

Chapter 1

The best way to kill someone is from the other side of the world. Every step closer you get to your target, the worse your plan is. My plan fucking sucked.

There was an empty room on the fourth floor of an office building that overlooked a long stretch of road. The busy London street should have been my killing ground. The setup was almost perfect. The Grand Plaza Hotel was at a t-junction after half a mile of clear street. The second my target emerged from the revolving doors of the hotel, I'd gently squeeze the trigger, and the job would have been done. Unfortunately, I wasn't in that empty office. That half mile also had multiple wind tunnels, funneled in from surrounding buildings. I couldn't guarantee making that shot. I was good, but even I couldn't fight Mother Nature. Her wrath was great, and I'd probably done plenty to piss her off at some point.

That's why I was drinking overpriced coffee in the Grand Plaza's cafe. Killing people was a tough job sometimes – I mean, instant coffee? Jesus Christ, what year did they think it was that instant coffee was acceptable?

I was reading a book. Most people would go with a newspaper. A big one to cover themselves with. It's a good idea, but the only thing more suspicious than a big neon sign above your head flashing "Contract Killer", is trying to hide your face. Stealth has a place, but it's rarely in the middle of a hotel. It would only draw more attention to myself. As it is, I was another average looking face blending into the background.

The choice of book is also important. You can't go Machiavelli or Art of War – too obvious. War and Peace, too thick – looks suspicious. In fact, anything related to war is right out. It's all about blending in. The latest thriller makes sense, right? Only if you've really read it. A few years ago I got caught out by a target who had read my dummy book and struck up a conversation. It made killing him awkward, to say the least.

Pyramids by Terry Pratchett. An unassuming book, respectable enough to not raise any questions in most social situations, and just thick enough to fit the kit I needed. The inner of all the pages had been stuck together with a machinable resin, then milled out and replaced with a series of prisms and cameras all pointed at different angles with different levels of magnification. I could hold the book in almost any position and manage to see my target. To them, I was just enjoying an acceptably quirky novel.

I turned one of the few loose pages in the middle of the book and looked at the upper right prism. Three businessmen sat in the lobby, talking loudly enough that everyone now knew their stance on pumping shares into the yen. A bellboy stood at attention by the entrance. Apart from that, it was empty. My target must still be in his room. I checked my watch. Still within parameters for his schedule. Nothing out of the ordinary.

A waiter came over to me and asked how everything was. I wanted to tell him that this coffee was a war crime and I'd be reporting their kitchen to the UN, but that would be a memorable comment. I nodded and mumbled something passive aggressive.

'I didn't know you could still get coffee like this. Thank you.'

He kept his face carefully neutral, twitched an eyebrow, and left. Quite why the upper echelons of the serving industry schooled their servers to somewhere between neutrality and disdain, I'd never know. The kid couldn't have been more than twenty and he was treating me like that? *Me?* If only he knew. I could follow him back into the kitchen, push him into a closet and garrote him.

I took my hand out of my suit jacket's inner pocket where I kept my garroting wire. This was exactly what my therapist had been talking about. I hadn't even realized I'd gone for the wire. I wasn't that guy any more. If I wanted to be a better person, a better *man*, then I needed to control those impulses. They'd served me well the past twenty nine years, but that didn't need to be me now.

I took a deep breath, held it for four seconds, then exhaled slowly. Calm. The kid hadn't done anything wrong. His friendly smile or apology for the terrible coffee wouldn't have actually changed my day. Calm. Mindfulness was the way forward.

I picked my book up from the table, leaned back, crossed my legs, and began to "read". I enjoyed Pyramids, but there were only ten loose pages in the middle, and even the great man's words began to wear thin after a few months.

'Anything?' The smooth, sultry tones of my operator chirped in my ear-comms.

'Nothing ye—' The elevator doors opened, and a tall man wearing a black, skin-tight tank top and tracksuit bottoms stepped out. My target. 'Huh. Stand by.'

Harold Usilov. Leader of the Usilov Ring, a splinter group of a large Bratva family. He had made some dangerous enemies and ended up with an open contract on his head. I had decided to break my recent abstinence for several reasons. Firstly, this guy was scum. I mean, real scum. He was worse than me before I tried out this whole mindfulness, positive thinking, thing. I could list what he'd done, but it was a bizarre concoction of drugs, animals, and children. Old

me would have said that death is no big thing, and it comes to everyone, deserving or not. New me would say that death should be avoided. New me would also say fuck this sick motherfucker. I'd try and make his death slow and painful – curb stomp his family while he watched, burn his favourite book, piss in his drink and force feed him marmite – but I'd met his type before, and he had no emotions. He was a full blown psychopath. The best thing I could do, was end his existence in this world.

The second reason, as if I needed one, was that he was defecting to a rival crime syndicate, and his main bargaining chip was the identity of undercover operatives, turncoats etc. I knew most of the special forces that he'd be unmasking. His little bit of knowledge would end up with a lot of good people dead. I'll admit that I took a special interest in this because one of those "good people" was me. I'd crossed paths with one of Usilov's lieutenants a while back, the Russian Spetznaz had moved in early, a mess happened, and somehow my identification had been leaked. We'd jammed the target location, but Usilov had a very savvy tech guy working for him. It involved proxies, relays, spoofing, remote servers, and my MI6 file being sent to Usilov's phone.

Usilov had leveraged the ability of his technician against rival gangs for the past two years until finally one of them offered him enough cash to hand over all his information. The meeting was taking place this week, and I'd been tracking him for long enough to feel confident enough to make the hit today.

Really, this rival gang would be getting access to Usilov's technician. Usilov himself was just a minor part of the deal. I hadn't managed to find out who the tech was, but we knew he wasn't Russian. Not much to go on.

Through one of my book's optics I could see Usilov lighting a cigarette as he strutted through the lobby.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the bellboy walk forwards and say, 'Excuse me sir, I'm very sorry, but you can't smoke indoors.'

Usilov stopped and stared at the boy. I'd seen that stare before. It was a predator realising that he could kill his opponent, and then deciding if the social repercussions were enough to stop him from doing it. It was the look I'd given the server just a few minutes ago. After a few seconds, during which the bellboy stuttered an apology and refused to meet Usilov's eye, he took a long drag on his cigarette, blew it in the bellboy's face, and flicked the cigarette at the kid's chest.

The lad coughed at the smoke, and hurried to clear the cigarette butt. Usilov strode on through the lobby, his sneakers squeaking on the polished marble. He pushed through the revolving front door, and I made my move. The book went into the pocket of my suit jacket, and I followed him out.

It was a windy day even without the swirling eddies the buildings created, but it was bright, and the sun lit the street and surrounding buildings, allowing them to shine as they really should. Every window shone gossamer and the whitewashed buildings glistened. I took in a deep breath of the London air, trying my best to ignore the smell of diesel a black cab had left behind. I waved off one of the valets who was trying to usher me into a limo, squinted at the figure of Usilov as he went out of sight round the corner of the hotel, and headed after him.

I spoke softly as I walked. 'Target has left the hotel. Following.'

'Confirmed,' the voice in my ear said. 'Do you require assistance?'

I smiled. I always got a kick out of the idea of my assistant helping me. She matched me for average traits. Average height, brown hair, brown eyes. Spoke the Queen's English, but could leverage a passable East Londoner if required. Usilov was a mountain of a man, and the thought of calling in a five foot four woman amused me. Appearances can be deceptive, and I'd seen her pull some impressive feats that by all laws of physics she shouldn't have been able to do. Like how a bumblebee can fly. She got her nickname the first time I'd seen her flip out of a stranglehold.

'Negative, Bee. Stay on cams.'

Bee was nearby in a truck, patched into London's robust CCTV network. Good for keeping tabs on innocent bystanders *and* killing criminals, it turned out.

I crossed the road, and walked past where Usilov had turned. The first thing you learn on surveillance is how to follow someone. Ideally you want three people to tail a single target. First lesson is corners. If the target has figured out you're there, and you follow him round a corner, he's got you dead to rights. So I crossed the road, and I kept walking, glancing down the road he'd taken. He hadn't stopped and pulled a knife to stab the first person who came round the corner after him, and he wasn't checking over his shoulder. I was probably safe. I crossed back to his side, and sauntered along the pavement across from him about twenty metres back. I was on a crowded street, having to weave through people to keep up with Usilov. He'd probably never see me even if I was right behind him, but I couldn't ignore the basics.

I'd been tailing people for the last decade, so this was hardly anything new for me, but I still got that old familiar thrill. The chase. Something primal inside me loved it. The capture and the

kill had lost its lustre, but the chase... I rolled my neck to work out the excitement, the thing inside me that wanted to throw stealth to the wind and just run after the guy.

He walked for several blocks, before turning left into a side street. I did the same as before, made sure I had distance between myself and the corner, sped up so I didn't lose him, slowed down again as the street he took became visible, and crossed to continue the chase. The very slow, walking speed chase.

'Bee, move up, just in case.'

I heard her sigh. Her signal that I'd be hearing more about this later. She was no amateur and she knew what to do, but I couldn't stop myself from giving the basic instructions. I just knew that the one time I didn't give them, she wouldn't do them, and then one thing would lead to another, and I'd be having my fingernails pulled out by a Brazilian torture artist.

'Stay in range, affirmative.'

He took another corner, and like a lot of London, the streets became small and winding, a bizarre warren known only to locals, filled with grime because the lack of tourists meant there was no reason to clean it. I stuck with him as best I could, but I had to close the gap. The further Usilov went, the more the surrounding crowd thinned until it was just the two of us. Time to make my move.

'Block cameras,' I whispered. Bee knew what that meant I was about to do. I doubted there would be any cameras down here to take off the grid, but better safe than sorry.

'Cameras blocked.'

The streets were too narrow now for there to be any point crossing the road, so I took this corner slowly. I peeked to make sure he wasn't waiting for me. If he had been, he'd still have seen me, but at least I wouldn't have ended up with a knife in my gut. He hadn't been waiting for me. But he had walked into a dead end. That was never good. I held back.

A woman leaned against a door frame in the small courtyard, wearing a fashionable red jacket with the hood up. I couldn't see her face. She'd have been taller than me even without her high heeled boots, but she was still shorter than Usilov.

The two began talking, their voices echoing around the enclosed space so that I could hear everything. They exchanged pleasantries. So, the woman was Russian as well. Usilov didn't seem taken aback, so it was expected. My Russian had gotten rusty from lack of practice, but I could keep up.

The woman asked if he brought it. He called her something I'd never call a woman and said of course. She ignored his casual misogyny and asked where it was. He said... a metaphor? A riddle? That was beyond my conversational Russian. He reached into his back pocket.

A glint of metal from Usilov. My hand was on my silenced pistol faster than Usilov could move, and I drew it from my underarm holster.

He slashed at her with the knife, and she whirled around, her hood falling down. Usilov charged into her, his huge bulk pushing her to the floor. He followed her down, kneeling over her.

I aimed for his head. I'd have rather had the location of the USB stick, but him dead would have to do.

He pulled his arm back, ready to strike. But suddenly slumped to the side. There'd been no sound, so the shooter had used a suppressor. I hadn't pulled my trigger. The woman on the floor had pulled a gun from nowhere, and it now pointed at where Usilov's balls had been. But she hadn't fired. No smoke from the barrel and she was looking around frantically trying to find out what had happened, tracing the small courtyard with her gun.

I hadn't fired, and she hadn't fired. I would have loved a bit more time to figure out what was going on, but then the woman who had just had a man killed on top of her, was pointing her gun at me.

The dull thud of a silenced barrel expelling its bullet, and the showering of brick on my head as her bullet barely missed me. I pulled back round the corner.

'Perestan!' she shouted in Russian. 'Drop it!'

Shit. A shoot out with an unknown Russian. Wait, was that...

'I'm not here for you!' I shouted back. Not because I wasn't, I mean, maybe I was if she knew where that USB stick was, but I just wanted to get her to talk to me.

'You killed him. Meant to?'

It was so hard to tell, but I thought... was it her? I'd recognise that voice anywhere, but why would she be in London?

'Natalia?'

No response. I heard her moving, probably getting into a better position to kill me.

'Who wants to know?' she spat.

I peeked back around. She had retreated behind a dumpster.

'It's—' I tried to remember which name she knew me as. I knew her from when I seconded to the Spetznaz, so I would have been calling myself... 'John Fisher. From—'

‘John? Show your face.’

She was always direct, I’d give her that. ‘Don’t point your gun at me.’

‘No deal.’

I shrugged to myself. I couldn’t really fault her logic. It was definitely her, but I’d lost contact the last few years. She could have swapped allegiances. I could just walk away, Usilov was dead, the contract was complete – by someone else, but still complete. But damn it, curiosity would be the death of me.

I stuck my gun out first, holding it by the barrel to show I was unarmed. I followed it out, hands in the air.

Seeing me unarmed, she removed herself from cover, standing in the middle of the courtyard. As striking as I remembered. A soft and small face, marred by a small scar under one eye, and built like a rake. She didn’t have the low centre of gravity that let Bee work her magic, but if you could put a sharp edge on it, she could cut you with it.

Her gun was still pointed at my chest. It’s not like I wasn’t used to having guns pointed in my direction, but it was never a good feeling. It did serve to sharpen the mind, though.

‘Why’d you kill him, John?’

‘Wasn’t me. Check my magazine, still fully loaded.’

She squinted at me, trying to decide if I was telling the truth or not.

She nodded. ‘Why let us both stand in the open when an unknown gunman has a bead on us?’

A good question. Easy enough to wriggle out of if I’d wanted to, but a bit of truth would do the trick. ‘I figured if they wanted you dead, you’d been stood here for longer than Usilov, and if they wanted you both at the same time, you were lying down defenceless for long enough that they’d have done the job.’

She nodded slowly, and then magicked her pistol back underneath her coat. The threat gone, I holstered mine.

She walked to within arm’s reach and stopped.

‘Why are you here?’ I asked.

She thumbed at Usilov’s corpse. ‘To meet him.’

‘No, in London. Are you still with Spetznaz?’

She narrowed her eyes, deciding something. I knew that look. She was beautiful and smart and far too clever. She was also deadly and had the sense of humour to match. Along with the

language barrier it made for some interesting conversation. I could never tell if she was joking or not. But she'd made her decision.

'You know my price for this information. John...'

I rolled my eyes at her. 'Fine. We meet tomorrow night. Scalini in Kensington. At eight.'

She smiled at me, and sashayed off, letting her hand run across my chest as she went. I exhaled, and watched her go, trying to puzzle out what I was getting myself into.

Bee spoke. 'What the hell just happened? Who's John?'

'Blast from the past,' I said, pinching the bridge of my nose, the beginning of the headache this was going to cause already throbbing behind my eyes. 'But we've got bigger issues. Usilov is dead, and I don't know who killed him.'

'So you missed out on the contract?'

'It's more than that, Bee.' I hadn't told her about Usilov being one of the few people that knew who I really was. 'We'll talk about it back at base. Bring the van round, I need to make sure I haven't left any of my DNA here.' I probably had on the wall I'd leaned against, and the MET were sticklers about scouring gun crime scenes. 'Bring the bleach. And we need to find where that killing shot was taken from, there's only a few buildings it could have been.'

'Gotcha. Anything else to scrub the DNA?'

'DNA? That's to get the taste of instant coffee out of my mouth. We're stopping for a latte on the way back.'

Chapter 2

‘Have you heard of them before, Jack?’

To clear up any confusion, Jack Hobb was my current identity. Bee knew it wasn’t my real name, but frankly I was starting to suspect that Bee wasn’t Bee’s real name. Partly because I was the one that had given her that nickname, and partly because whenever I tried to do some snooping into her background, my laptop ended up contracting a virus that made the hard drive explode.

‘It sounds stupid,’ I said. “The Black Dragon”. A bit pretentious, I feel.’

I turned the card over. It was like a standard playing card that had been sprayed matte red with a stylised dragon’s head in a glossy black at its centre. No contact information, just the name on the reverse. At least, nothing visible. I dropped it into the plastic evidence bag Bee was holding open for me.

‘Anything else?’

I looked around the small room. Straight out of the 1970s, it had a threadbare and stained orange carpet, peeling wallpaper with a yellowish nicotine staining, and everything else was brown – the radiator, the chair, the kettle. Even the table the rifle had been left on was painted to be a fake brown instead of the natural brown pine it should have been.

Oh right, the rifle. It wasn’t anything ridiculous. In movies you always hear about some tank-destroying Barret .50cal or a Dragunov or something equally ridiculous. Those wouldn’t just kill a man, they’d kill him, his entire extended family, and ruin the financial future of anyone he had shaken hands with recently. Some real “cleanse the bloodline” level shit. This rifle was an M16 assault rifle. Standard issue to the US army – plus a scope and suppressor. And that was the first clue. Getting it into the UK would have been no easy task, so it must mean something. It might even be more relevant than the calling card.

We’d already picked up a shell casing – I didn’t expect anything from that, but you never knew – and we’d leave the rifle here. This wasn’t our mess and we’d been careful not to contaminate the scene.

‘No, we’re done here. Standard exit procedure.’

I left first, and once outside, peeled off my elbow length latex gloves and hairnet. They went into a bin bag that we'd dispose of later. Bee backed out, and for professional reasons, I averted my eyes – mind on the job, stay focused. She pulled the entry mat out with her, rolled it up, and stuffed it in her backpack.

Life isn't a police procedural. The police don't whip out their DNA evidence kits because someone stole your wallet. But this scene had a loaded gun, with a dead body two hundred metres away. Every speck of dust between here and there would be catalogued and examined. Fortunately for us, I'd worked with the teams who would be doing that, and knew their procedure. We'd be just fine.

I picked up the still-warm latte I'd left outside the room. We took the too-narrow stairs down, and dropped a bundle of banknotes onto the floor of the living room. The group of junkies that were squatting in the otherwise abandoned house all suddenly agreed that they couldn't remember us being there. Bribery wasn't my preferred method of cover up, but as none of these fine additions to society could remember anyone walking through carrying a rifle only a few minutes ago, I figured I'd be safe enough.

We threw everything into the back of our van, and Bee took the wheel. I stared out the window and did some very hard pondering as we crawled through London traffic. We'd been working together for a year, and she'd gotten pretty good at knowing when I needed peace and quiet.

'Come on, Jack. What's up?'

She also knew when I needed some encouragement. I guess hitting my head against the window had been enough of a sign to her.

'We've had a good year, right, Bee?'

'It's been interesting, sure.'

I frowned while looking at a Porsche next to us. Fat lot of good that sports car did you, huh, buddy?

'What do you mean interesting?'

'Oh, no, it's been good. But this isn't a traditional job, you know?'

I played it cool. No reaction. Maybe she'd slip up. 'What is a traditional job for you?'

She chuckled. 'Not going to get me like that. All I mean is, we take the jobs you want, so it's a pretty eclectic mix. This isn't the military, this isn't the special forces. You need to be very self motivated to do this. Four months, you know?'

She was referring to the four months when I had refused to take any jobs. This Usilov contract was the first bit of work I'd accepted, even though the both of us were going a bit stir crazy.

'This is the first time we've failed. Not bad odds, I'd say.'

She nodded. 'That's a fair point. But you do take some very odd contracts, Jack.'

I shrugged. 'That's why I became freelance. To take the jobs I want.'

Silence. 'What about the jobs I want?'

'I've put up a suggestions box in the office. It's anonymous.'

She beeped the horn at someone that cut her off. 'Anonymity in a two person company isn't quite as anonymous as you might think.'

Silence again.

'Is there a job you want us to take, Bee? Someone you want killed.'

More silence.

My phone buzzed and I checked it.

'Who's that?' Bee asked.

'A friend.'

She scoffed.

'Hey, I have friends. It's a guy I grew up with. Sam. Works in IT. Wants to go out for drinks, or clubbing, or something like that.'

'Sam?' Bee asked and waited a beat. 'Hmm, you should go. Maybe let me meet him. Not sure I believe you have friends.'

'Your humour is a constant source of enrichment to my life, Bee, have I told you that?'

She laughed, and then oh so casually asked, 'So who was she? The woman with Usilov.'

'I've told you about my time with the Spetznaz. Before the Yakuza thing?'

She hummed an affirmative.

'She was one of them. Natalia Tarnovetska. Primarily worked in undercover and infiltration ops.'

'What's she now?'

'You heard our conversation. No idea. I'm hoping she'll tell me tomorrow.'

'Are we treating it as an op or a date?'

Maybe I imagined it, but I was sure there was a slight strain to her voice. Subtle, but there. Jealousy?

'Oh, it's an op, definitely. She's lethal, and I want you fully kitted out ready to break down the door and save me.'

'Save you from the incredibly attractive woman seducing you?'

'Damn right. She's good. I'm going in, walls up, mentally prepared, but... she's good, is all I'm saying.'

She snorted. 'You're kind of a pig.'

I nodded. 'I'm just saying, she's survived the last six years as a professional seductress.'

Bee rolled her eyes. 'And this calling card? The Black Dragon. Holding anything back on me?'

'Wish I was. I don't like not knowing things.'

I looked around and actually took in the London street for the first time since getting in the van. A sign saying "Underground" was right next to us, and we were stuck at some traffic lights. Green Park station. It would only take about twenty minutes to get to somewhere where I could really relax and blow off some steam. Work things out.

'I'm going to get the tube,' I said and unbuckled my seat belt.

'Back to base?'

'Nope, heading to Hubert.'

She laughed as I jumped out of the van.

'It's kind of weird, you know?'

I turned back to her. 'He says that there's nothing wrong with it, and it's perfectly normal. Especially for someone like me.'

Bee shrugged. 'If he says so.'

I shut the door, and instantly heard 90's pop rock start blaring from the van. When we'd built the van for our unique purposes, I had been very specific. No unnecessary equipment. Bee had decided that a ludicrous sound system counted as necessary. It included bluetooth to her phone, and a vast collection of Blink 182.

I jumped into the tube at Green Park, and sped southwards on the Jubilee line for fourteen minutes. Say what you will about the London Transport system, but they get some things right. I mean, yes, I had my face in another guy's armpit for the entire journey there, but that's authentic London.

The tube induced a mental coma and I finally broke out of it at Canary Wharf. Docklands. The new Square Mile. It singlehandedly brought in enough of the UK's income in a single week to keep the entire island running. If it wasn't for the finance sector and international trade, the UK would fall, straight and simple. Also, there were more criminals here than in any prison the UK had ever built. A lot of people doing a lot of bad things. They mainly did bad things with money. Enough money that I won't even put a number on it because the human mind struggles with such large numbers. Suffice to say, it's a *lot*. And where there are so many bad people doing so

many bad things, parasites will pop up. You think your local drug dealer has connections and a good stock? Has he ever thrown a cocaine party and had the Escobars hand deliver the shipment to your entire office? Money makes money.

Other services that so many bad people doing so many bad things require, are ways of releasing that stress. The drugs work for a while. The “escorts” work, and you can get whatever you want – young, old, male, female, both, neither – but eventually the drugs, and the sex, and the money, make you numb. And that leads to the final parasite for the financial sector.

Therapists.

Do enough illegal things, and giant companies quickly realise that you need company therapists who are contractually obligated to not inform the authorities about anything anyone tells them, financial or otherwise.

And that whole ecosystem was what led me to Dr. Hubert’s door, on the twentieth floor of a building I’m not allowed to mention, because even I know better than to piss off people with fewer scruples than contract killers.

Straightening my cuffs as I walked up to the desk of the receptionist who was too attractive for reception work, I lied, ‘The Doctor is expecting me. Mind if I go in?’ I hadn’t seen her before, so she was probably just a temp.

She started to say something in a vaguely negative tone, so without ruining my stride, I walked past her, and pushed open the door to the private room.

A man I didn’t recognise was sitting on the couch, sobbing into a pillow. I dashed into the seat next to him and sat uncomfortably close, our thighs touching. I put my arm around him and patted his shoulder.

‘What’s wrong buddy?’ He jumped up, throwing the pillow across the room, his sobs becoming hysterical cries. He grabbed a photograph and slip of paper that were on the small coffee table, and ran from the room.

The Doctor glared at me over the top of his glasses. There’s really not much need to describe Dr. Hubert. He looked exactly like you’d expect a therapist to look. Old, grey, kind of like a substitute teacher that’s hiding from his horrible class, but who had far more money to spend on excellent suit tailoring.

I took the gun out of my shoulder holster and put it on the table between us. That’s how the doctor liked to operate. Make your baggage physical, and lay it out. I slouched down into the leather couch and sighed.

As I wasn't actually an employee of this company, making an appointment was never easy, so this was by far the most effective way of dealing with that. I was still covered under his confidentiality clause, because Bee had hacked into the company's files and made me a mid-level partner. Junior enough that the execs could passably not know my face, but high enough that my monthly walks of the office floor telling people they were doing a good job still motivated the graduates. She'd put me in the system as one Jim Castell.

'Hello, Jim. How unexpected of you. As usual.'

'Don't give me that look. When we started this four months ago, I might have just killed him for deigning to be in this room when I wanted to use it. You're really helping me heal, Doc. I am the model of progress, and you know it.'

Dr. Hubert put aside the notepad he'd been using for the crier, and pulled a different coloured one out of a drawer in his desk. I'd gotten curious what he was writing about me a few months ago, and decided to find out one night when the office was closed. That was actually just his doodling book. Small pictures of farm animals mostly. The gun between us should be enough to prove he knew what I really did, and he'd obviously decided that taking real notes was too dangerous. Or pointless because I didn't really work for the company, so it could never be used to blackmail me.

'What was his problem?' I asked. 'Didn't screw enough impoverished families to get his big bonus this year, so his trophy wife fucked some other guy to tell him to shape up and get in line, otherwise he'd lose it all?'

The doctor cleared his throat. 'You know I can't talk about other patients, Jim.' He scribbled. 'But go on then, since I know you're dying for me to ask. I'll indulge you. How did you know?'

I laughed and pulled the garroting wire from my jacket pocket, placing it next to the gun. 'Deduction, my dear Watson!' I knew the misquotation would annoy him.

He sighed, leaned back, and carefully lowered the needle of a vinyl record player onto the grooves. He insisted that the sound was purer and soothed his patients out of their technological lives. Where he managed to get a vinyl record of whale noise, I didn't know.

'Fine,' I conceded. 'He picked up a pay slip that was remarkably ordinary, so that must have been an issue for him, and the photo was of him standing next to a woman who was so far out of his league, only money could be the answer. Specifically, a shit ton of money. The fucking another guy and impoverished family was just flair.'

'Remarkably accurate for flair, Jim.'

'Educated guess.'

‘Of course. Anyway, Jim, what can I do for you today?’

I threw my feet up on the couch and lay down, my head propped up by the arm rest. I liked to really get into the role of “patient”.

‘I’m struggling.’

‘What with, Jim?’ Saying my name repeatedly was another of his therapist things.

‘Trouble at work. And socially. And they’re kind of on a collision course.’

This would be the part where he stayed silent until I started talking again. Oh, he was good.

‘Well, since we last spoke, I took another contract. I know you said I had some *things* to work out before I did, but I had to.’

‘Emotions, Jim. I said you had *emotions* to ruminate upon.’

‘Right. And I’ve been working on getting in touch with those. The mindfulness books you gave me were very helpful. I’m working on that. I’m really liking the stream of consciousness thing, and talking to yourself about what’s going on. It slows things down, gives me time to think of a way out of different situations.’

‘And when was the last time this helped?’

‘Earlier today, in fact. Can you believe some kid served me instant coffee and charged me four pounds fifty for it? And you know what? He’s still alive. Mindfulness works!’

‘Indeed, Jim. Keep going about the work and your social life.’

‘Right. So like I was saying, I took a new contract. Pardon my language, Doc, but shit got complicated. And fast. And this isn’t your regular complicated, like I needed to call in a proper clean up crew. This is...’ I made an exploding gesture with my hands. ‘Complicated.’

‘How does that make you feel, Jim?’

‘No, no, we’re not there yet. You need to ask about the social thing.’

‘Tell me about the social side of your life, Jim. Why’s that complicated?’

I scoffed. ‘Apart from my only skill, passion, and thing that I do, being killing people?’

‘Aside from that, please, Jim.’

‘I have friends. You know. I’m a likeable guy. For a sociopathic killer, but again, we’re working on that, right, Doc?’

‘Right, Jim.’

‘And one of them has just gotten a divorce, and has asked me to go out for a drink with him. He’s called Sam. Very ordinary, works in IT, and I think he’s going with the whole “get on top of a girl, to get over one” kind of thing, you know? Anyway, I’m not sure that’s a good idea.’

‘It’s just meeting for drinks, Jim. Why do you think that’s not a good idea?’

'I suppose. I'm not sure. Maybe this work thing just has me spooked.'

'Tell me about the work thing, Jim.' His phone rang. He cancelled the call. 'I'm sorry about that. The work?'

'I didn't get a target, which sucks, but isn't the end of the world. The wrinkle comes in the fact that an old acquaintance with unknown loyalties has entered the picture and was probably going to steal this target from me.'

'I suspect that old acquaintances in your life are rarely good things?'

'Not when they're someone you promised to go on a date with, and then skipped out on because you got an emergency call to leave the next day for Japan. She might be bitter, Doc, I just don't know.'

'And how does that make you feel, Jim?' His phone went again, but this time an internal line. The too attractive assistant most likely. He cancelled the call again.

'Oh, I wish, Doc. But we're still not there. I don't suppose you've heard of The Black Dragon, have you? That would really save me some time. It would make you a very good Doctor. I'd give you five out of five on Trip Advisor or whatever you guys use.'

A knock on the door, and it was half-opened by the assistant. 'Sir, I'm really sorry, but you *have* to pick up the phone. It's super urgent.' She looked at the table. 'Oh hey, I don't know that gun, what is it?'

I looked up at her. 'It's a custom job. Heckler & Koch owed me a favour. A craftsman is only as good as his tools, after all.'

She nodded, and closed the door. I was about to ask Dr. Hubert if she was bound by the same confidentiality rules as him, but the desktop phone went. He mouthed an apology to me, and picked up the receiver.

He listened as the other person talked for about thirty seconds, then lowered the mouthpiece and stuck the phone out towards me.

'Actually, Jim, I *have* heard of The Black Dragon. He wants to talk to you.'

Chapter 3

I took the phone from his trembling hand.

‘Hello?’

‘Hello... what name are you using here? Jim? Okay, we can call you that.’ His voice was deep and smooth with an American accent. The kind you hear on TV, not too thick. Inoffensive, so everyone can understand it. No need for subtitles.

‘Yeah, sure. Jim will do for now.’

‘Then Jim it is. Did you like your present?’

‘Present? What present? You took my contract. There was a tidy little sum on Usilov’s head. I’ve got to keep the lights on.’

He gave a deep chuckle. ‘And you think him meeting with a Spetznaz agent was going to turn out well for you?’

So, Natalia was still Spetznaz, which was good to know, *if* he was telling the truth, but did he also mean that they were actually after my real identity? Or would that have just been a bonus to getting rid of Usilov. Did the Russians know about me...? This guy clearly knew *something*, but so far he could also just be fishing for information. He knew I used fake identities, but who didn’t?

‘I was there. I was about to take the shot. You stole my kill.’

‘It’s no big deal. I’ll tell you what, you can turn the contract in and take the credit. Like I said, this was a gift. If you want your past to stay a secret so badly, then so do I.’

‘Uh huh. Enough of this. What do you want?’ Everybody wanted something. I wanted to know how he knew there was information about me included in Usilov’s deal.

‘Do you know how a gang starts, Jim?’

‘Sure. One guy says he’s bigger and stronger than everyone else, and after he’s put enough people in the ground to prove it, people believe him. Stupidly, they think “he’s strong, so he will protect me”. Et voila, a gang.’

‘Right, right. That’s how it happens. So I’m The Black Dragon. I *am* the biggest, the toughest, and the best. What are you?’

‘Just a guy. A guy with a few issues, I’ll grant you that, but I’m also a guy that grew up making people who think like you, disappear.’

He laughed loudly down the phone. 'Jim, them's fighting words, buddy! No, no, you misunderstand. Usilov and his contract was a peace offering. I know how territorial we all are. Someone comes along claiming they can do your job better than you – it hurts the ego.'

'The id.'

'Ha! See, Jim, you know how the brain works. That's a fun little quirk. That's why I want you.'

He wanted me? Something about his tone of voice told me he didn't want me in a candlelit dinner kind of way. But also, probably not in the dead kind of way. Which was a positive development. 'You want me to join you?'

'That's right. Join The Black Dragon.'

'Hmm. Did you just refer to yourself in third person?'

'The organisation is also called The Black Dragon.'

'So you named it after yourself?'

'I'm the best. My organisation will be the best. It makes sense.'

'Uh huh. Well, hey Mr. Dragon, I like to think of myself as an entrepreneur, so sell it to me.'

'That's what I like to hear. It's easy. The organisation takes 25% of your contract fee. In return, we help with overheads, logistics, that kind of thing. But the real selling point is you have a team ready to back you up if anyone messes with you. There are a few small print kind of things, minimum contracts, blah blah blah, I don't want to bore you with the details, but that's the core of it. What do you think?'

'That's a tempting offer, but can I be honest?'

'I wouldn't expect anything less from you.'

'I'm not interested.'

'Ugh.' He sighed. 'Jim. I'm being very polite here. I'm inviting you to be part of the most elite group of hitmen in the world.'

'I appreciate that, but let me ask you this question. See, back to how gangs work, right? The gang leader wants something, but doesn't get it. Shows weakness, right? And weakness in the gang world means you're old. Need to be replaced. Can't have that, right?' I start making everything into a question when I'm feeling antsy. 'So here's the question. If I refuse, what happens to me?'

I heard a growl reverberate through his chest, but when he spoke, it was the same calm, smooth American voice. 'I activate the agents I've planted in that building, and they try to kill you.'

‘Right, right. Now let’s just confirm a hunch for me, shall we? You know, in this dog eat dog world you’ve created, what happens if I accept your offer?’

‘Oh, well in that case, I’d activate the agents I’ve planted in that building—’

‘And they’d try to kill me. I thought as much.’

He laughed again. ‘You’re good, Jim. Real good. A lot of people want to be in The Black Dragon who aren’t as good as you, so I’ve had to turn them down. Except, I told all of them to be in your building. Since I got wind of your trips to Dr. Hubert there, I’ve had them all camped out there, blending in for the past month. When you hang up the phone, they all receive a text telling them that to win their spot, they just have to be the last one standing.’

I moved the phone away from my ear and looked at Dr. Hubert. Nah, he hadn’t known. Poor guy. I still had a burning urge to garrote the twat, but then who the fuck would help me with my mindfulness. Yeah, I ask questions, and I get swear-y. I swept the the garroting wire off the table and back into my jacket pocket, and went back to the phone.

‘So I get to choose if we call this an execution or an audition?’

‘See, I like your attitude. Now I know this is going to seem a bit unfair to you right now—’

‘Not really. Seems about how life goes for me.’

‘— so I understand your reluctance to accept. I’ll give you another chance. If you pass the test. Audition. Execution. Whatever you want to call it.’

The line went dead.

‘Fuck.’

Dr. Hubert was nervous. ‘Is everything okay, Jim?’

‘Fuck no, Doc. Fuck no.’

‘I see. And how does that make you feel, Jim.’

The door swung open, and the too-pretty secretary who had been asking me about my gun – which was still on the table – walked into the office.

I lunged down and got my arm under the glass coffee table that Dr. Hubert made everyone put their problems on. I made his problem-solving table solve my problems. I put all my weight behind it, and launched it into the secretary. The plate glass smashed, and she screamed.

I charged right behind the table, and kicked the flailing secretary in the chest, throwing her backwards, through the door, into the glass wall behind her, and she finally let go of the gun she’d expected to kill me with.

Glass these days was tempered. A human being thrown against it might make it shake, but not break, or even crack. So I had some work to do. Because I was pissed off, and this bitch had the audacity to walk into my therapist meeting with an MP5k in hand? Fuck no.

I kicked the gun out of her hand, rolled her over so she was on her front, and picked her up. Holding the back of her head, I began my work.

‘Oh, God.’ Dr. Hubert muttered from behind me. ‘Jim, please. You are trying to get over exactly this kind of behaviour.’

I kept hitting her face into the glass. I was going to destroy my shoulder doing this, but a point had to be made. And the glass was beginning to crack.

A gunshot rang from my left and the Doc screamed, running back into his office. ‘Then again, an intentional relapse could be a valuable part of your emotional growth, Jim!’

I mean... if your therapist tells you to do it, then... that makes it okay, right?

I dropped the no longer too-pretty secretary into a mess at my feet, and fell into a backwards roll, picking up her MP5k on the way. The man standing in the reception doorway was just a dark figure with a shiny object in his hand. He wasn’t a person. Just a target.

The MP5k is largely a useless weapon outside of very specific confrontations. The magazine holds thirty rounds and can be shot at 900 rounds per minute. It was designed for close quarters combat. My target was five metres from me. My finger automatically checked the safety was off, and my other hand held the pistol grip firm.

Exactly half a second later, I’d sent thirty shots into the target. He hadn’t even started falling by the time the magazine was empty. There had been no need to aim for the head. Centre mass was fine.

Two down. Not that keeping count helped when I didn’t know the total.

The room was silent. I mean, there was screaming and the sounds of an entire office stampeding away from me, but the immediate threat was gone. Oddly calm. Thirty seconds, then I’d make my way down the twenty floors – let the innocents have their head start getting out of the target zone. Dr. Hubert probably wouldn’t have condoned me using them as cover.

I walked over to my pistol, which had been thrown into the corner of the room. The suppressor was hardly needed anymore, but as part of the custom job, it couldn’t be removed. I smoothed my suit jacket, and checked my shirt – non-iron was a lifesaver. I shook my legs out, and rolled my shoulders. Twenty floors, and the elevators would be a death trap. I doubted the stairwells would be much better.

I looked back into the Doc’s office. ‘You don’t happen to have any weapons, do you?’

His feet were sticking out from behind his desk, and he didn't look up to answer. 'The mind is the greatest weapon, Jim!'

I nodded. Wise words.

The sounds of the crowd were dying down. I was positive that they'd never had such an efficient fire drill. I stepped over to the cracked and blood smeared window. The crowd below looked so small from up here. Like they were nothing. Bunch of fucking ants. I closed my eyes and felt the cool of the window press into my forehead. What would the toll on my psyche be this time?

I hadn't realised until a few months ago, but every time I went into one of these mental voids, where I viewed people as targets, I lost another part of myself. Maybe this time I'd lose the feeling of being held by my mother when I was eight and had scraped my knee. The love and warmth that she gave me unconditionally. Or maybe I'd lose the brainfreeze I had during my last icecream – an equally intense emotion. It seemed a bit potluck.

Oh well. Not much choice about it now. I pushed myself off from the glass wall, which flexed dangerously when I did, and headed out into the hallway. Total silence now. If I hadn't been wearing a suit and looking damn sharp in it, then this could have easily been a zombie apocalypse movie set. Valuables were strewn across the floor, phones were off the hook with dead ringtones buzzing from them, and half eaten sandwiches were... I picked it up and took a bite. Pret, nice. No one thinks about how much energy being a hitman takes. I'm constantly eating.

I put the sandwich back down, and continued through the open plan office. There were two stairwells that serviced the entire building. I headed for the one closest to me. I kept my pistol at my side for now. No point tiring my arm out.

I pushed open the fire door and the sound from the throng of people escaping the bottom of the stairwell hit me loud and clear. The stairwell was a drab grey concrete with bright yellow handrails – the sure mark of health and safety regulations along with nothing flammable in the fire escape lanes. Very slowly, I looked over the rail. People were still circling their way down far beneath me, but it wouldn't be much longer now. I didn't see anyone obviously standing around waiting for me with a gun drawn, so I began my descent.

I looked through the narrow window of the nineteenth floor's fire door. Empty. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all. I mean, how many people really wanted to join something called The Black Dragon? People in my line of work weren't known for their cooperation skills, and I'd already dealt with two.

Eighteenth floor was clear. Seventeenth too.

I heard a loud crash from far below. The ground floor door closing. Civilians were out. I looked down again, just to confirm. Three people were on the landing guarding the exit. I saw a flash from one of them, and sparks erupted from the railings around me. I jumped back from the edge, and carried on down the stairs, hugging the outer wall. The men were talking in quiet voices, no screaming or shouting. At least they weren't total hooligans. I heard the telltale crackle and buzz of radios.

Sixteen and fifteen were clear.

Steps from below. They were coming up to meet me. How nice.

I kept a nice brisk pace, and pushed open the door to the fourteenth floor, gun raised and ready to shoot. God help any dedicated worker who had ignored the gunshots. Luckily, the floor was empty. I crossed an identical open plan office, heading for the opposite stairwell. I opened the heavy door, and carried on down. I stayed close to the wall. I didn't need to check over the railings to know they were coming. I could hear them below and above now, and there was no way they had missed the sound of the door opening and closing. Radios crackled and voices whispered in the echoing vertical corridor.

The next four floors were tense, but essentially, I walked down some stairs. I repositioned my grip on my pistol multiple times. It was a real tension builder.

Cut to the tenth floor. Like every floor, I peered through the long window. Another identical, soul destroying, open plan office. I stepped past, and heard the crackle of a radio from behind me.

As the door opened, I spun and dropped to one knee. My bullet through the head of the first shooter dropped him to the floor. The second took two to the chest, his gun not even raised. The third was so close behind them that he stumbled, and started to fall onto me. I got my shoulder underneath him, pivoted, and sent him tumbling down the stairwell. A blood curdling shriek was cut short by the crack of bones against concrete and metal, then a slap of wet meat as he hit the ground floor.

I guessed that they couldn't have known exactly where I would be, so there must be another team on the tenth floor that had been waiting for the other stairwell. I hurried down to the ninth floor, and had to take my chances. I checked the railings for the team below me. They were three floors away. I decided to go for it, and ran for the eighth floor's door, throwing my shoulder into it to slam it open. I recovered quickly, scanning the room. No one. As the door behind me

swung closed, I could hear the slow footsteps change to sprints, as the upper and lower teams gave chase.

I ran for the opposite stairwell. Half way through the office, the door behind me crashed open. Instinct told me to make the dash for the way out, but experience stopped me. I split my step and whipped around. Two quick shots at the door had one of them shot in the gut, blocking those behind him, and everyone else having to take cover.

I went into the next fire door shoulder first – again. I was going to need a lot of ice packs, but it proved to be a prudent decision, as only a split second after I hit the wooden frame, a hail of gunfire ripped through it. They could have felled an entire forest with the amount of bullets they sent my way, and it splintered the door into obsolescence. All they needed was one lucky shot, one stray bullet, and they could claim credit. Frankly, they were all cooperating with each other far more than was healthy for me. Where was the competitive instinct? Why weren't they killing each other? The medal for second place in this competition was made of lead.

Down the stairs to the seventh floor, and I jumped the last half of the flight of steps, doing a completely unnecessary flying kick into a suited man's back. His face whiplashed into the concrete wall, and I kept running.

Sixth floor, and I finally met the guards that had been coming up to meet me. I had the high ground, but they had fully automatic submachine guns. They opened fire at where I had been about to run into, and concrete dust showered all over me. Well, shit. Two men with guns who had both decided to hunker down and wait for their target to walk into their sights. They wouldn't miss their shots.

I just had to let them hit something else. I pulled Pyramids from my jacket pocket, and threw it in their general direction. The stairwell exploded in gunfire as their nerves got the better of them, and I was a split second behind the book. They'd just mentally told themselves off for being so jittery and firing at a paperback book, so they were distracted. That tenth of a second was all I needed to get the first one clean between the eyes. I pulled back as the other opened fire and covered me in debris again. The same trick wouldn't work twice. I needed something else.

The door two floors above me opened as the group there finally had the nerve to follow me in. I could use that. I waved my pistol around roughly where they'd be able to see. They'd shoot down here, distract the other guard, make him have to reposition, and I'd make my move.

'He's there! Two floors,' one of the targets above me shouted.

But there was no gunfire. The last thing I wanted was for them to actually come down the stairs and engage me properly. I was trapped. Shit. Shit, shit, fucking sh—

A small green object bounced against the stairs I'd just run down, and rolled its way to me. Showing my own nerves, I reacted to the movement by raising my pistol, but managed to not pull the trigger. I stepped towards it and kicked it off the side towards the guard beneath me as I shrank back into the corner and covered my ears.

I imagine he was about to say something like, "I'm not falling for that again", but he didn't have time before the grenade exploded. I pushed myself out of the corner and ran down past the mangled corpse. I thought about taking one of their guns, but didn't like my odds of getting a misfire as they'd just been in an explosion.

Floors five and four went by in relative peace. Yes, I was being chased, but I couldn't really hear anything after the grenade had gone off. Fingers in the ears wasn't nearly as protective as you'd imagine. There were of course an indeterminate number of armed men chasing me down the stairs, and yes, they were starting to take desperate potshots at me. I mean, I'd made it seventeen floors by this point. They must have been reevaluating their odds.

As their wild firing came closer to reaching my feet, I decided to take floor three's door, and headed into the offices. Three armed men turned and raised their guns. I took one in the head before diving for the floor. At this point, people would be tempted to rush things. Guards behind and in front. Getting caught between would not be fun for anyone.

Which is exactly why I crawled my way round the side of a wall, concealed by desks, potted plants, and other office paraphernalia, and waited.

'Where is he?' Hapless Guard #1 asked.

'Just wait,' said Hapless Guard #2.

I do love it when a plan comes together.

The door I'd just entered through opened, and men poured in. I was behind them and round the corner. I couldn't see how many, but it sounded like too many. Unfortunately, no one opened fire immediately. That would have been too easy, I supposed.

'Where is he?' one of the newcomers asked urgently.

'Shit. He was right there.' Hapless Guard #2 said.

I couldn't see what was happening, but I could picture it from experience. The two that were in the middle of the office had their guns pointed at where they thought I was when the stair guards came in. The stair guards expected to find me, but instead saw guns pointed at them. There were more stair guards than office guards, but numbers became largely pointless. It was about who shot first, and everyone knew it.

Would they all get along, put aside their differences, and unite as one to hunt me down? Like fuck. I leaned out just enough to see one of the stair guards, and shot him in the head.

The falling body, and sound of a silenced bullet, was all the momentum they needed. The gunfight was brief and mobile. They didn't just stand there having a shootout, they ran and dived and died. When everyone had stopped shooting, I removed myself from behind a desk, and swept my pistol round the room. No one seemed to be moving.

A head popped up from behind a desk, and I shot without hesitation. I holstered my pistol. For anyone counting, that was nine bullets, and I was now out of ammo. I took a deep breath, enjoying the smell of gunsmoke, and took advantage of this reprieve to check over the targets. Some had been blending in with their office suits, others had presumably been waiting outside and were in full tactical gear. Eight people had just died in as many seconds. And I'd only had to fire a single bullet to make it happen. That's called being economical.

I chuckled to myself. I bent over and picked up one of the guns. An FN P90. I pulled the magazine out and threw it away, reloading with a fresh one from the downed target's tactical webbing.

That was two in the Doc's office, three on floor ten, one flying kick, two on the stairs, and eight here. Sixteen dead. God, life was good sometimes. This mixture of wellness *and* extreme violence was interesting. Maybe I didn't need to try and get over killing people. Just combine it with a positive outlook on life.

I walked back into the stairwell, and all was quiet. I kept the P90 clearing the way ahead of me, and made my way down past the second floor, onto the first, and finally arrived on the ground floor. I met the guy I'd thrown over the railing. He didn't look so great.

There was my exit to the outside world, at last. I dropped the P90 in the middle of the small landing, tugged on my cuffs, straightened my suit jacket, and pushed the door open.

The barrel of a gun pressed into my forehead.

A rookie mistake, easy to disarm. Except when you have someone behind you covering your side, like right now. The gun pushed me back into the small ground floor landing. I kept my arms up. My mind registered the make of gun they both held, but it didn't matter. They'd both blow the back of my head out. The woman holding the gun to my head pushed me into the centre, and motioned for me to get to my knees. Shit.

A guy and a girl. Lovers in this together? No, more likely brother and sister, their features shared too many similarities. Like the feature of mild psychopathy and holding a gun pointed at me. They both wore gender neutral grey office suits.

I had no way out. They'd pushed me back close to the P90, which I knew lay there, fully loaded and safety off, but I wasn't anywhere near fast enough. Okay, time to keep them talking. It wasn't even about trying to play them off against each other, although that might work. When you face certain death, time changes things. It might change certain death to *almost* certain death. So sure, I'd talk for that addition of an "almost".

'Nice weather, huh?'

That earned me a pistol butt to the back of the head. I managed to not fall forwards, but my vision misted and I had to shake my head to clear it.

'Don't shout,' the man said.

'Sorry, grenade.' It was true, but also I wanted to shout. Any change was good, and noise could be the instigator. 'So, which one of you is going to get the credit?'

The man circled around me, but the woman kept her gun pressed against my temple.

'Both of us.' The man had a thin raspy voice. I knew his type. The kind that licked the knife clean after he cut your balls off. Yeah, that's right, I know that kind of person.

'You sure? I've talked to the Dragon himself, and he seems like a stickler for the rules.' I could just see the P90 out of the corner of my eye, to my right and slightly behind me. I couldn't get it, but it didn't hurt to keep it on my radar.

The man tucked his gun into his belt and pulled a knife out of his pocket, flicking it open. See, knife licker. Fucking told you.

'We kill you, and tell him we're partners. If he doesn't want us, we just carry on doing what we do. Maybe we'll kill him next for denying us.'

'Right. Well, I see that there's no chance of me driving a wedge between the two of you. Shit.' Yeah, I was straight up thinking out loud, but at least it kept me not dead for the moment.

The man kept circling, and as he passed his sister, dragged the back of his knife across her breasts. Fucking creepy.

'We thank you for dealing with everyone else, of course. Saves us having to clean up.'

'I do what I can to give back to the community.'

I saw something out of the corner of my eye. Something I could work with. 'Hey, how many of you were there, anyway?'

'Nineteen.'

'Nineteen? Damn. Because I met all seventeen of the others on the way down here. So just you two left. That makes the nineteen, right?'

The man let out a laugh like he'd watched too much Batman and fancied himself as the Joker, high pitched, and completely insane, before he dropped back into a near whisper. 'You're good at maths. They say it's the right side of the brain that handles logic. Such a shame we're going to be blowing that out of you. A real loss to the scientific community.'

'Oh yeah? I always thought maths was done with the fingers more than the brain, you know?' Come on, come on. What was he waiting for? All I could do was talk.

The brother stopped, and darted down to grab my hand, splaying my fingers apart, and singled out my middle finger.

'My, my, maybe you're smarter than I thought.' He looked up to his silent sister who nodded her permission. He licked my cheek and spoke his warm breath into my ear. 'I'll take these. Maybe track down someone you care about and drop them off as a present. Let you continue to improve the next generation, help them count to twenty instead of just ten, like you.'

I struggled to pull my hand away as I felt his knife start to cut into the back of my finger just above the knuckle.

'Wait, wait!' I shouted. 'Fucking wait!'

He was crazy enough to actually wait. 'Yes?'

'I get that you two are in on this together. But what about him?'

They both turned to see one of the guards, crouching at the top of the stairs. His grip loosened on me as he reached for the pistol at his belt. I threw myself back as gunshots rang out between the three. I didn't know if anyone hit anything, but I felt the cool plastic of the P90 beneath my right hand, and pulled it up. The good thing about the P90 is that each magazine has fifty rounds. I didn't even try to aim. I kept shooting until both of them were on the floor. I was out of the line of sight for the man on the stairs. The nineteenth man, that I'd shot in the gut on the tenth floor. He'd been taken out of the action, so had missed the big shoot out.

'Hey,' I shouted up the stairs. 'You going to kill me?'

A weak voice murmured back, 'Nah, man. I just want out. Gut shots fucking hurt, man. I'm done.'

I'd heard that before. 'Throw your pistol away and I'll help.'

I heard metal clatter against concrete. It hadn't made it to the bottom of the stairs. Yeah, he was done. I stood up, and peeked round the corner. He was lying on his side. Tough guy, managing to crawl all this way. I walked up to him. He'd been hit again by the crazy sister, but only in the arm. His stomach was wet with blood. I weighed it up. He might make it if I got him to a hospital right away.

Instead I said, 'The Black Dragon only understands strength. A point has to be made.' I emptied the magazine, mashing his head into the concrete, and then dropped the P90 on his body.

On the way down, I picked up the crazy guy's knife, and stabbed the siblings in the side of their heads.

I breathed in deep again. There was no gunsmoke to please me this time. Just blood. I rolled my neck, and tugged on my cuffs. I checked myself quickly. A lot of blood on my shirt now. Shit. I put my hands in my trouser pockets and tried to shrink into my jacket. I shoulder barged the door open, finally walking out into the post-lunch sunshine of Canary Wharf.

I was surrounded by police.