded, to himself. This was looking bleak. "You know we can't do this."

"Of course, we can't. But we have to figure a way out of this. *That's* the brilliant plot we need to come up with."

"And it needs to be something that involves us being part of the master plan. That way, they don't kill us off after we give it to them."

"Not an easy job."

"No choice. In the meantime, we have to give them something to buy ourselves some time."

"The guy didn't know about Dr. Evil or about Nelson DeMille's books," Khoury said, an idea blooming. "He doesn't seem too well versed in popular culture. We can use that. Why don't we just give him something that's been done before."

"Dangerous. They might catch us—or they might actually go out and do it."

"If they catch us, we can just claim we never read it or saw it. And as for them going and doing it—what are the odds of these morons actually pulling off something that big?"

"They just might," Berry said. "Remember *Debt of Honor*? Tom Clancy had a pissed off Japanese Air Lines pilot crash his jumbo jet into the Capitol building during a special joint session of Congress killing the President and everyone else, and that was seven years before 9/11."

"You think Bin Laden read Clancy?"

"Maybe. He was a jet-setting Saudi millionaire before he turned into an asshole."

"Okay, let's get back to our asshole," Khoury said. "What bone can we throw him to buy some time?"

"He wants big. Epic. And no bombs or viruses."

"Something from a Bond movie?"

"Risky. Too popular."

"Maybe you're right. If he hasn't seen them, one of his goons probably has."

"Okay, so let me ask you this," Berry asked, "what's the best plot you ever read? Or saw? What's the one you wish you'd come up with?"

"In terms of a brilliant plan, I've got to go with the first *Die Hard*—"

“Genius—”

“Totally. But our guy is no Hans Gruber. And there’s another problem. Like a lot of these stories, it’s about personal gain, not destruction. The fireworks, like Goldfinger’s nuke, are just a sideshow to the real motive: money.”

“This guy didn’t give us much to work with.”

They both mulled over the question.

“Okay,” Berry offered. “What about the second *Die Hard*? Bringing down airliners by hacking into air traffic control.”

“Nasty. But scarily doable, don’t you think?”

“Nah, come on. We both know there are all kinds of firewalls built into these things. It’s virtually impossible to pull off—if you’ll pardon the pun.”

“But what if it wasn’t?”

Berry thought about it for a moment, then nodded. “Too risky, you’re right.”

“Yeah, but the hacking thing might work. In fact, it’s perfect. No explosives. Nothing basic that could kill lots of people. And it’ll be too sophisticated for them to be able to control every aspect of it.”

“Meaning we’ll have plenty of opportunities to shut it down if it ever got that far.”

“Exactly. Have you been watching this new TV series, *Mr. Robot*?”

Berry shook his head.

“It’s very cool.” Khoury considered it briefly, then smiled. “Yeah, I think this might work.”

The man only had a few seconds' head start, but he was fast. He already had a fifty yard lead by the time Reilly and Malone burst out of the restaurant.

"You gonna tell me what the hell that was all about?" Malone asked, panting.

"Later," Reilly shouted back. "Need to grab him first."

The man spun around for a quick look, gauged how far back they were, then cut across the wide sidewalk and onto the road, oblivious to the cars coming in his direction. He zigzagged through them and made it to the opposite side, where cars and buses were heading south towards Hyde Park.

Reilly and Malone tried to follow, but they were interrupted by a wave of cars that screeched as they swerved to avoid them while blaring their horns.

The two agents were dodging the traffic when they saw a red Routemaster bus, one of the new models, drive past on the opposite roadway, obscuring their target momentarily before the man reappeared behind it, only now he was sprinting even faster, fast enough to leap onto the open platform at the rear of the bus just as it accelerated away.

"Crap," Reilly shouted. "He's getting away."

He looked around in a panic and spotted possible salvation: a trio of tourists pedaling peacefully down the road on Santander bikes, ones provided across the city as part of London's bike-sharing scheme.

He didn't hesitate.

He rushed up to the lead bike, grabbed its rider and pulled him to a sudden halt.

"Sorry, I'm going to need this," he blurted as he pulled the rider off his seat. Seconds later, he was pedaling furiously after the bus, with Malone in his wake on a second bike.

The bikes were no match for the bus, not when there was a long stretch before the traffic lights at Marble Arch. They could see their target standing on the platform at the back of the bus, watching them through its angled rear window.

They lost more ground as the bus neared the intersection, where the lights were red. A few cars were stopped there, waiting.

"If the lights go green, we're screwed," Malone yelled.

They went green.

The cars drove off, far enough ahead so that the bus didn't even have to slow down. Instead, it just motored on, veering left around Marble Arch before heading down Park Lane.

"Shit," Reilly shouted.

He pedaled more furiously, as did Malone. The two agents were still a good twenty yards away from the lights when they went from green to amber. By the time they reached them, the lights were red, and cars were already moving into the intersection from the right.

"Keep going," Reilly hollered.

He kept going, cutting into the intersection inches ahead of the lead car to his right. The car screeched to a stop, causing the one behind to plow into it. Malone was a few feet behind Reilly and just managed to avoid the scrape. The two agents kept pedaling and banked right to head down Park Lane, oblivious to the mess they'd left behind.

Then they got lucky.

The traffic ahead was heavy, with cars and buses blocking the way long before the red light that was a couple of hundred yards down the road.

Reilly saw the Routemaster grind to a halt. The target's head swung left and right as he considered his next move, then he leapt off the bus and ran.

Reilly and Malone kept going. Other cars and buses coming from Oxford Street had filtered in ahead of them before stopping too. They had to slow down before threading their way through the stopped traffic, but at least, their quarry was now on foot.

"We're going to lose him," Malone shouted as he and Reilly maneuvered between the stopped cars. They could see their target as he ran across the wide, planted median and cut through the traffic coming up the opposite carriageway before making it to the other side and running into Hyde Park.

"Damn it," Reilly hissed as he dumped his bike and sprinted ahead.

Malone did the same.

It took them longer to get across the road, with its four lanes of cars to dodge. By the time they made it into the park, the man was over a hundred yards ahead of them.

Reilly looked around without pausing. There was nothing for him to requisition—no bikes, not even a skateboard.

They kept running, chasing him down the Parade Ground and past Reformer's Tree, heading south. They weren't catching up on him.

"Would have been easier without those damn shawarmas weighing me down," Reilly yelled to his partner.

"Forget the shawarmas. It's the garlic that's burning me up," Malone quipped. "And I don't even like garlic."

They followed him around the Look Out Educational Centre and down towards the Serpentine, which was spread out at the bottom of the hill like a huge, black mirror. Dozens of small pedal boats carrying tourists and families idled peacefully on the water, mingling with the resident swans and ducks.

All of which presented their target with a problem. He'd have to go around the lake, either left or right. When he did, Reilly and Malone could triangulate in his direction, cutting the distance between them.

The man kept going straight.

"We'll gain ground on him now," Reilly blurted.

Only the target didn't turn right or left. Instead, he kept going straight towards the lake until he reached the boathouse, where he barged through the waiting crowd, leapt onto an empty pedal boat, and set off across the surface. By the time Reilly and Malone reached the shore, he was a good thirty yards away from the bank.

"Come on," Reilly yelled as he charged through the crowd and grabbed a pedal boat that had just come in.

Malone jumped onto it alongside him.

They started pedaling.

Up ahead, their target was now halfway across.

"You've got to be kidding me," Malone said as he pedaled furiously. "I can swim faster than this."

"You wanna go for it?" Reilly asked. "Be my guest."

Malone glanced at the water around them. It was freezing, and he was fully dressed. By the time he shook his clothes off, the man would be on the opposite shore.

It wasn't a particularly inviting prospect.

"Maybe another time," Malone said. "Keep spinning."

Minutes later, their target rammed his pedal boat onto the bank, jumped off, and sprinted away.

The agents did the same.

They crossed Rotten Row and were all heading down towards the Edinburgh Gate and the gleaming glass towers of One Hyde Park.

"We need a bike, a cop, or something," Reilly said between labored breaths.

"How about horses?" Malone asked.

"As long as they don't have guys with swords on them, I'm happy," Reilly quipped, panting heavily.

"If he gets to the big department stores in Knightsbridge, we'll definitely lose him."

The target reached South Carriage Drive and rushed across it, easily avoiding the sparse traffic heading up the single lane.

Reilly saw him disappear behind a white van that was parked by the Pan Statue. He and Malone didn't slow down. They crossed the road and rounded the van—only the target was gone.

They stopped running and for a split second, Reilly didn't get it. Then he turned to face the side the of the van and saw the target inside.

He wasn't alone.

Another man was in there with him.

They were both pointing guns at the two agents.

"Get in, now," the new guy barked as he beckoned them with his gun.

Reilly looked at Malone. They were both out of breath and exhausted. Putting up a fight, in their present condition, was simply not an option.

Malone nodded grudgingly.

And with that, they both boarded the van.

“So you have something already?”

The man who asked to be called Abul Mowt stood by the door, his face alive with expectation. “That was fast,” he told the two authors. “You guys are really good.” He turned and gave his two goons a couple of slow, smug nods that said, See, that’s why I’m the grand poobah here. He faced his prisoners again. “Tell me.”

“Actually,” Khoury said, “it’s something I’ve been working on for a book.”

“It’s good,” Berry added. “More than good. You’ll see.”

“I’m listening,” their captor said.

“Okay. So it involves hacking.”

Khoury waited, watching the reaction on his captor’s face.

A couple of cracks appeared across Abul Mowt’s forehead as he frowned with curiosity. “You mean, like hacking into a nuclear power plant to cause a meltdown?”

“No, no, please,” the writer said. “That’s old school. Been done to death. Plus they’ve been onto that one since before 9/11, before Y2K even. Too many firewalls. You’d never get in.”

“Where you can get in, though, is the banks,” Berry put in.

“The banks?” Abul Mowt looked displeased, his tone rising. “I’m not interested in stealing money. I want pain.”

“Hang on. We’re going to give you pain,” Khoury said.

“We’re not talking about stealing money,” Berry added. “We’re talking about wiping it out. All records of it.”

Abul Mowt seemed confused. “You want to wipe it out? You can’t wipe out cash.”

“No,” Khoury explained, “We don’t mean get rid of it. We mean wipe out all records of it. Everything. Everyone’s bank records, savings, deposits. Credit card debt, bank loans, mortgages. All records—wiped out. In one go.”

He glanced at Berry, then they both watched their captor, studying the reaction percolate across his face.

The man seemed lost in a deep, brow-furrowing mull. He was obviously not impressed. After a moment, he asked, “What kind of pain is that?”

“Are you kidding me?” Khoury shot back. “You’re talking chaos on an apocalyptic level. An economic meltdown. Forget the Great Depression. You’d send America right back to the days of the Wild West. Or worse. It’ll be like in *The Road*.”

“Or *Mad Max*,” Berry added.

“Or *Waterworld*, but without the water.”

“Same thing, really.”

“True.”

“Enough,” the man barked. “Look, I want to do something big. I want noise and spectacle, and I want people to die.”

“Yes, but this is so much better,” Khoury countered. “More sophisticated. More subtle.”

“Death by a thousand cuts,” Berry added. “Metaphorically speaking.”

Khoury slid him a glance, like, Easy on the vocab.

Berry gave him a discreet grin back.

“But your country already had a meltdown,” Abul Mowt said. “A few years ago. Your banks, your car manufacturers, they were all bust. Your government just bailed everyone out and everything went back to normal. This won’t be any different.”

“No,” Berry said. “It’ll be completely different. I’m telling you, this will be the biggest shock to hit the country—ever.”

“And we’ll tell you how to do it,” Khoury said. “Not just tell you. Assist you. Because you will need help. You’ll need hackers. Serious players. This won’t be easy. No brilliant master plan ever is. But we know where to find them.”

“And how to talk to them,” Berry added. “We have access.”

Abul Mowt didn’t seem convinced. In fact, he looked downright dejected.

“What?” Khoury asked.

“I don’t know,” the man said. “It’s just not what I imagined. It’s not ... big.”

“It’ll be huge,” Khoury insisted.

“No, I mean big,” the man repeated. “We do this ... what will it look like on the news? What will people see on TV? What’s the horrible image they’ll always remember? Blank screens at ATMs across the country? People sitting at their laptops and moaning about their bank statements?”

“Look, you kidnapped us because you think we’re good at what we do. Okay, this is a terrific plot, I’m telling you. This is New York Times top five bestselling stuff, easy.”

Berry nodded. “No question.”

Their captor was clearly struggling with it. “I don’t see it. It’s just not ... dramatic. It’s not sexy.”

Khoury glanced at Berry, who spread his hands out slightly and shrugged with defeat.

Then the man seemed to reach a conclusion. “No. It’s not what I’m looking for. All this hacking stuff ... it’s just numbers and letters on a screen. It’s not real. And it doesn’t last. It’s quickly forgotten.” He shook his head slowly, his tone low with disappointment. “I did an online chemistry course, I took a high speed driving course, I spent hours on my computer doing simulator flying lessons for planes and helicopters, all to prepare for this ... and you want to use hackers?”

“You wanted something different,” Berry offered.

He shook his head and sighed. “Is that all you’ve got?”

He studied the two authors.

They had nothing to add.

“Fine,” he said, clearly dismayed. “I was hoping you’d come up with something special, but ... fine. We’ll keep it simple. A bomb. Nuclear, dirty, I don’t care.”

His phone started ringing.

He pulled the unit out, spoke a few quick words in Arabic, then killed the call.

“I’ve got to go. New guests to attend to.”

His expression darkened, and he jabbed the air with a peremptory finger.

“Find me something great to blow up, and a foolproof way to do it. And do it soon. My patience isn’t limitless.”

Reilly and Malone were now in a locked, windowless room.

There were no light fittings inside, at least none that they could make out in the semi-darkness, but some faint light was coming in from under the door, enough to allow them to see what their surroundings were like. Not that there was much to see: bare walls, a couple of old mattresses on the floor, and the door. There was also a palpable dampness to the air which was consistent with them being in an underground basement.

Their hands were zip-locked behind their backs.

“Damn it,” Reilly hissed. “How could we let this happen?”

“I didn’t even see him make that call,” Malone said. “Did you?”

“No.”

Malone shook his head. “It’s very out of character for us both. We should have known he’d call for back-up.”

The room fell silent with frustration.

“We need to get out of here,” Malone finally said.

“Yeah, but how?”

Malone looked around the room. “There’s always a way, right?”

“Always.” Reilly was walking around the perimeter of the room, scrutinizing the walls. He did a second lap, then he stopped and tilted his head slightly, deep in thought. “I can’t see it yet.”

“There’s a way out, I can sense it,” Malone insisted. “It’s like ... it’s at the tip of my consciousness. But I can’t put my finger on it.”

“Me too. It’s just ... weird. It’s like I can’t fully engage my thinking on this.”

“Same here. It’s like something’s missing. Like I can’t focus.”

They stared at each other in the semi-darkness. “What do we do?”

“Keep thinking,” Reilly said. “And hope our usual inspiration kicks in soon.”

In a similar bare but illuminated room, Khoury was also pacing around.

“Tough pitch meeting, huh? And where the hell is the food he promised us?” the author grumbled. “I’m starving.”

“Other guests,” Berry said, his focus still on their captor’s parting words. “What do you think he meant by that?”

“Other writers?” Khoury wondered.

“Maybe. Which would be good. The more of us go missing, the more someone’s going to notice.”

“But it makes you and me disposable if we don’t deliver.” Khoury. “We need to come up with the winning plot if we want to stay alive.”

“Who do you think they’ve grabbed?”

“Who’s in town besides Lee and Rollins?”

“Simon Toyne. Sandra Brown. Lisa Gardner. Peter James.”

Khoury frowned. “Crap. That’s some tough competition. We’re going to need to get our thinking caps on big time.”

Berry said, “Maybe we’re not approaching this the right way. What would Malone and Reilly do?”

“What do you mean?”

“We always write them into this kind of trouble. But when we do, we always write in something tiny, a crack in the set-up that gives them a way out.”

“But we didn’t write this. This is real life.”

“True, but maybe there’s a crack here too. Or maybe there’s something we’ve used in one of our books that we could use here.”

Khoury grinded it over for a moment. “Do you have any pills on you? Anything that can make one of us so sick that they need to get us to a hospital?”

“*Rasputin’s Shadow*,” Berry said.

Khoury smiled and aimed a congratulatory finger his way. “Well done, sir. Well done. I love a focused reader.”

Berry grimaced with disappointment. “Sadly, I don’t have any vials of psychotropic powder on me right now.”

Khoury scanned the room again. Then his eyes settled on the mattress Abul Mowt had shot up. Bits of spring and cotton were sticking out of it, and the image triggered something inside him. He stared at it, deep in thought, then a small grin broke across his face.

“I used something in an old screenplay of mine,” he told Berry. “My character needed to sneak into a high-security facility. He had gone to the house of a sleazebag who worked there and knocked him out, so he had the guy and the guy’s Porsche to use, but the place had fingerprint checks as well as overhead thermal scanners that checked the cars at the entrance gate.”

“So how’d he get in?”

“I’ll show you.”

Berry heard the keys working the lock seconds before the door to the authors' cell swung open. He was ready, sitting patiently on his mattress with his back against the wall.

The door creaked open, and the two now-familiar goons stepped in. One—the driver—stayed by the door. The other had a full carrier bag in his hand.

“Your food,” the man with the bag announced—then he stopped in his tracks.

His eyes, wide with alarm, scoured the large, empty space.

“Where’s your friend?”

Berry sounded surprised. “Friend?”

The goon was quickly losing it. The bag just tumbled out of his hand and he reached for his gun. “Your friend. The other writer.”

Berry looked around the room with mock bewilderment. It was, in fact, empty. Apart from Berry and the two goons, there was no one else in the room.

“I don’t know,” Berry said in a surprised, concerned tone. “He’s not with you?”

“No, he’s not with us. Where is he?”

“I don’t know. I fell asleep, and when I woke up, he was gone. I assumed you took him to use the toilet or something. Speaking of which—”

“No,” the man screamed. “Where is he? Where is he?” He was now leaping around in a mad panic, waving his gun around like a lunatic.

“I’m telling you I don’t know,” Berry said, then his worried tone turned conspiratorial. “Man, are you boys going to get in trouble?”

The man looked at him in utter bewilderment, then turned to the other goon and started rambling something in Arabic. The driver had now also stepped into the room and was walking around its perimeter, scrutinizing the walls as if anyone could just melt into them.

Berry couldn’t understand what they were saying, but it sounded like they were having a heated debate about what to do. You didn’t need to be the Amazing Kreskin to guess what was going on: they were crapping themselves about what the head goon was going to do to them when he found out one of his prized authors had somehow escaped—and, more critically, which one of them was going to be the one to tell him about it.

The hissing match kept going until a fierce tirade from the gunman finally pummeled his cohort into submission. With drooped shoulders and a fatalistic shrug, the driver muttered something as he shuffled off into the darkness beyond, leaving the first goon alone with Berry.

“Where is he? How did he get out of here?” the man asked, his face sweating in an intense fear and bewilderment combo.

“Honestly, I have no idea,” Berry said with forced sincerity and compassion as he pushed himself up to his feet and took a few steps away from the mattress.

The goon kept his eyes locked on him, his gaze and his gun tracking Berry as the author skirted the long side of the room, ambling slowly towards the opposite wall, where the other mattress lay.

“I mean, it’s not humanly possible, is it? For a fully-formed adult male to just vanish like that. Is it? Unless,” Berry added as he stopped, turned and raised a questioning finger with dramatic flourish, “unless he managed to go through the wall.”

“Through the wall? What are you talking about?”

“What, you don’t know? No, of course you don’t. Not many people do.” His expression went all professorial. “It’s called quantum tunneling. I only know that because Raymond told me he was researching it for his next book.”

The man had rotated to keep facing Berry, his face a pained mix of confusion and worry.

“See, there was this fellow in Paris by the name of Dutilleul who worked as a clerk in the Registration Ministry. This man had the ability to walk through walls,” Berry informed his captor, “like at platform nine and three quarters at Kings Cross in the Harry Potter books—but you probably haven’t read them, have you?”

The goon gave him a sheepish shrug. “Actually, I saw the movies.”

“Pirated downloads?”

The man’s eyes dropped guiltily to the ground.

“Of course, what else.” Berry raised a chastising finger. “Anyway, I’d love to tell you more about it, but now’s not really the place or time for it.”

He added and emphasis on the word “time,” and, as he did, looked over the goon’s shoulder.

But nothing happened.

The man seemed confused. “You really think it’s possible?”

“I do, but like I said, now is not the right *time*.” Again, he raised his voice when saying the word “time,” and again, he looked over the goon’s shoulder.

A sudden, loud rustle coming from behind him surprised the goon. He turned and saw the mattress Berry had been sitting on rise up off the ground, on its side, along with a loud shriek. The man raised his gun in fear—but before he could fire, Berry, who was now behind him, unleashed a vicious side kick, buckling the man’s knee.

The man yelped as his leg collapsed, and he went down, lopsided, the gun falling from his grasp as he hit the ground.

Berry didn’t wait.

He’d already moved in and followed his first strike with a savage kick to the man’s kidneys, followed by a punch to the side of his head.

“That’s for threatening my family, dickhead,” he added as he knocked the man out with a final hammer-fist to the man’s neck.

He grabbed the gun off the ground and crossed the room to where Khoury was extricating himself from the mattress.

They’d used the holes opened up by the lead goon’s gunshots to tear open the cover of the mattress, then they’d pulled out some of its innards—springs, foam and cotton—enough for Khoury to be able to fit himself into the mattress, just like the character in his script had done to the car seat of the bad guy’s Porsche before stuffing the man into it and sitting on him. Like a puppet master, his character had manipulated the bad guy’s arm to clear the fingerprint scan, while the overhead scanner only saw the thermal image of one body since he was sitting on top of him.

The two writers had then taken the bits they’d removed and spread them under the other mattress, flattening them evenly so it was barely noticeably higher off the ground.

Then Khoury had waited for Berry’s signal.

“I thought you were never going to make your move,” Berry said.

“I couldn’t hear you,” Khoury replied, brushing his ears. “I’ve still got cotton in there.” He looked across at the downed goon, then took in the gun in Berry’s hand. “Malone would be proud.”

“I guess that Krav Maga training I did for research paid off.” He gestured towards the door. “Let’s get the hell out here before the others get back.”

They scooted out of the room and into a long, dark corridor that led to a staircase, Berry leading the way in a slightly crouched stance and on high alert. They were passing a door to their right when the goon leader and his other underling appeared, coming down the stairs.

Shots exploded around them, as the goons started firing.

“Shit,” Khoury said as they both hugged the wall, looking for cover. “What are you waiting for, shoot back.”

“You do realize I’ve never fired a gun in my life,” Berry yelled.

“Just point the damn thing and pull the trigger.”

Berry did just that.

Two, three, four times.

The two goons scrambled back up the stairs as bullets bit into the walls around them just as shouts came from the room next to where the authors were huddled.

“Hey, who’s out there? Get us out of here.”

Berry looked at Khoury in confusion, then leaned closer to the door and said, “Who are you?”

“FBI agents,” the voice said. “You American?”

“Through and through,” Berry replied. “Stand clear.”

He stepped back and fired a shot into the door lock, destroying it, then kicked the door in.

“You’re getting real handy with that thing,” Khoury said.

Malone and Reilly emerged from the darkness. Their hands were still zip-locked, but they were no longer behind their backs. Adrenaline was running high all around.

Malone asked, "What's going on?"

"The guys who grabbed us," Khoury said, "one of them's knocked out back there. The other two are up there."

"Let's go," Reilly said. "Stay behind us." Then he told Berry, "Give me the gun."

Berry handed it over.

They moved quickly but quietly, down the hall and up the stairs—Reilly, Malone, Khoury, and Berry. They crept up the stairs, Malone's gun leading the way, and emerged into what looked like the ground floor of an empty warehouse. But a door that looked like the main entrance hung wide open.

Reilly shouted, "Come on," and he and Malone rushed out into the daylight.

Khoury looked at Berry, shrugged, then said, "What the hell. We've written about this kind of thing often enough. Might as well live it for once."

"Go," Berry said.

The two writers charged after them.

Malone and Reilly burst out of the warehouse in time to see the two goons getting into a black people carrier that was parked across in the complex's small forecourt, its nose facing the lot's low perimeter wall. Beyond were some trees and what looked like train tracks.

"I'm not losing them again," Reilly said.

"I'm not getting grabbed again," Malone added as he aimed at the goon he had a better bead on, the underling who'd gone to fetch his boss. "Stop, or I'll shoot."

The lead goon was barely inside the vehicle when its engine rumbled to life.

"Stop," Malone repeated, but the man didn't stop climbing in. Instead, he swung around, a gun in hand, and fired.

Rounds punched into the walls and cars around the agents, who dived for cover behind a nearby vehicle.

Malone peered out and fired back.

The rear windshield of the Ford Galaxy burst into smithereens, as did one of its rear lights, just as it lurched back, heading straight at them. Its engine whined as it cut across the parking lot, Malone and Reilly diving out of the way a split second before it plowed into the car they were using for cover and crushed it against the warehouse's wall. The engine screamed again as the driver slammed it into gear and it accelerated away, down the lot before swerving left and disappearing behind the side of the warehouse complex.

Malone and Reilly emerged and rushed through the parking lot after it, looking for a car they could use. The cars were all locked, and no one else was around.

"We're going to lose them again," Reilly hissed. "We need to hotwire one of these cars."

"Hang on a sec. The two guys who got us out of there," Malone said, checking behind him. "Where are they?"

Reilly turned and scanned the warehouse's entrance.

There was no sign of them.

As soon as the gunfire erupted, Khoury and Berry stopped and pulled back into the warehouse.

"There," Khoury pointed.

There was another door at the back of the space. It looked like an exit. "Let's get the hell out of here."

"I thought you wanted to live the adventure," Berry said.

"Yeah, maybe one with a little less bullets flying around. Especially when we can't shoot back."

They sprinted across the large space and tried the door, which was unlocked. They went through and emerged outside, behind the warehouse—just as the black Galaxy rushed past them.

“It’s them,” Berry blurted.

“They’re getting away. Where are those agents?”

“Maybe they got them.”

Khoury looked at Berry. Hard resolve bounced back between them. “Screw that. Come on.”

About thirty yards away from them, the Galaxy swerved to the right and burst out of the lot, narrowly missing a black Audi Q5 that screeched to a halt as it was turning into the warehouse complex.

Khoury sprinted towards it, with Berry hot on his heels.

They reached the Audi before it was moving again, its driver, a thin, balding man wearing wire spectacles and a suit, momentarily jolted by the close call.

“We need your car,” Khoury said, breathless.

“What? No,” the driver said, totally confused.

“We’re federal agents,” Berry informed him with as much authority as he could muster. “We’re going to need your vehicle, right now.” Major emphasis on the last two words.

The man wasn’t impressed. “No, I’m sorry, I just got this car, it’s on a lease.”

“Fine,” Khoury said as he reached in, yanked the door lever and swung it open.

Before the man could object, Khoury had unclipped his seat belt, pulled him out, and was climbing into the driver’s seat. Berry also sprinted around the car and clambered in to ride shotgun.

“Hey,” the man protested as he tried to open the driver’s side door—but Khoury just floored the pedal and sped off.

Berry gave him a sideways glance as they banked out of the lot. “I never thought that kind of throwing your weight around actually worked in real life.”

“Neither did I, but it’s what our boys would have done.”

“Absolutely,” Berry replied, then he scanned the road ahead. “Where’d they go?”

“I can’t see them, but I know this area. We’re in Battersea. Not far from my place. I’m just across the river.”

“Convenient,” Berry quipped. “I hope those agents are all right. Maybe they need medical assistance. Shouldn’t we go back?”

“Someone in that complex is bound to have heard the shots. They can call an ambulance if it’s needed. Besides, we have to get these guys.”

“The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few?”

“God bless Spock.”

“Make it so, Number One.”

“I think you’re confusing Star Trek series.”

“Just keep driving,” Berry ordered.

Khoury followed the lane as it banked around the warehouse complex. They were about to merge into the main road when Berry blurted, “There.”

The two agents were sprinting across the road from the warehouse complex, waving at the passing cars and trying to flag one down.

Khoury pulled up next to them.

Malone started to say, “Thanks for stopping—” then he recognized them. “You? How did—”

“Get in, Berry ordered.

Reilly and Malone hustled into the back of the Audi, then Khoury hit the gas and powered away.

“Where are they?” Reilly asked.

“We lost them,” Berry informed him.

“The main road leads to the river,” Khoury said as he scanned the area. “I say we just keep going, the odds are that’s the way they’re headed.”

They careened down the wide road which veered left past a big Land Rover dealership before snaking along the Thames.

They were blowing past the Battersea Heliport to their left when Berry shouted, “Stop. Right there.” He was pointing out from his window.

Khoury slammed on the brakes and swerved off to the side.

They all followed Berry’s lead.

The Galaxy was parked on the tarmac in the heliport after evidently crashing through its thin metal gate. The two goons were by a small chopper that had its rotor already spinning. By the looks of it, they were arguing with the pilot, whose door was open—then the lead goon pulled the pilot out and flung him to the ground, gestured for his henchman to go around the front and get in, and climbed into the pilot’s seat.

“They’re going to fly off,” Berry shouted.

“This guy knows how to pilot a chopper?” Reilly asked in disbelief.

“He did mention he took flying lessons,” Khoury said.

The three others’ heads swerved slowly in unison to face him.

“What?” he protested. “That’s what the guy said.”

The others held him with their triple-deadpan gaze.

“We don’t have time for this,” Khoury muttered, as he threw the Audi into reverse, backed up, spun the wheel, then charged ahead.

Right at the chopper.

“Raymond,” Berry said in a low voice as his fingers tightened around the handles next to him.

Khoury didn’t let up.

“Hey, buddy,” Malone said from the back, “There’s probably a lot of fuel in that thing. And it’s flammable. You do know that, right?”

The Audi was still rocketing ahead.

“Seriously, dude,” Reilly added. “We’ll get him. He’s got to land somewhere.”

The revs kept rising.

The chopper was just lifting off the tarmac.

“Don’t worry,” Khoury said. “I’ve researched this.”

And just as he reached the chopper, he turned the wheel slightly and the Audi banked left, and instead of crashing into the chopper’s main body, the Audi’s right front wing clipped its tail rotor. The spinning propeller ate into the car’s bodywork, slicing it up in a scream of grinding metal—but it was enough to break the blades, which flew off in pieces.

Khoury piled on the brakes, hit reverse and floored the gas.

The Audi pulled back just as the chopper, now without a tail rotor, started spinning around its own vertical axis, out of control. The chopper banked right, then left, going around like a spinning top, before it angled left, clipped the edge of the tarmac, and flipped over—crashing into the Thames in a huge white plume.

The four men dashed out of the Audi and rushed to the river’s edge just as its dark water swallowed the chopper.

They stared down as the last bits of its fuselage disappeared under the surface.

“Shouldn’t someone dive in to try to rescue them?” Berry asked.

Reilly looked at Malone, then they nodded grudgingly.

“I guess,” Reilly said, as he started pulling his clothes off.

Berry and Khoury walked off.

“Wait,” Reilly called out after them. “You can’t just leave. We’re going to need your statements about what happened.”

“We haven’t had lunch,” Berry shouted back. “We’ll be in touch.”

“We’ll call the London field office tomorrow,” Khoury said. “I think we could both use some rest. Who should we ask for? What’s your name?”

“Reilly,” the agent said. “Sean Reilly. And he’s Cotton Malone.”

Khoury stopped dead in his tracks. Glanced over at Berry.

Berry looked back at the two men, turned to Khoury, then shook his head. “They’re just messing with us. They must know who we are.”

The two authors chuckled and walked away as the agents dove from the bank and into the murky river.

THE END

(or is it?)

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BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE LAST TEMPLAR*

RAYMOND KHOURY

THE NEW REILLY & TESS THRILLER

THE END GAME



Allentown, New Jersey

I really didn't want to be here. Then again, who would?

Three o'clock in the morning, me and my partner Nick Aparo, in our unmarked SUV, parked on a dark street in the middle of nowhere with the engine off, freezing our nuts off, watching, waiting for the go signal, making sure our target didn't vaporize before we nabbed him.

Don't get me wrong. This is my job. I do it by choice. I do it because I believe in it, because I think what we do, as special agents of the FBI, is important. And the guy in our crosshairs on this particular night deserved our full attention, no question.

It's just that I had bigger fish to fry. But more on that later.

Right now, all I can tell you is that we'd spent countless hours staring through the condensation-clouded windshield and the snow flurries outside at the single-story house up and across the street, the one with the hypnotic, mind-numbing Christmas lights twinkling along the edge of its roof, and I was exhausted. We'd been at it for days.

I watched my breath billowing out in front of my eyes as I zipped up my FBI parka, the cold metal of the zip reaching its endpoint against my nose. Any more coffee and there was zero chance of sleep when I finally made it home—in time to watch the sun rise as I zoned out against a deeply asleep Tess.

Nick, on the other hand, had no such concerns. He was pouring himself yet another mug from the five-liter flask before sipping the steaming, bitter liquid like it had been lovingly made by his favorite barista. He looked ridiculous in his big, Russian-style fur hat, the flaps of which he had pulled right down over his ears, but nothing I said was going to make him lose it. At least he was watching the house with me and not sitting there flicking through an endless array of female Tinder offerings while subjecting them to the incessant vocal critique that usually accompanied his left- and right-swipes, which was his MO on previous stakeouts. Small mercies, I guess.

The subject of our impromptu igloo huddle was called Jake Daland. Daland was the founder and head honcho of Maxi plenty, which had taken over from Silk Road not long after we had shut that online marketplace down. Daland was an interesting target, a nice change from the Jihadist scumbags hogging our work load. Besides choosing a tongue-in-cheek twist on a Newspeak term from George Orwell's *1984* to name his site, he'd also come up with a neat way to try and avoid the fate of Silk Road by avoiding financial transactions altogether: no cash, no checks, no credit cards, no Bitcoins. Maxi plenty was a darknet barter-only site, an online marketplace where you could do anything you wanted—get drugs, guns, explosives, launder money, or have someone murdered—provided you had something you could trade for

it. It was the hub of some pretty nasty stuff, which is why we were here, waiting for word that power had been cut to Daland's house before we stormed in and shut him down.

We weren't alone. The whole team, including a couple of specialists from Cyber Division, was waiting close by, equipped with night vision goggles and, with a bit of luck, a little less frozen than us. The aim was to disconnect all the computer equipment—along with any battery backups—before we turned the power back on and began the bagging and tagging. I didn't want Daland to have the tiniest window in which to hit some kind of nuke switch and wipe his hard drives.

"Heads up, Reilly," a voice announced through my earpiece. "Looks like it's feeding time at the zoo again."

I looked out through the near whiteout on the other side of the windows and saw the now-familiar pizza delivery car with half a plastic forty-eight-inch pepperoni sticking out of the roof glide past.

"*More* pizza?" Nick grumbled, peering out through the windshield. "How in God's name can he eat so much pizza and stay so thin? Bastard."

I turned to face him, a slight grin on my face. "Maybe he doesn't chase it down with a bowl of lasagna."

My partner was fairly legendary for his appetites, particularly when it came to Italian food and generously proportioned blonds. The former had provided something of a distraction when the latter ended up getting him divorced. Nowadays, he was happy to indulge in both, having finally come to terms with the court-appointed bi-weekly weekends with his eleven-year-old son. He'd also stuck with the spinning classes. I'd lost that bet, along with most of Twenty-six Federal Plaza.

"What's wrong with having a pizza as a starter? That's how they do it in Italy, you philistine."

I smiled. "Maybe he's got a gym in there."

His face got all bent out of shape. "At home? Alone? What's the point of that?"

"The point of exercise being to meet the ladies, right?"

"D-uh. But, hey, if I get to live a couple of extra years, that's cool too."

The delivery guy—a new kid, I thought, although it was hard to tell, what with his thick coat and his hood up—kept his engine idling as he hurried up to the door and rang the bell.

The snowflakes were getting meatier.

I adjusted the screen brightness on the laptop sitting at my elbow. Four video windows showed the feeds from the cameras we'd managed to set up on our target. I concentrated on the feed from the camera facing the house's front door, which was hidden inside a newspaper vending machine.

Jake Daland—elegant as ever in a short, silk kimono over a deep V-necked white T-shirt that exposed a mat of black chest hair—opened the door with the same calm, nonchalant demeanor. No stepping halfway through the door, no furtively peering to left and right. Zero interest in what was outside the house at all. Either he knew we were out here and didn't care, or—and though possible, it was by now fairly improbable—he didn't have a clue that he'd been under surveillance for days.

Daland took the pizza box and handed the delivery guy some money. The delivery guy seemed a bit thrown. They exchanged a few words as he struggled with his oversized puffer coat, fishing through its pockets, then shook his head, the cash in his outstretched hand.

“What’s he doing?” Nick asked.

“Daland must have handed him a large bill and the kid doesn’t have enough change.”

Nick shrugged. “We’re *so* on the wrong side of the law.”

They exchanged a few more words, then Daland waved the driver inside. The guy went in and the door closed behind him.

Moments later, the delivery guy re-emerged. He was holding a gift-wrapped box from his most loyal small-hours customer and was turning it over curiously.

Nick said, “Now he’s giving the guy a Christmas present?” He shook his head. “I’m telling you, Sean, we chose poorly. Poor-ly.”

The delivery guy got back in his car and drove away.

It was at that precise moment that my earpiece burst back to life. “We have a go. All teams: get into position.”

Nick and I climbed out of the Expedition. We were wearing Kevlar under our FBI parkas, even though I thought it was highly unlikely we’d meet any armed resistance. Four SWAT members were already skulking up to the house’s front door, while two other agents, Annie Deutsch and Nat “Len” Lendowski, climbed out of another unmarked vehicle and approached from the opposite direction. We had other men covering the rear of the house. The tech specialists would wait till the house was secure.

We fell in behind the SWAT guys. “One in position,” I said into my cuff mike.

“Two in position,” came the confirmation from the rear of the house.

“Hold,” the voice in my ear said. A brief moment, then it came back. “In five. Four. Three.” Two seconds later, the Christmas lights on Daland’s roof snapped off as the power was cut.

We flipped down our night vision goggles and drew our sidearms as the SWAT team leader swung his battering ram through the door, but just as we were about to follow them in, an alarm burst to life inside me as my brain spontaneously highlighted something I’d seen as I walked up to the house.

Something I’d barely noticed out of the corner of one eye.

Lying innocuously by the edge of the curb, obscured by the shade of some parked cars, barely noticeable: a flash of red ribbon.

The Christmas gift that Daland had given to the delivery guy. Discarded, tossed away like garbage.

I was electrified with the feeling that something was wrong.

“Nick! Car —now,” I shouted as I pulled off my goggles and stepped back, toward the sidewalk. I saw Deutsch and Lendowski looking at me, all confused, and just waved them on. “Go, go, go!”

They disappeared into the house as I passed the gift and jabbed a finger toward it, telling Nick, “The gift’s a prop. He faked us out.”

We hurried into the Expedition, Nick's face shooting me a sizeable question mark as I slammed the big SUV into gear and floored it.

We fishtailed away from the curb, with me shouting over the revs, "The delivery guy's still in the house. Daland drove off in the pizza car."

Nick shook his head. "Bastard's got a couple of minutes on us."

The roads were covered with snow, but the four-wheel drive of the Expedition was rock solid as it ate up the miles. There were no cars driving around, not at that hour, and we soon hit an intersection. I stopped, clueless about which way to go.

"He knows he's burnt," I said. "Which means he knows everyone else is burnt too. So where's he going?"

Nick rubbed his face, trying to force his brain into gear. "Daland knows we'll be looking for the car and it's not the most discreet ride. He needs to ditch it fast."

"Yeah, but where? And swap over to what?"

The onboard satnav flickered through screens as Nick worked it. I couldn't wait for it to suggest some answers. I scanned the road's surface and could just about make out a set of thin tracks that turned left.

I followed.

Nick watched as I turned onto another residential street, then his attention went back to the navigation system. Thick walls of snow were now making it increasingly difficult to see where we were going. Even at full speed, the wipers were straining against the weight of the heavy flakes and the trail I was following was getting progressively more shrouded by the new snow.

We were going to lose him.

I adjusted the traction control. "He can't stay out in this. Either he's got somewhere to lay low nearby or he's got a fallback drive stashed somewhere."

Nick shook his head and said, "I can't see him having that much foresight. Doesn't seem in character."

I nodded. "A cab, maybe? Or maybe he's ordering an Uber."

Nick grabbed the car radio's mike. "I need the location of all twenty-four-hour cab companies around the target's house."

Moments later, the radio squawked, "Millpond Cabs, corner of North Main and Church."

The radio squawked again, another voice this time. It was Lendowski. "Daland's in the wind," he said. "The pizza guy is freaking. Daland told him he needed to avoid an angry boyfriend. Told him the guy's girlfriend was in the bedroom and gave him three hundred bucks. Reilly, where the hell are you?"

Nick nudged my arm and pointed urgently to the left. I swung the Expedition accordingly, heading west as Nick answered for us both. "We're closing on him. You and Deutsch secure the house."

"Already done. Power's back on."

“Are we good?” I asked.

“We’ve got several computers. The hard drives were already over-writing, he had battery backups. We got what we could, but there’s also a laptop here with a missing hard drive.”

“He pulled it. It must be on him. That’s what we need.” I gunned the V8 engine, the four-wheel drive now winning a one-sided battle against the fresh snow. The houses were larger now. Set farther back from the street.

Nick pointed up ahead. “Five hundred yards more, then we need to cross over North Main onto Church.”

I was scanning every alleyway as we moved. I peered into a lot shared by a fitness center and a gas station. Nothing.

“Right there!” Nick shouted as he opened his window to take a better look. I slowed the SUV to a crawl.

A narrow street ran about thirty degrees off our position. Almost completely obscured by snow-covered trees was the top of a giant pepperoni pizza.

I swung the Expedition to the left, ready to turn right in another fifty yards.

Nick gestured toward the fast-approaching junction.

A single vehicle was midway through a left-hand turn onto North Main Street.

As we got level with the vehicle, a Toyota Camry, I registered the “Millpond Taxicabs” livery. The cab had pulled away before I could look inside.

I spun the wheel around, breaking hard. The Expedition skated a few feet in the original direction of travel, then completed the U-turn as the wheels regained traction.

“That’s him.”

Nick hit the siren as I swung the Expedition into the empty oncoming lane, accelerated beyond the Camry and swerved back into its path.

The cab’s driver hit the brakes. Its wheels locked and the Camry slammed into Nick’s side of the SUV, blocking his door.

I climbed out of the Expedition, pulled my sidearm, and edged around the front of the stationary SUV.

The shotgun-side rear passenger door opened and Daland emerged, both hands high over his head.

“Down,” I barked. “On your knees!”

Nick had climbed over the seats and was now covering the taxi cab’s driver, who had stepped out of the Camry, both hands in the air.

Daland dropped to his knees, shouting, “Easy with the guns! I’m unarmed.”

I stepped toward him. “The hard drive. Where is it?”

“What hard drive?”

The taxi driver turned toward me, all panicked and jittery. “He threw something out the window as we turned out of Church.”

Daland lowered his head, then turned toward the taxi driver, his face tight with anger. “They watch everything you do, every website you read, every keystroke you tap in. They know everyone you talk to, everything you buy. They own you. And you’re no one. Imagine what they do with people who matter.”

I held my position as Nick moved to cuff Daland. “Save the rant for your Twitter feed.” I gestured at the taxi driver. “Show me.”

He led as we jogged back toward the junction with Church, our footfalls crunching in the snow.

The radio squawked as I called it in. “Target secure, repeat, target secure. We’ll meet you back at the house. And tell the pizza guy his car is safe.”

The snow was falling heavier now and sticking to the ground with purpose, but it didn’t take long. We found the hard drive, half-buried in the snow, by the base of a fence.

I brushed some snowflakes from my face, enjoying the sharpness of the freezing air as it hit my lungs.

It was good to be done with Daland. It always felt great to close out an assignment successfully. We’d done our part. From here on, the ball was in the DA’s court. Right now, though, that familiar euphoria was tainted by something else, a foreboding about some unfinished business I needed to get back to.

I looked up at the snowflakes, watched them cascade down onto my face which tingled under their gentle, cold stings, and shut my eyes, trying to breathe in the calmness.

The season, I sensed, really wasn’t going to be particularly jolly. And that was when my work phone rang.

I checked the screen. There was no number appearing on it. It was a private caller.

I took the call.

The voice was cavernous and artificially monotone. “Agent Reilly?”

I froze. The caller was using an electronic voice changer.

Never a good sign.

In these situations, my mind instantly goes to Tess, and to the kids. I don’t know why. I don’t usually deal with psychos or serial killers. The cases I normally work on rarely have the kind of personal angle that can spiral into a vendetta against my loved ones or me. But right there and then, I thought of them. And it sent a spasm of worry through me.

I just said, “I’m listening.”

“Are you interested in justice?”

I forced out a small chortle. “It’s really hard to take that question seriously from someone who sounds like he has a Darth Vader fetish.”

The man paused, then said, “I know things, Agent Reilly. Things you need to hear. Things I need you to do something about. Many innocent people have died because of this. The question is, are you ready to put your life on the line to do something about it?”

I didn’t know what to make of this. We get these whackos more frequently than you’d think, but they usually call the Bureau’s switchboard. Special Agents’ cell phone numbers aren’t easy to get hold of.

I said, “That’s kind of my job description. Who are you? How’d you get this number?”

“What I know, what I want to tell you about, goes way back. It involves a lot of people. Powerful people.”

“OK, I’m going to hang up now, cause we’ve hit our quota on scoops about Area 51 and—”

He interrupted me. “What about your father Colin? You hit your quota on that too?”

That got my attention.

I caught my breath as the savage image that had been seared into my mind ever since I was ten came bursting out of the cage I tried to keep it in, the image of my dad in his office at home, slumped at his desk with a gun by his hand and the back of his head blown off.

“What do you know about my dad?”

“The truth. Look, I’m prepared to tell you everything. All the information you need, proof to back it up. I’ve kept a record of it all and I’ll give it to you. But I need to know you’ll make sure it gets out.”

I was seething inside, but I knew how to keep it at bay and stay calm. I was fully aware that I was probably being played, but whoever it was was pressing some pretty nasty buttons inside me. “You didn’t answer my question.”

After a moment, I heard him cough—a weird, jarring sound, when it comes out through a voice box—then he said, “Let’s not play games and let’s not waste each other’s time. I can’t stay on this call much longer. All you need to know is, this is on the level and I need you to hear the truth—about your dad, about the others, about Azorian . . . just meet me.”

I didn’t have much choice. “Where and when?”

“Tomorrow. One o’clock. Times Square. By the Duffy statue. You know where it is, right?”

“Of course.”

“Come alone. I won’t show if I think you’ve got anyone else there. And, Reilly? Keep it quiet. I’m saying this for your own good.”

“Oh?”

“The last person I reached out to—the only person I tried to tell about it—he’s dead. And I’m sure it wasn’t pleasant, not that death ever is, but—burning to death in his own home because of some electrical fire the day after I called him? Give me a break. I told him not to look into it, but some of these guys, it’s just in their blood. They can’t help themselves.”

“Then why not cut the whole charade and come in to Federal Plaza? I can protect you.”

His voice stayed calm. “No. You can’t.”

“You’d be in federal custody. My custody.”

“No. The people I’m talking about—they’re your own people. That’s why I need you to hear it first. Alone. So you can think about what you’re going to do about it before they come after you too.”

I couldn’t help but sense that he was telling the truth. He was scared. Even with the voice box, the fear was palpably there.

“OK,” I said. “I’ll be there.”

“Good. Let’s just both hope you stay alive long enough for it.”

Then the line went dead.

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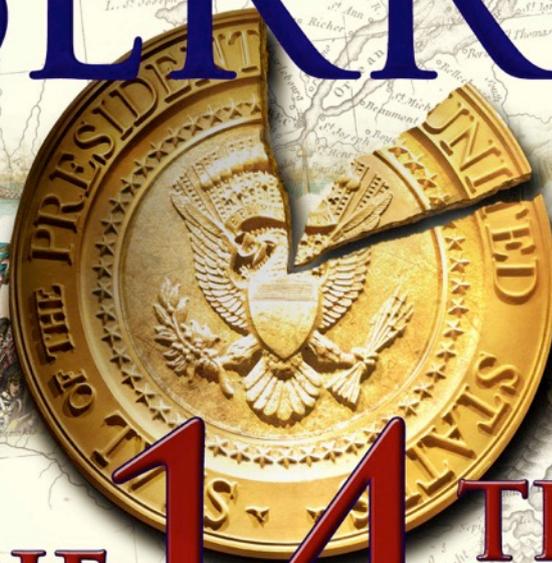
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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

STEVE BERRY

A NOVEL



THE 14TH COLONY

CHAPTER ONE

LAKE BAIKAL, SIBERIA

FRIDAY, JANUARY 18

3:00 P.M.

Bitter experience had taught Cotton Malone that the middle of nowhere usually signaled trouble.

And today was no exception.

He banked the plane 180 degrees for another peek downward before he landed. The pale orb of a brassy sun hung low to the west. Lake Baikal lay sheathed in winter ice thick enough to drive across. He'd already spotted transport trucks, buses, and passenger cars speeding in all directions atop milky-white fracture lines, their wheel marks defining temporary highways. Other cars sat parked around fishing holes. He recalled from history that in the early 20th century rail lines had been laid across the ice to move supplies east during the Russo-Japanese War.

The lake's statistics seemed otherworldly. Formed from an ancient rift valley thirty million years old, it reigned as the world's oldest reservoir and contained one-fifth of the planet's freshwater. Three hundred rivers fed into it but only one drained out. Nearly four hundred miles long and up to fifty miles wide, its deepest point lay five thousand feet down. Twelve hundred miles of shoreline stretched in every direction and thirty islands dotted its crystalline surface. On maps it was a crescent-shaped arc in southern Siberia, 2,000 miles west from the Pacific and 3,200 miles east of Moscow, part of Russia's great empty quarter near the Mongolian border. A World Heritage Site. Which likewise gave him pause, as those usually meant trouble, too.

Winter had claimed a tight hold on both water and land. The temperature hovered right at zero, snow lay everywhere, but thankfully none was currently falling. He worked the controls and leveled off at 700 feet. Warm air blasted his feet from the cabin heater. The plane had been supplied by the Russian air force from a small airport outside Irkutsk. Why there was so much Russian-American cooperation he did not know, but Stephanie Nelle had told him to take advantage of it. Usually visas were required for entry into Russia. He'd used fake ones many times in his day as a Magellan Billet agent. Customs could also be a problem. But this time there was no paperwork, nor had any officials impeded his arrival. Instead, he'd flown into the country on a Russian Sukhoi/HAL fighter, a new version with two seats, to an air base north of Irkutsk where twenty-five Tupolev Tu-22M medium-range bombers lined the tarmac. An Ilyushin II-78 tanker had provided refueling along the way. A helicopter had been waiting at the air base, which ferried him south to where the plane waited.

The An-2 came with a single engine, two pairs of wings, an enclosed cockpit, and a rear cabin large enough to hold twelve passengers. Its thin aluminum fuselage constantly shook from a four-blade propeller that bit a choppy path through the frigid air. He knew little about this World War II Soviet work

horse, which flew slow and steady with barely any zip to its controls, this one equipped with skis that had allowed him to take off from a snowy field.

He completed the turn and readjusted his course northeast, skirting heavily timbered ground. Large boulders, like the teeth of an animal, protruded in ragged lines down ridges. Along a distant slope sunlight glinted on phalanxes of high-voltage power lines. Beyond the lakeshore, the terrain varied from flat empty earth, punctuated by small wooden houses clustered together, to forests of birch, fir, and larch, finally to snow-topped mountains. He even spotted some old artillery batteries situated along the crest of a rocky ridge. He'd come to examine a cluster of buildings that hugged close to the eastern shore, just north of where the Selenga River ended its long trek from Mongolia. The river's mouth, choked with sand, formed an impressive delta of channels, islands, and reed beds, all frozen together in an angular disorder.

"What do you see?" Stephanie Nelle asked him through his headset.

The An-2's communications system was connected through his cell phone so they could talk. His former boss was monitoring things from DC.

"A lot of ice. It's incredible that something so large can be frozen so solid."

Deep-blue vapor seemed embedded in the ice. A swirling mist of powdered snow blew across the surface, its diamond-like dust brilliant in the sun. He made another pass and studied the buildings below. He'd been briefed on the locale with satellite images.

Now he had a bird's-eye view.

"The main house is away from the village, maybe a quarter mile due north," he said.

"Any activity?"

The village with log houses seemed quiet, only fleecy clouds of smoke curling from chimneys indicating occupancy. The settlement rambled with no focal point, a single black road leading in, then out, outlined by snow. A church comprising yellow and pink plank walls and two onion domes dominated the center. It nestled close to the shore, a pebbly beach separating the houses from the lake. He'd been told that the eastern shore was less visited and less populated. Only about 80,000 people lived in fifty or so communities. The lake's southern rim had developed into a tourist attraction, popular in summer, but the rest of the shoreline, stretching for hundreds of miles, remained remote.

Which was exactly why the place below existed.

Its occupants called the town Chayaniye, which meant "hope." Their only desire was to be left alone and the Russian government, for over twenty years, had accommodated them. They were the Red Guard. The last bastion of die-hard communists remaining in the new Russia.

He'd been told that the main house was an old dacha. Every respectable Soviet leader back to Lenin had owned a country place, and those who'd administered the far eastern provinces had been no exception. The one below sat atop a whaleback of rock jutting out into the frozen lake, at the end of a twisting black road among a dense entanglement of trailing pines feathered with snow. And it was no small, wooden garden hut, either. Instead, its ocher façade had been constructed from what appeared to be

brick and concrete, rising two stories and topped by a slate roof. Two four-wheeled vehicles were parked off to one side. Smoke curled thick from its chimneys and from one of several wooden outbuildings.

No one was in sight.

He completed his pass and banked west back out over the lake for another tight circle. He loved flying and had a talent for controlling machinery in motion. Shortly, he'd make use of the skis and touch down on the ice five miles south near the town of Babushkin, then taxi to its dock—which, he'd been told, handled no water traffic this time of year. Ground transportation should be waiting there so he could head north for an even closer look.

He flew over Chayaniye and the dacha one last time, dipping for a final approach toward Babushkin. He knew about the Great Siberian March during the Russian Civil War. Thirty thousand soldiers had retreated across the frozen Baikal, most dying in the process, their bodies locked in the ice until spring when they finally disappeared down into the deep water. This was a cruel and brutal place. What had one writer once said? *Insolent to strangers, vengeful to the unprepared.*

And he could believe it.

A flash caught his attention from among the tall pines and larch, whose green branches stood in stark contrast with the white ground beneath them. Something flew from the trees, hurtling toward him, trailing a plume of smoke.

A missile?

"I've got problems," he said. "Somebody is shooting at me."

An instinctive reaction from years of experience threw him into autopilot. He banked hard right and dove further, losing altitude. The An-2 handled like an eighteen-wheeler, so he banked steeper to increase the dive. The man who'd turned the plane over earlier had warned him about keeping a tight grip on the controls, and he'd been right about that. The yoke bucked like a bull. Every rivet seemed on the verge of vibrating loose. The missile roared past, clipping both left wings. The fuselage shuddered from the impact and he leveled off out of the dive and assessed the damage. Only fabric had covered the lift surfaces, and many of the struts were now exposed and damaged, ragged edges whipping in the airflow.

Stability immediately became an issue.

The plane rocked and he fought to maintain control. He was now headed straight into a stiff north wind, his airspeed less than 50 knots. The danger of stalling became real.

"What's happening?" Stephanie asked.

The yoke continued to fight to be free, but he held tight and gained altitude. The engine roared like a rumble of motorcycles, the prop digging in, fighting to keep him airborne.

He heard a sputter.

Then a backfire.

He knew what was happening. Too much stress was being applied to the prop, which the engine resisted.

Power to the controls winked in and out.

“I’ve been hit by a surface-to-air missile,” he told Stephanie. “I’m losing control and going down.”

The engine died.

All of the instruments stopped working.

Windows wrapped the cockpit, front and side, the copilot’s seat empty. He searched below and saw only the blue ice of Lake Baikal. The An-2 rapidly changed from a plane to eight thousand pounds of deadweight.

Dread swept through him, along with one thought.

Was this how he would die?

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