

# DOUGLAS MISQUITA



*Read for  
free!*

# HAUNTED

A KIRK INGRAM ACTION THRILLER

RELOADED EDITION

---

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events, incidents, and businesses is purely coincidental.

You may freely download read and distribute **this** PDF **with** attribution **without** changing its content.

Copyright © Douglas Misquita.

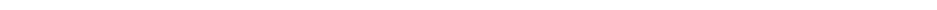
'Reloaded edition' published 2021.

Self-published by Douglas Misquita.

Downloaded from [www.douglasmisquita.com](http://www.douglasmisquita.com).

---

For my mother, Audree Misquita, for introducing me to the  
fascinating world of books, and the stories they hold.





# CAST OF CHARACTERS

Kirk Ingram — FBI special agent, LA Field Division

Madeline and Lisa — Kirk's wife and daughter

Richard Depalma — Kirk's closest friend and colleague

Erin and Nisha — Richard's wife and daughter

Dave Travis — FBI assistant director in charge, LA Field Division

Reed Michigan — CIA handler

Samuel Fisher — CIA Special Activities Division operator

Frederick Boseman — CIA deputy director

Caliph Deminksi — Russian mercenary

Edward Gunner — Marine archaeologist

Mikhail Basara — Gunner's student

Carl Landis — owner of the yacht, *Sea Breeze*

Amanda Gunner — Corporate lawyer and Edward's daughter

Tim Maurice — Amanda's ex

Leonel Novack — Captain of a shady salvage operation

Evans and Black — Two of Novack's crew

James Connor — LAPD homicide detective

Lakisha Tamura — Connor's partner

Vincent Medera — FBI informant

---

Rosalie Palermo — Vincent's stepsister

Lars Gunther — Chairman, Gunther Trade and high-ranking member of crime organisation Osvetljiv Anđeli in the USA

Boris Zarebski — Gunther's executive director and agent of Osvetljiv Anđeli

Imer Qerim — Osvetljiv Anđeli enforcer

Fred McKinsley — Chief legal counsel for Gunther Trade

Ibrahim — head of security at Paramount (Gunther Trade property)

Jon Straight — guard at Paramount

Mark Ricardo — FBI agent

Han Li — veterinarian in Koreatown, LA

Hwang Kim — patrolman in Koreatown

The Gonzalez Brothers — drug smugglers in Panama

---

# CHAPTER 1

---

## West Hollywood, Los Angeles

The rain fell in great drenching sheets. It drummed on the roof of the black BMW 5, streaked down the windows. It thundered onto the road, frothed in the gutters lining the road.

Inside, three men waited. They had been waiting for an hour. They were restless. They were watching the doors to *Lucques*, across the road.

In contrast to the Mediterranean cuisine offered by *Lucques*, their dinner was Burger King takeaway. A box of soggy fries sat on the dashboard, beside a half-empty pack of cigarettes. One of the men reached for a cigarette and lit up. The flame cast his features in flickering orange. He took a deep drag, exhaled blue smoke toward the roof.

The curtain of rain undulated in a gust of wind. On the sidewalk, people were rushing, hugging themselves, meeting the downpour head-on, battling it with umbrellas that threatened to blow inside-out.

An LAPD car pulled up behind the BMW. Its headlights illuminated the BMW. The men tensed. Three pairs of eyes locked onto the rear-view mirror. The man in the back seat touched his underarm holster.

A police officer with an overflowing belly stepped out into the rain. There was a distinct *clack* as the nervous man cocked his weapon.

The driver shook his head. Ducking against the downpour, the officer ran toward a convenience store.

The other officer in the car tapped a beat on the steering wheel. Abruptly, she snatched the dashboard radio, spoke into it. Seconds later, her partner burst out of the store. He got into the squad car. The engine growled, the roof bars lit up. The car executed a tight U-turn and raced away, its siren wailing.

The men in the BMW relaxed. The man in the back secured his weapon.

The doors to *Lucques* opened.

Their target emerged, holding an evening jacket over his wife's head and his. Their five-year-old daughter was cocooned between them. She clutched her father's trousers. The family made its way to a parked Ford Explorer. The Explorer pulled into the road and drove past the BMW.

The BMW followed at a safe distance.

In the Explorer, FBI Special Agent Kirk Ingram glanced at Madeline, in the passenger seat. He was reminded of the time they had met. At thirty-five, she looked as beautiful as on that day. The years had matured her features, like fine wine, increasing her appeal. He looked at Lisa in the rear-view mirror. His daughter was playing with Freddy, the teddy bear she kept in the Explorer. She would grow up to look like Madeline. A smile crossed his face.

"What are you thinking?" Madeline asked. She twirled her hair in her fingers.

That morning, Ingram had surprised her when he told her that he had applied for a desk job at the Bureau. No more field assignments, he promised her. Madeline was incredulous at his



sincerity. She felt immense relief because it meant no more worrying for his safety. It meant more family time.

"I'm blessed," Ingram replied, "with two wonderful women."

She had heard of agents who never adjusted to a normal life. They grew detached, depressed. They returned to the field, the family broke, or both happened. Looking at her husband, his strong features and unruly black hair, Madeline wondered if he could ever give it up.

Ingram sensed her thoughts. He had discovered she was visiting a marriage counsellor. It had prompted him to get a hold of himself. Whatever anyone thought, Madeline included, Kirk loved them dearly.

He leaned over, kissed her lightly on the cheek. "Hey," he said, "I'm here. Do not think that. I promised. No more assignments. We are going to be great together. You, me, Lisa."

"I'm sorry; you're making a genuine attempt and I'm..." She paused. "I'm going to be with you, every step of the way, Kirk." She would make it difficult for anybody to take him from them. "Yes, we are going to be great." They intertwined fingers.

Lisa said, "Stacy's building a tree house."

"A friend of yours?"

"You've met her."

"Oh." He struggled to picture Stacy. Then, "Well then, we'll get you a bigger one. I'll start on it second thing in the morning."

"Why not first thing in the morning?"

"First, I've got to fix you a breakfast fit for a princess."

Lisa smiled and rocked her stuffed toy. Then: "David's mommy says a lot of people want to kill you, Daddy. Is that right?"

Ingram did not reply immediately. His eyes flicked toward the rear-view mirror and narrowed. *I'm being paranoid*, he thought, *we're not being followed*.

"No, Lisa," Madeline was saying, oblivious to Kirk's distraction, "David's Mom's is wrong." She made a note to call David's mother while Kirk and Lisa worked on the tree house.

"David says Daddy's going to get knifed or shot."

Ingram glanced at Madeline. *Who are these people?*

"He said that?" Madeline asked Lisa.

"Uh-huh."

"I don't want you talking to David anymore, okay?"

"*He* talks to *me*."

Madeline announced with finality, "I'll tell them both to stop talking to you!"

Ingram's eyes strayed to the mirror again. The BMW was nearer.

*Drop it*, he reprimanded himself, *this is a public road*.

His phone rang. Madeline's features clouded. He answered. A male voice said, "Listen carefully and no harm will come to your wife and daughter."

# CHAPTER 2

The voice continued, "We have enough firepower to obliterate your family. That will happen if you call for help or attempt to escape. If you want proof that I am serious..."

The BMW's headlamps flashed thrice. The Explorer's outside rear-view mirror exploded. Ingram recoiled as shards of glass flew backwards. A ragged hole materialised in the mirror's housing. He glanced at Madeline and saw shock and confusion on her face. Thankfully, Lisa was occupied with Freddy and had not noticed. The BMW was close, and the gunsels were ready for evasive manoeuvres from him. The police were out of the question. They would arrive with sirens blaring and lights flashing. The guys in the BMW would panic. They might flee... or make good on their promise to blast his family to molecules.

"Kirk," Madeline began in a worried voice. He raised a silencing hand.

"What do you want?" he said into the phone.

"Drive to Arakaki Scrapyard!"

Ingram knew the place. Arakaki Scrapyard was in legal limbo. It was abandoned.

"Ingram," the caller warned, "their lives are in your hands." The line went dead.

"Who was it?" Madeline asked anxiously.

"Don't know." His voice was tight. Alone, he would have resorted to dare-devilry. But now, his dread of somebody harming his family, was coming true. There was no sense in beating around the bush.

"There's a BMW behind us," he told her in a soft voice. "They want me to drive to Arakaki Scrapyard or ..."

She understood what he did not say and twisted in her seat, her eyes wide with fear. "Oh my God, Kirk." Lisa looked up, noting the tremor in her mother's voice.

"Don't look back. Listen." Their eyes met. She took a calming breath. "No police. Take my phone." He surreptitiously fished it out. "Keep it out of sight. Call Richard Depalma. Tell him to come to Arakaki with backup."

She held the phone low as she pushed the keys, activated the speakerphone. She slouched in the seat so that the backrest hid what she was doing. The call did not connect.

They were almost at the scrapyard. "Okay," he said, "I'll try to stall them. You call Richard again."

"But –"

"Madeline."

"Yes, I'll call him, but –"

"Madeline." He gave her a reassuring look. "Trust me."

She nodded.

"Okay, good. Now I want you to get behind the wheel when I step out of the car."

"Why must I –"

He turned onto the road that led to the scrapyard, "If anything happens to me, drive away. Okay?"

"What?"

"Don't look back. Just drive. Go to the FBI."

"Kirk, I –"

His tone was fierce. "I can take care of myself, but not when you and Lisa are in danger."

There was no time for debate. Up ahead, they saw the scrapyard.

# CHAPTER 3

The Explorer passed under a rust-pocked, arching signpost. The headlamps illuminated junk cars and scrap metal piled high.

Ingram's eyes searched the mountains of scrap for movement. The rain frustrated his efforts. Behind, the BMW turned broadside, blocking the gate. Madeline was rigid in her seat, her breath coming in gasps. He reached over and squeezed her hand reassuringly. She flinched.

"The BMW's blocking the way out," he said, in as calm a tone as he could muster. "But it can't stand up to a head-on collision with the Explorer." She did not indicate if she understood. "Madeline?" She nodded.

Noticing the towering junk around them, Lisa asked, "Why have we come here?"

With dented front grilles, smashed headlamps, shattered windcreens and caved-in roofs, the scrap vehicles looked evil. The rain on the metal sounded like the beating of drums at a cannibalistic ritual.

"Somebody wants to meet me here, sweetie."

"Who?" she persisted. Her nose was pressed to the windows.

*We'll know soon enough.* Ingram turned the Explorer so that it pointed at the BMW. He slipped off his seat belt, opened the door, stepped into the rain, put distance from the car. Madeline climbed over the gearshift into the driver's seat.

Ingram looked around. He hoped Madeline was trying Depalma's number. He wiped rain from his face. Nobody stepped out of the BMW. They were waiting. For?

"It's been a long time, Kirk."

Recognising the voice from a courtroom threat, Ingram spun. Three figures had materialised behind him. His gaze rested on the shortest figure. Danny Miller. He shouted, "Madeline, get out of here! Now!" He gestured emphatically toward the scrapyard's entrance. "Get out!"

Madeline misunderstood. She opened the door, beckoned him. He saw Lisa's face pressed against the window. He screamed for her to drive. She looked in the direction he was pointing.

Now, men climbed out of the BMW. Time slowed. Their automatic weapons rose, the metal glinting in the Explorer's lights. He heard Miller's cackle taunting him.

Images flashed before his eyes.

The raid on Miller's villa. Armed FBI agents swarming the compound engaging Miller's private army. Bursts of gunfire, screams, shouts, blood. Miller's wife and his three-year-old twins were not supposed to be there. She succumbed to crossfire. Ingram would never forget the wild look in Miller's eyes as he beheld his wife. One of the twins tore free of Miller's grip, ran toward her. An explosion knocked Miller back and tore the kid apart. Enraged, Miller dropped three agents in succession. Ingram's bullet was intended for Miller but took the other child in the chest. The spent cartridge from that bullet spun in the air, bounced on the ground with a metallic clink.

"No!" Ingram screamed.

The Explorer roared, its wheels spun, throwing plumes of muck. It raced toward the BMW.

The men near the BMW opened fire.

One of the headlights blew. The Explorer swerved out of control. Its right wheels rode a scrap car that was lying with its bonnet buried in the muck. The bonnet acted as a ramp and flipped the Explorer on its right side. It slid in the muck. The beam from its single headlight shone into the air.

Ingram ran to his family, heard Miller shout. He saw the men converging on him, had a vague impression of something swinging. Pain exploded in his chest. He went down.

"Daddy!"

He looked at the Explorer. The windows were smashed into spider webs. He had to get to her. Blackness crept around his peripheral vision. He had trouble breathing. He felt burning pain in his scalp as he was yanked upright by his hair. He struggled and lashed out with his leg. His captor hit him on the neck with the butt of a gun and he crumpled to his knees. Nausea washed over him and then lifted like a flash storm.

"I promised you," Miller said. He was near. "I told you I would avenge my family."

"Your family was a mistake," Ingram cried desperately.

"Daddy!" Lisa's voice was distant. Pleading.

"Lisa!"

"How touching." Miller kicked Ingram in his left kidney. Ingram coughed blood. "You are going to watch your daughter and your wife die and then you are going to die." He kicked Ingram in the face.

Ingram tasted blood, spat out a tooth. He watched two men walk toward the car. Miller stamped on Ingram's back, pinning him down. Ingram felt the cold barrel of a gun touch the base of his skull.

Miller's men climbed the underside of the Explorer, wrenched the driver door open. They hauled Madeline's limp form out, dumped her to the ground. One of the men reached in and got Lisa out. She was crying, kicking.

Ingram pleaded, "Please. Take –" He felt the gun being taken off his neck.

*Bang!*

Lisa's body twisted grotesquely. He watched her small body spin forever, fall to the muck and lie there, never to move again.

He screamed – a wild animal scream. He thrashed as Miller's men pulled Madeline upright. Her head and arms were limp. Tears flowed down his cheeks. "Miller!" His voice cracked.

Miller aimed at Madeline. He fired thrice. Madeline's body jerked with the bullets.

An engine roared. All heads turned. Bright headlights blinded them. A Honda Civic raced for them. Gunshots rang out from the Civic and two of the gunsels near the Explorer fell. The third man ran for cover, firing at the intruder.

The Civic screeched to a halt, bullet holes in the windscreen.

Another shot and another of Miller's men fell. Miller and his men retreated from the clearing, urged on by the assault from the Civic. Insane rage consumed Ingram. His world turned red.

He spun over onto his back, found himself staring into the barrel of Miller's gun. He moved as Miller squeezed the trigger. The muzzle flash was like a supernova; the explosion was deafening. The bullet grazed his ear. There would not be a second chance. He buckled his knees, fired his feet into Miller's midriff. Miller staggered; the gun flew from his grasp. Ingram pounced, straddled Miller's chest. His hands enclosed Miller's neck, choking the life out of him.



Miller clapped his palms over Ingram's ears. The air pressure nearly burst Ingram's eardrums. Ingram released his stranglehold on Miller. Miller heaved him aside and grabbed the gun that lay near one of his fallen goons.

As Miller raised the gun, he saw a man getting out of the Civic and aim at him. Both men fired at the same time. The man from the Civic missed. Miller did not.

Agent Richard Depalma ducked behind the wheel on the far side of the Civic when his companion died. If he did not do something, Ingram would join the body count. From where he was, Depalma could see the bodies of Madeline and Lisa lying near the Explorer. He fired over the bonnet. His shots sent Miller running behind the junk. Taking a deep breath, Depalma stood behind the car and panned his weapon in sweeping arcs. Nothing. Only the sound of the rain.

# CHAPTER 4

"Kirk, are you okay?"

"Lisa..."

His eyes darting all over the place, Depalma ran out of cover, to Ingram. He grabbed the fallen agent's gun as he ran past the body. He crouched beside Ingram. "Backup is on the way." He helped Ingram to sit and shoved the gun into his hand. "We were nearby when Madeline called."

Ingram was oblivious to his friend's words. "He killed them."

Ingram's voice was devoid of emotion. He stared through Depalma, at where his family lay. "He killed them. He –"

"I know," Depalma said, nodding, squeezing Ingram's shoulder. He blinked rain from his eyes. "Stay here. I'm going to see if they're still around." He patted Ingram on the back before leaving him.

Ingram looked at the bodies littering the yard. He did the math subconsciously: two goons, including Miller. In this yard, they were a lethal combination.

Depalma spied a pair of figures dodging among the cars. He gave chase. The pair split. Not good. He went right, into a path between the cars, slowing to a cautious trot, weapon ready. The junk presented innumerable hiding places. He heard a shot and a bullet ricocheted off a door with a metallic zing. Depalma ducked and spun as another bullet ploughed into a tire. He ducked behind a tower of metal.

Ingram closed his eyes, willed himself to focus. His hands trembled; he bit his lip with the effort. When he opened his eyes, he looked different. He was not a man who had lost the two people he loved most in this world. His eyes were slits, aflame with vengeance. Blood dripped from his lips mixing with the puddles. The rain plastered his hair to his scalp. His jaw was set in cold determination giving him a grim, foreboding appearance.

In a detached part of his mind, he understood Danny Miller's revenge.

He stood, looked around, feeling the weight of the gun. He touched the cold metal to his skin. He breathed deeply.

"Miller! Your wife and kids deserved to die!" he screamed over the noise of the rain. "You hear me! They deserved everything that happened to them!" A pause. The rain drummed. "Miller!"

Movement behind him. Ingram spun, dropped to the ground, raised his weapon, and squeezed the trigger twice, in fluid motion.

Miller sprinted into the clearing, firing. He dodged Ingram's volley and hit the ground rolling. He came up on one knee, pivoted behind a car, his back to its door.

Ingram regained his feet, moved sideways, circling around Miller, squeezing the trigger. Normally, it was wasting ammo. But he was past normal.

The window above Miller's head exploded. Glass rained on him. He began slinking toward the front of the car. He peered under the front bumper and spied Ingram making his way around the other side.

He leapt upon the bonnet and then onto the roof. He had a clear advantage, but he slipped, and his aim faltered.

The bullet that would have killed Ingram grazed him in the thigh. As Ingram fell, his gun went off, expending its last bullet. Miller tumbled off the roof, striking his head on the rear bumper. Ingram's freak shot missed his head by an inch.

The two men regarded each other with hate-filled stares. Both raised their weapons at point blank range and squeezed the triggers simultaneously.

*Loud clicks.*

They tossed their useless weapons. Both surged forth. Ingram landed a punch that dropped Miller. Ingram stamped, intending to crush Miller's throat. Miller rolled, snatched a two-foot spike lying nearby. He swung it at Ingram. The spike's razor tip ripped Ingram's shirt. Ingram backpedalled. With a deadly hiss, the spike cleaved the air again. Miller fainted. He made as if to swing at Ingram's head. But in the arc of the swing, he lowered his attack. The spike struck Ingram's leg. Ingram collapsed on one knee. Miller raised the spike. His lips curled in a demonic snarl.

A vision of Madeline and Lisa made Ingram hesitate. They appeared peaceful. Madeline beckoned for him. Large drops of rain fell from heaven above into his eyes and open mouth.

The spike hurtled toward him.

Miller's body jerked. His eyes bulged in surprise. He stopped his downward plunge, swayed, then toppled forward, still holding the spike.

Ingram had a blurred impression of Miller's lifeless body falling upon him. The spike pierced into Ingram. He heard Richard Depalma's scream of anguish, far away.

And then, Kirk Ingram's scream merged with Depalma's. Then everything went black.



# 10 months later

# CHAPTER 5

---

## Vladivostok, Russia

The sky was blue with a touch of grey. Clouds swept overhead like the contrails of a jet fighter. The mountains channelled a breeze from the north into the old town.

Dr Alexander Reich's beige oversize coat billowed about his frail physique. Wisps of steel-grey hair peeked from under a beret. He nervously piston-chewed his breakfast. He sipped black coffee, stared at the sparse Sunday traffic through rimless spectacles. He glanced at the clock above the entrance to the café, beneath the red-and-white striped awning. And prayed the man he was supposed to meet did not show.

His prayers were not answered.

Right on time, a man sat at a table near his and signalled the waitress. She weaved through the tables, toward him. The newcomer ordered coffee, black. When the waitress departed, he unfolded a newspaper, pretending to read it, and asked Reich, "Do you have it?"

"Listen, I've been thinking..."

The newcomer interrupted him. "In forty-eight hours, you'll be a rich man on a tropical island."

"If Caliph Deminksi finds out..."

The newcomer hissed, "Stick to the plan!"

"I think —"

"If you double cross me or back out there won't be anyplace I won't find you!"



Reich gulped. The newcomer relaxed when the waitress brought his coffee. She turned to ask Reich if he would like something more. She paused on seeing his pale countenance. "Are you feeling all right, sir?"

Reich nodded. "Yes, yes, I'm fine. Thank you."

She lingered a moment, then left.

"Can we get on with it?"

From his coat Reich withdrew a sheet of paper, folded twice, into a square and passed it across.

The newcomer unfolded the sheet. A tiny locker key was secured within. He regarded the paper with satisfaction. The paper was refolded around the key, and it disappeared into the newcomer's pocket. "Well done, doctor." A manila envelope crossed over to Reich's table.

Inside, Reich found an American passport with a photograph of himself. There was also ten thousand US dollars in cash. Reich returned the passport and money to the envelope.

"The remaining money?"

"Wired to your account when I return from Kronj with Citex."

"What will you do with Citex?"

The reply was evasive. "Look at it this way: with Citex in our hands, the world will be a safer place."

Typical American arrogance.

Reich had had enough. He placed money for the breakfast under his plate. He pushed his chair back with a scraping noise and departed in a huff. He crossed the road and climbed into his battered sedan. As he turned the ignition key, he looked at the café where he had breakfasted every day for the past three months. His routine had led to the first meeting with the CIA agent. After today, he would not be breakfasting there anymore.

# CHAPTER 6

---

## Langley, Virginia

A giant screen on one wall displayed a satellite image of eastern Europe. Reed Michigan waited while his boss, CIA deputy-director, Frederick Boseman scanned the contents of a file Michigan had handed him. Boseman's expression was inscrutable when he looked up and nodded. Begin.

Michigan tapped at his computer. The satellite image passed through the cloud cover. Terrain features resolved: hills, forest, a circular lake. There was a tight cluster of buildings on an island in the centre of the lake.

"Kronj Lake, twenty miles north of Vladivostok. The buildings are Kronj Research Complex. During the Cold War, the Soviets had a chemical weapons program there. We believed it is defunct. Recently, it was occupied by a former Russian general, Caliph Deminksi and his mercenaries."

Boseman interjected, "Caliph is bankrolled by the Kremlin. Despite the Russian president's rhetoric, Caliph provides Moscow with political deniability." *Nothing new, Michigan.*

Michigan nodded hastily. "Intelligence confirms Kronj has stock of a nerve agent called Citex."

He had Boseman's attention. "Let's hear it."

"Citex is absorbed through the skin. Within seconds, it causes acute diabetic neuropathy. Victims feel as if they are being incinerated from within." He looked grim. "I have tasked Samuel Fisher to acquire a sample and destroy the remaining stock."

"Samuel Fisher," Boseman worried, "is reckless."

"He gets the job done."

Boseman asked, "Can one man can handle it?"

"We believe Kronj has antiquated security. The Russians had forgotten about Citex. Deminksi is there to move it. Somebody in the Kremlin wants this kept outside the official channels. Fisher's mark is Alexander Reich. Dr Reich is part of a small team to pull any information on the nerve agent from Kronj's computers. Reich has given Fisher all he needs to get into the facility and steal Citex."

"This wasn't approved," Boseman complained.

"There wasn't time. We have a small window of opportunity before Citex moves."

Boseman brooded. Then he said, "Okay. Get us Citex, Michigan."

# CHAPTER 7

---

## Vladivostok

Samuel Fisher climbed the stairs to his third-floor apartment in a dilapidated building. He unlocked the door, stepped in, groped for the light switch. A single, bare bulb came on and he started.

Alexander Reich was waiting for him. "Did I scare you?" he asked with a thin smile.

"How did you get in?" Fisher's eyes narrowed in realisation. Without the coat, Reich looked different. Confident. Deadly. *Too late*.

There was a muted pop. Fisher staggered backward into the door.

His body slid to the carpet leaving bloody smears on the door.

Reich holstered his gun. He found the folded sheet of paper in Fisher's pocket. The key slipped into his palm. He memorised the hand-drawn map and credentials written by the real Alexander Reich for Fisher. He dragged Fisher's body into the bathroom, hefted it into the bathtub and turned on the faucet.

As he watched the mixture of blood and water flow into the drain, he felt a thrill. What he was about to do would send the CIA into a tizzy. Before leaving, Reich tossed the safehouse. It had to look real. He found an item that made him smile. It would tie up everything in a neat bow, he thought, as he regarded a synthetic face mask.

It was like looking at an amorphous reflection of his face.

# CHAPTER 8

---

## Kronj Research Complex

Soft music played inside the stolen Hyundai Elantra. The imposter drove, savouring the mountain breeze blowing into the car from an open window. A sign indicating his proximity to Kronj Research Complex flashed by. Further on, the car passed another signboard with a warning in Cyrillic. Trespassers would be treated with extreme prejudice.

The Elantra rounded a sharp turn and the imposter saw the research facility, bathed in floodlights, spread below him. It arose from a cobalt lake. The lake was cordoned by a twenty-foot-high chain link fence surmounted by another three feet of barbwire. A narrow single-lane bridge was the only access to the island. The complex was two grey buildings and a low dome-shaped structure. The actual facility was ten levels below the lake surface.

The imposter eased the car to a stop at a security checkpoint. A guard, packing a sidearm, approached the car and the imposter produced Alexander Reich's ID. The guard shone a torchlight on the ID, directed the light on the imposter's face, inside the car. The light rested on the carry bag on the passenger seat. The guard switched off the torch and signalled. The barrier rose and the Elantra drove through.

He crossed a compound to the dome, shouldering the carry bag. He acknowledged the guards standing sentinel at the entrance. A door

was recessed into the surface of the dome. It had 'Authorized Personnel Only' in black across its width. The guards allowed him through. The door slid shut. He was in a long corridor. At the far end was another checkpoint. A bored guard manning an X-ray scanner. He motioned for Reich to place his bag on a conveyor and step into the scanner. Seconds later, Reich collected his things and stepped into a two-person-capacity elevator.

The elevator jolted to a stop. Following the memorised map, he walked down a concrete corridor lit by recessed bulbs. The air was damp. In some places, the dampness had stained the walls grey. For a moment, he imagined the lake breaching the facility.

*More reason to hurry up.*

He entered a deserted mess room, made his way to the lockers, found the one with 'Alexander Reich' stamped into a metal tag. He palmed the key he had taken from Fisher, used it to open the locker.

Placing his carry bag on a shelf, he reached for a white jumpsuit hanging on a door peg. It had Kronj Research across the back and Alexander Reich's name across the left breast. He slipped into the jumpsuit. It was a perfect fit.

Next, he extracted a lunch box from his carry bag. The box had a lead-lining which was how its contents had escaped detection in the X-ray scan. He detached an upper tray with two sandwiches, set it aside. The padded interior of the box held the disassembled parts of a SIG Sauer P226, two ammo clips and a black cylinder with a nozzle. He assembled the gun, screwed on a suppressor, loaded a clip. He upturned the sandwich tray and plucked out a disc. He dropped the gun, spare ammo clip, cylinder into his pockets. The

disc went into the lunch box. He tucked the box under his arm and exited the locker room.

He retraced his steps to the elevator without incident. He stepped into the car and pushed the button. The elevator creaked its way down.

The level that housed the vault was cavernous. His gaze rested on the glass-walled twenty-foot-cube in the centre of the space. The place was a mess of abandoned workstations. A solitary guard outside the vault glanced up as the imposter approached the vault. He nodded to the guard. At the vault entrance, he keyed in Reich's passcode and stepped into an outer chamber.

Five hazmat suits and facemasks were stored in a closet. He set the lunchbox, SIG, cylinder and disc on a scratched metal table affixed to a wall. He donned a hazmat suit, locked the insulated gloves into the arms of the suit, and put on a face mask. A small oxygen bottle protruded beneath the face mask. His breathing hissed.

He passed through an airlock into the vault. Before him was cylindrical floor-to-ceiling rack with twenty shelves. Each shelf held ten canisters of Citex in brackets along the circumference.

He approached a computer console on a pedestal near the vault. The keys were large, designed for use with the gloves. His fingers flew over the keyboard. The system prompted him for credentials. Alexander Reich's credentials got him through. He made another selection and looked at the vault.

The vault's housing fanned open like a space shuttle's bay doors. He plucked the canisters, two at a time, and pushed them into the lunch box. The theft was completed in thirty seconds.

He closed the box. He set the disc in the tray and activated it. A red light winked at him. He instructed the computer to shut the vault. In the outer chamber, he tore off the facemask, gloves and shrugged out of the insulated suit. He exited the vault. The guard did not look up from picking his nails.

He got onto the elevator and jabbed at the button. The car began its upward trudge. He went past the fourth level when he heard a muffled boom. The explosive in the disc had detonated, incinerating the Citex in the vault. Only thing, the bomb had gone off ... prematurely! Alarms blared. When the elevator stopped at the locker level, he pushed the button for the ground level. No time to get out of the jumpsuit. He palmed the SIG. The elevator arrived at the ground level. The corridor was awash in emergency red light. The guard manning the X-ray booth put out a palm. Halt! The imposter shot him between the eyes. A pair of figures materialised in the corridor. The guards from the main door responding to the alarm. They took in the scene, reached for their sidearms. The imposter shot them both but not before one guard managed a shot. The imposter grimaced and pressed a hand to his waist. His palm was slick with blood. Ascertaining it was a minor injury, he sprinted for the front door, threw himself through it, ran for his car.

He swung the Hyundai in a screeching arc, pointing the bonnet at the bridge. He stamped the accelerator as a volley of gunfire blew in the windows on the right-hand side. The car fishtailed, leapt forward, burning rubber. He slalomed off the bridge guardrails, ejecting sparks. A glare of light reflected in his rear-view mirror. A Ural motorcycle with a sidecar was in hot pursuit. The lights of the



guardhouse at the far end of the bridge blazed. He saw figures blocking the path. Muzzle flashes. A bullet lodged in the windscreen, surrounded by a spiderweb formation. More worrying was the Pecheneg machine gun that was being pivoted at him.

*Would he survive the onslaught?*

# CHAPTER 9

The lead storm began thirty feet from the guardhouse. Desperately, he threw the Hyundai into S-curves and slouched low to present a small target. The car shuddered with bullet impacts. Ricochets sparked off the paintwork. The windscreen disintegrated. *How long before...?*

Abruptly, the storm abated. His eyes were slits against the wind gusting through the windscreen frame. A glance over his shoulder. The Ural was still in pursuit, the gunner sighting down the machine gun mounted on the sidecar. But not shooting.

He realised: they were afraid of compromising the integrity of the Citex canisters. And were counting on him not risking a head-on collision with the barrier gate.

*They were right. But...*

He aimed the Hyundai at the guardhouse. It exploded through the tin shed and roared at the chain link fence. It tore through a section of fence. Coils of barbwire wrapped across the bonnet like a sadistic chain of flowers. His eyes danced over the dashboard. The engine temperature gauge was flashing but he could not help it except hope the car carried him where he needed to go. He had lost his lights and the road was rising into the hills.

A sign for a hairpin curve zipped by. The car drifted, negotiating the turn, tearing up rickety, wooden guardrails. He lost control, spinning in a circle so that he was facing the way he had come. Frantically, he executed a K-turn on the narrow road. The right rear wheel dipped off the road. For a terrifying moment, he thought the tail was going to drop off the cliff. The engine revved and he willed the car

forward. The other three wheels dug in and propelled the car onto the shoulder. As the car bounced onto the road, he wondered what had happened to the pursuit.

He never heard the Ansat helicopter until it swooped over the car like an insect. Its under-belly spotlight washed the road in bright light. The Ansat angled so that its oval of illumination encompassed the Hyundai. Then it surged for an attack. The pilot matched the Hyundai's speed so that the Ansat was flying parallel to, and fifteen feet from the car.

The Ansat's door slid open, revealing a sniper, cradling a Dragunov sniper rifle.

The sniper raised the gun's sight to his right eye. "Lower," he whispered into the radio. The pilot obeyed. His finger curled around the trigger.

The imposter jammed on the brakes. The car threw up a great cloud of dust. Its brake-locked wheels skid on momentum. He pointed his SIG out the window and emptied his magazine, tracking the helicopter as it overtook him.

The sniper recoiled from the attack. He lost his rifle. It bounced off the landing skids, to the ground. The Ansat shuddered and the sniper was almost tossed out. He grabbed a handle. He turned to look at the pilot... The pilot was slumped against the yoke. A lucky round had severed his jugular. Blood spurted; the sniper screamed. The Ansat rolled onto its side, hung suspended for an instant before plummeting like a rock. Its rotors sliced into the road and sent it cartwheeling before the blades crumpled. The whole thing skittered off the road, landing in the trees at the foot of the cliff.

Silence descended. The imposter did not bother to check his handiwork. He put the car into gear and mashed the accelerator. The battered car miraculously obeyed, riding over the fallen Dragunov rifle.

In the trees, smoke continued to belch from the Ansat like a grave-marker. Then lazily, the first of the flames licked the wreck.

# CHAPTER 10

The road meandered through boreal forests. The car, its lights out, coasted to a stop. The imposter opened the glove compartment where he had concealed the Alexander Reich facemask. He tossed it to the floor. A red herring. He inspected the lunchbox for damage, unlocked it. The canisters were unharmed. He stepped out of the car, stretched, then shed the jumpsuit. He loaded the spare ammo clip into the SIG. He abandoned the Hyundai and entered the forest. He navigated the declination of the terrain to a stand of boulders at the edge of the forest. He studied the scene before him.

A village – a cluster of eleven small adobes, huddled together for warmth. More patient reconnoitring and he spotted a jeep. Guards. He assumed they were appraised of the incident at Kronj. Further beyond, glistening in the moonlight, were a pair of silver lines. A railroad.

The forest had concealed his approach to the village. But there was open land between the village and the tracks.

He crouch-ran toward the adobes. The whistle of a locomotive reached his ears. He had minutes before the goods train came into view.

He disappeared into the shadows of the nearest abode. Classical music emanated from a radio within. He peered around the corner. A handcart stood a little distance away. He spotted the jeep. No occupants. He cursed: *Where are they?* He sprinted to the next house. His foot kicked a can. It rebounded off the side of a house with a clatter. He stumbled, ducked into hiding. He held his breath, hoping the music had masked his clumsiness. When it came again,

the train's mournful whistle was nearer. He was about to set off again when a figure with a machine pistol held at the waist came into view. The guard was twelve feet away.

The guard advanced. His boots crunched in the mud. He nudged the can with his toes. He looked around, snorting irritably. He froze. His mind registered a presence although his eyes did not perceive anybody. The machine pistol started to rise.

Two bullets hit the guard in the chest. He spasmed in his death throes and squeezed the trigger. The guard's pistol chattered in contrast to the silenced SIG.

Lights came on in the houses. Somebody screamed. The music soared to a crescendo.

The imposter made a break for the tracks. He crashed into another guard, and they went down in a tangle of limbs. The lunch box spun away. He smashed his gun into the guard's face. He extricated himself and frantically searched for the box.

The locomotive's powerful headlight illuminated the night.

He spotted the box, retrieved it and sprinted.

He spied a bobbing pinpoint of light. A third guard coming to investigate.

A third guard spied a figure running for the tracks. He raised his machine pistol. His bullets chased the figure. The figure went down. The guard released the trigger and dropped his gun on its sling, thinking his work over. Then he saw the figure rise, and limp toward the tracks, clutching something protectively to its chest.

The imposter struggled up the embankment. He clutched at shrubs and rocks. The blare of the train's horn and the rumble of wheels on the tracks were deafening. The train whooshed past him, hot air and noise engulfing him, the wheels inches from his hair. He knelt and scanned the blur of wagons for anything to grab hold of. A metal ladder was coming right at him.

One chance.

He grabbed as it rushed past. The violent tug nearly dislocated his shoulder. His feet dragged in the stones and pebbles lining the tracks.

The guard crested the embankment to see his target dragged by the locomotive. The fugitive performed awkward gymnastics to manoeuvre his body off the ground. The guard raised his weapon as the last car raced past.

The thief slumped atop the car, feeling the wind on his clothes. Muzzle flashes cast the night into flickering light. The sounds of gunfire were lost in the noise of the train. Nobody was coming after him. At least not yet.

# CHAPTER 11

Reed Michigan stepped into the jogging track. Going against the early morning joggers, he drew irritated glances. He spotted Frederick Boseman in a sweatshirt. The CIA deputy director's close protection unit was invisible. Boseman did not notice Michigan, until the man gripped his elbow.

"Michigan," Boseman said in surprise.

"We have to talk."

They veered aside, found a bench. They made an odd couple: Boseman sweating in a Nike sweatshirt; Michigan in trousers and shirtsleeves.

"Well?"

"The Citex job... Fisher was murdered, Alexander Reich is missing." Boseman glowered. Michigan continued shakily, "Somebody did steal Citex from Kronj on the day Fisher was to go into action. And went in disguised as Reich – the way Fisher was planning."

"This is bad," Boseman agreed. "For us. You."

Michigan was glum. He had no words.

Boseman ordered, "Find Citex, Michigan!"

And he left his subordinate sitting on the bench.

Intelligence agencies around the world picked up on the incident at Kronj. The United Nations used the information to condemn Russia and called for full disclosure. The situation escalated when black marketeers advertised the exorbitant sums they were willing to pay for Citex. There were rumours that Citex was already in the possession of terrorist organisations.



Meanwhile, the thief jumped the train and made his way to a fishing village north of Vladivostok. He paid cash for passage on a trawler heading to the Bering Sea. He landed in Unimak, an Aleutian Island with a population of 65. A boat ferried him to Anchorage. There, he had a cabin reserved aboard a freighter, Ocean Spirit, bound for Los Angeles. Off the coast of Los Angeles, Ocean Spirit suffered a catastrophic engine room explosion that ripped a gash in her hull. Survivors reported that she sank in minutes.

# THE HAUNTING

Rain. All around. Heavy. Thunderous. Flashes of jagged lightning. Hideous faces stare from behind the ruins. The faces are a lifeless grey. The mouths open in snarls and shrieks. Drums pound to a cannibalistic beat, reaching a manic crescendo.

He falls into the abyss, screaming, his legs and hands flailing. The black of the bottomless pit is terrifying.

The cannibals leap and lunge from the shadows of the ruins. They snatch but they can never hold on. He squeezes his eyes shut and clamps his hands over his ears. Still, he cannot shut out the rabid faces and the beat of the death drums.

He lands in thick ooze that renders him immobile. The cannibals land around him. They have long, curved claws. They eviscerate him. Their teeth are bared.

"Back!" he pants, "Get back!"

Then angels descend from the sky. He calls out to them, but the cannibals pounce on the angels in a feeding frenzy. He cannot save the angels. The angels look at him with sad eyes as the cannibals drag them into lairs in the ruins.

# CHAPTER 12

---

## Off the west coast of Los Angeles

The yacht, Sea Breeze cut through the water like a dagger through muslin. A pennant stretched taut over the stern in the slipstream. Standing in the open cockpit, Mikhail Basara appreciated the beauty of a picture postcard sunrise.

A voice interrupted his reverie. "Grid's coming up to port. You'll have to slow down for me to get the sensors into the water."

"Okay, Dr Gunner" Basara called as he closed the throttle. The rumble beneath the deck ebbed. The prow fell, the rooster tails of backwash disappeared. Basara's gaze wandered to the radar, cocooned in the polished mahogany dashboard. The fluorescent wand traced its circular path with cold electronic precision. He made out the squiggle that was the mainland and the single blip that was his boat. As the sweep moved on, he read another boat. Basara took the binoculars, looked toward the mainland. The image resolved to show a trawler.

"Mikhail, come help me."

Basara descended the ladder to the stern deck.

Edward Gunner was a tall, barrel-chested man in his late fifties. His swept back silver hair accentuated his broad forehead.

Gunner had a PhD in Maritime Archaeology. Two months ago, Gunner was in the Aleutians. Fishermen had stumbled upon a submerged Viking settlement. Gunner's team had painstakingly raised several artefacts from the Bering Sea, including a cache of runes. The runes were put on a flight to the Smithsonian. The

heavier artefacts were loaded onto a ship bound for Los Angeles. The ship was the Ocean Spirit. Gunner discovered that the explosion was near the aft hold... which held the Viking artefacts. Excusing himself from a scheduled conference in India, a distressed Gunner loaned a boat and equipment. If he could photograph the surviving artefacts, he would raise the funds to retrieve them.

Gunner and Basara opened three cases which held a magnetometer, a side scan SONAR and an underwater autonomous vehicle (UAV). Gunner set up his laptop, fiddled with the feed lines. They lowered the magnetometer into the water and Gunner calibrated it. Next, the side scan SONAR went overboard. Gunner brought up an image on his video screen.

"We'll begin our search lanes for the ship," he instructed.

Basara gripped the ladder. He paused, looked in the direction of the trawler.

Gunner looked, too. "Is that a boat?"

"A trawler."

"These aren't fishing waters."

Basara shared Gunther's concerned look.

Treasure hunters had tailed Gunther before. "Keep an eye out."

Basara restarted the engines. The lines attached to the sensors took up the slack. Soon the magnetometer was trailing behind, and the SONAR along the port side. Gunner returned to the laptop. He watched the overlay of lanes programmed into the computer.

"Entering lane one. Now."

# CHAPTER 13

---

## Kuwait City

There were six men and three women in the Presidential Suite at the Sheraton. All wore business suits. They were intimately aware of each other's pedigree and accomplishments. Nobody made conversation. They were occupied with their laptops and phones. They had travelled from as near as the Emirates and as far as Colombia. Collectively, these men and women represented the financial interests of six international organised crime networks — around six billion US dollars in annual revenue. They met annually for two reasons. One, to settle what each organisation owed the others. Two, announce revised commissions for the next year of business.

A commotion at the door heralded the arrival of the last representative. The meeting could begin. The door opened and the nine started. They exchanged surprised looks. They were not expecting *this* man to represent Osvetljiv Anđeli.

Lars Gunther, chairman of Los Angeles-based Gunther Trade, strode in with a bemused expression. His arrival had gotten their attention. It was uncommon for a high-ranking member of any of the crime networks to attend these meetings.

"I'll get down to it," he announced. "I'm here to make a proposal."

So, the rumours were true. Osvetljiv Anđeli had acquired *something* that would shake up their business.

"Extortion contributes, what, twenty percent to our top line?" It was a rhetorical question. "Thus far, our extortion programs target individuals and gangs." His piercing eyes regarded them. "What if I said we can target governments. And there won't be a thing they can do about it but concede to our demands?" A pause for effect. "I am in possession of the only stock of Citex, a Soviet nerve agent." Technically, he did not have it yet, but it was almost good as done. From his jacket pocket, he produced an ampoule with a clear liquid. The room cringed. "This is not it," he assured them, "but this much of Citex in an HVAC or sprinkler can wreak havoc in a city block." Another pause. "Imagine the possibilities!" He pocketed the ampoule, regarded his audience. "I speak for Osvetljiv Anđeli. All of you have priority access to decision makers in your organisations. Why don't you call them and ask them if they're interested in becoming fantastically rich?"

# CHAPTER 14

---

## Off the west coast of Los Angeles

Standing in the bridge wing of the trawler, Leonel Novack panned his binoculars. The stub of a cigar protruded between cracked lips. He had a flat nose, deep-set black eyes and a pugnacious set to his jaw. His heavy eyebrows met above his nose. He moved his cigar to one side of his mouth with his tongue and bit down on it again. He saw Gunner was gesturing wildly in the stern deck. The yacht stopped for the second time that morning and the pilot joined Gunner near the equipment.

*They've found her*, he thought.

The two men in the yacht were hefting a UAV to the diving board. After a little fussing, Gunner and Basara released it into the depths. Novack peered over the bridge wing and called out, "Evans, Black!" On the deck below, two of Novack's men went to work, readying a Zodiac.

Underwater lamps cast an eerie glow into the murky blue. The four frogmen, each gripping the handlebars of an underwater propulsion vehicle (UPV), glided forward swiftly. The air bubbles from their regulators strung out behind them. One frogman carried a rifle loaded with an explosive charge. The two divers bringing up the rear carried an oxy-acetylene torch between their UPVs.

A solitary eel watched the intruders with beady eyes. One of the diver's fins touched the seabed, throwing up a cloud of silt. The eel slithered away.

The frogmen topped a gentle rise. At the edge of the illumination of their lights, they spotted a single masthead sticking out of a sand bank. It was twisted backwards toward the superstructure of a ship. The ocean bed was strewn with debris of the wreck. *Ocean Spirit* was resting on her starboard side in a cradle of sand.

As the frogmen advanced toward the bow, they did not notice the UAV approaching the wreck from the stern. It was masked by *Ocean Spirit's* superstructure.

Gunner's fingers rolled the trackball that controlled the UAV. His other hand played with the focus on the UAV's camera.

"That's an 'O'," he mumbled. "But I – okay: S-P-I..." He trailed off. "This is her."

As the UAV glided over the hull, Gunner said, "I don't see the hull breach." Entry from there would have given him the quickest assessment of the state of his artefacts. "She is resting on it," he realised. "I'll find another way in."

The frogmen entered the ship through the bridge. They parked their propulsion vehicles on the bridge wing.

A bloated body, fingers clamped stubbornly around the spokes of the helm, greeted them. *Ocean Spirit's* captain had gone down with his command. The head bobbed slightly as if welcoming them aboard. The frogmen swam toward helm room door. The door gave easily. They shone their lights down a staircase. Creaks and groans



emanated from within the ship. They glided down the stairs, knowing exactly where to go, thanks to the blueprints they had memorised earlier.

The dive through the ship was uneventful. As they neared the aft section, the damage from the engine room explosion was apparent. The corridors were twisted and bore scorch marks. They squeezed through caved-in sections. Their oxygen cylinders scrapped through the exigent passage. The cabin they were seeking in the crews' quarters. It was a few metres shy of the epicentre of the blast. Intrigued, the frogmen swam to the ragged end of the corridor. They beheld the destruction to the boiler room. Bodies were suspended in the murk, amid debris. The bulkhead was warped. Machinery was crumpled, pipes twisted grotesquely. It was a wonder their prize had not been obliterated.

With that thought, they returned to the cabin. Its door was jammed shut. They used the torch to cut through. Because of the angle at which the ship had settled, the cutaway section of the door fell away. A body inside the cabin was in the path of the door and was decapitated. The head tumbled trailing blood. Had the frogmen been aware they would have recognised the face of the man who had stolen Citex from Kronj.

The frogmen rummaged through the cabin. Their search turned up a safebox beneath the bunk. They inspected it. It was not compromised. They turned to leave.

The lights of a UAV blinded them.

# CHAPTER 15

The image from the UAV jolted.

"Hey!" Gunner exclaimed, "What did I do!" The screen streaked with static. He made frantic attempts to restore the picture or regain control of the UAV. He called up a menu and ran a status check.

"What happened?"

The screen flashed a 'fatal error' message. "We lost the UAV!"

Gunner realised in disbelief.

"Lost the UAV?" Basara echoed. "Maybe you're –"

Gunner was busy at the keyboard. "You saw that last image?"

"I saw –"

"Bubbles," Gunner interjected. He was thinking aloud. Gunner tapped the side of the laptop impatiently. "But before the bubbles?"

Basara shut his eyes, trying to remember. "A faceplate!" Gunner snapped his fingers. "There's somebody down there."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure." Both men stared in the direction of the trawler. "Only one place they could have come from."

Gunner was indignant. "I'm going down there."

"Wait, we should call for help."

"By the time we convince the authorities to get here, those frogmen will have vanished." He made up his mind. "Tell you what: you call it in. Meantime, I'm going."

Novack was dismayed with what he saw. This was a classic 'wrong place, wrong time' scenario. For Gunner and Basara. Novack knew what he had to do.

"Evans! Black! No witnesses!"

The Zodiac was lowered over the side. Evans and Black cast away. Gunner double-checked his dive gear. A camera was attached above his faceplate. Basara helped him over the side of the yacht, shielded from the trawler.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Basara muttered to himself. He ran to the cockpit and grabbed the radio.

The wraparound windscreen shattered into a million fragments. Flying glass cut him. A bullet hit him in the shoulder. The impact threw him across the cockpit. He teetered on the edge and went over. He thought he would hit the water. He slammed into the deck below the cockpit. Pain exploded in his back. Luckily, the pain made him screw his eyes shut because glass and metal rained down on him from the ravaged cockpit. Then as abruptly as it had started, the staccato chatter of machine gun fire died. Everything was quiet. The pain in his shoulder was excruciating. He rolled onto his left side. Shrapnel sprinkled off his body to the deck. He pushed himself into a sitting position and rested against the superstructure. He heard an outboard motor. The assailants were circling. His right arm was useless. He breathed heavily. He would die if he did not move. *Move!* Clenching his teeth, he stood unsteadily and edged toward the corner of the cabin. He peered around. With a thud, something skipped across the deck, rolled and came to rest against Gunner's equipment. He made out what it was.

# CHAPTER 16

Before Basara realised, he was sprinting across the deck. He knocked Gunner's laptop over. Gunfire erupted around him. The fingers of his left hand closed around the protuberances of the grenade. He swiped it across the deck like a lethal ball. It went overboard. The hailstorm of lead continued to punch holes into the deck, throwing up flecks of wood. The laptop blew apart nearby.

The grenade that Basara tossed splashed into the water, near the Zodiac. Evans and Black did not see it. A great geyser of water picked the dinghy like a toy and sent it spinning into the air. Both men were thrown out. The Zodiac splashed back down, laden with water but afloat. It spiralled in the vortex created by the explosion. The two men swam toward the floundering Zodiac.

A shock wave churned the water around Gunner. In panic he craned his neck. *Sea Breeze's* screws frothed the water. The yacht was underway. *Basara is leaving!* The impulsiveness that had driven Gunner to dive to the wreck deserted him.

"What the hell!" Novack barked as he watched the drama unfold on the night vision goggles. "Get under way and send that boat to its grave!"

Novack's trawler looked like it was ready for scrap, but it was a powerful and fast vessel, a necessity in his line of undercover work.

Basara sagged, coughing. He ripped the hem of his shirt and fashioned a crude bandage, clinching it until he gasped. He rummaged in the splintered cabinets on the aft deck for the life vest and donned it.

He looked up. The trawler was rapidly closing the gap to *Sea Breeze*. Biting his lip, Basara made for the cockpit.

He turned the ignition and felt the deck vibrate as the engines turned over, sputtered and died. Basara tried again, pleaded with the engines. They coughed, hung indecisively as if taunting him, then roared to life. Relief flooded over Basara. He rammed the throttle to its stop and the yacht surged forth. He clung to the helm, spun the bullet-gouged wheel hard. The starboard side of the yacht dug deep into the water, raising the keel out of the water. The deck canted dangerously and Basara thought the boat was going to tip over. *Sea Breeze* pivoted in a tight arc. He righted the wheel, the keel settled in. Ahead, the trawler presented its port side to the smaller boat.

Gunfire erupted from the trawler.

Basara ducked beneath the shattered windscreen. His hand held the throttle to its stop in a death grip. With grim determination, he adjusted *Sea Breeze's* course heading. He counted down and let go of the wheel and leapt off the side of the yacht.

Too late Novack realised the yacht had no intention of stopping. "Brace for impact!" he screamed.

*Sea Breeze* crunched into the trawler with a terrific impact that knocked Novak's crew to the deck. The yacht's fuel tanks chose that moment to rupture. *Sea Breeze* was ripped apart by a fireball.

The men who were below decks bore the brunt of the devastation. They were still reeling from the collision and battling torrents of sea water from the ruptured hull when the explosion ripped through the deck like a freight train.

Jammed as its prow was in Novack's trawler, *Sea Breeze* started to pull the trawler with it, into the depths. Novack's helmsman tried to break the embrace in vain. The deck shuddered.

Fiery debris rained on Novack's boat. Fires sprouted and spread. Bloodied figures picked themselves up from among the destruction. A few tried to douse the fire, but when it occurred to them that the trawler could not be saved, they stampeded for the single lifeboat on the aft davits. Some jumped overboard in their haste to abandon ship.

The deck listed further, and the sea spilled into the deck. *Sea Breeze* was relentlessly pulling her assailant to the depths.

His ears ringing, bleeding from a gash in his forehead, Novack joined the exodus. He bumped into a crewman who stared wildly at him. An ominous snapping sound made both men look up. The bridge mast swayed. It twisted as it fell, and the crosspiece speared the deck. The same thought occurred to both men: the lifeboat would be overwhelmed. Novack acted first. He pushed his crewman overboard and hurried to the lifeboat.

# CHAPTER 17

*Sea Breeze* descended into the depths, dragging a trail of burnt, twisted metal and wood. Gunner had dived on several wrecks, but he had always been detached from a real sinking. Now, watching the yacht in its death throes, he felt overcome with horror and guilt. He felt the tug of the sinking boat's suction and struggled to break free.

As he flailed his fins, he became aware of a glow in his periphery. He turned to see forms materialising out of the dark. His disturbed mind was sluggish. By the time he realised it was a frogman riding a propulsion vehicle, he had been fired upon.

The projectile came at him with a burst of bubbles. The frogman banked, fleeing the imminent explosion.

Adrenaline seized Gunner. He kicked powerfully. The projectile flashed beneath him, missing his fins by inches. He swam furiously, to widen the gap from the pressure wave that would come. His lungs burned with exertion. His teeth ground upon his mouthpiece. The projectile impacted a shelf and detonated. The shock wave pummelled Gunner, cracking two ribs, breaking a third, and deflating his right lung. His regulator slipped from his mouth. He sucked mouthfuls of salt water and gagged. His eyes bulged. Every breath was scorching. He coughed blood that swirled in the water. Blackness encroached on his peripheral vision.

The regulator swayed before his frightened eyes, like a cobra out of a snake charmer's basket. It was seductive in its movements across his field of vision.

His outstretched finger touched the regulator. Then his hand closed on it. Feverishly, his mind on the brink of collapse, Gunner bit the regulator and sucked. The inhalation sent fresh waves of agony to

his brain, and he released the regulator, drank more water. His body spasmed.

Just before he died, Gunner watched, uncomprehending, as the mass of the trawler slid to the depths, a torrent of bubbles and debris trailing in its wake.

Then there was nothing.



# THE HAUNTING

Rain. Heavy. Thunderous. Lightning flashes in jagged bolts. The rain hurts. He is surrounded by thousands of mourners. He is naked.

They are attired in robes as black as the night. Their faces have a deathly white pallor, and their cheeks are tear stained.

There are two coffins on the mound. One is smaller than the other.

He approaches the coffins cautiously, unsure who he might find inside. He puts a hand on the wood of the coffin.

Drums begin to pound. He recognizes the beat. The death beat. The pounding intensifies. It swells and rises all around him. He looks over his shoulder for assurance from the mourners, but they are replaced by figures from Hell. They snarl and bare their teeth. Acidic saliva drools from their jowls. Their eyes are bloodshot, and faces contorted in expressions that send a shiver down his spine. They converge on him.

He peers into the coffins and sees two angels looking at him with sad eyes. They say something he cannot hear over the din of the drums.

The ground shakes and a bottomless abyss yawns and the coffins slide away from him. He lunges for them, to save them from being swallowed by the abyss. But he is pulled along and cannot stop the inevitable.

He feels intense agony and looks down. He has been eviscerated. The pain is unbearable.

"No!" he screams and turns in rage. His fingers are claws. He has transformed. He pounces on the creatures. He slashes at them. He rips off their heads. There is blood everywhere. But they keep coming. And he keeps fighting. It is an endless, bloody battle.

# CHAPTER 18

---

## Santa Monica, Los Angeles

Amanda Gunner's morning run had done her wonders. She felt rejuvenated, infused with positive energy, ready to take on the world. Most of all, she felt free. But as she turned the block on the approach to her house, her mood darkened. A white Porsche 911 with a familiar vanity plate was parked outside her house. She scowled, aware that its occupant had seen her.

Tim Maurice was out of his car in a flash. He would intercept her at her gate.

It disgusted her to notice he had not changed out of the blazer he had worn to the party last night. He had lied when he had told he was in New York for work. His subterfuge of six months had inevitably been revealed: he had been sneaking off to Miami. His girlfriend there had tagged him on her Facebook page. The picture was damning: they were partying hard, couldn't keep their hands... or mouths off each other.

Unfortunately for him, Amanda had seen it before he had deleted it. Amanda suspected the post had not been accidental.

"Amanda," he began. She angled away. "I can explain." She kept walking. "It isn't what it seems." No reply from her. She sniffed alcohol on his breath. And a whiff of perfume. *Ugh.* "I've been assigned a team in Miami. I decided to drop in there, meet them, before flying back." *And you didn't tell me. Unlike the past when you couldn't stop talking about your achievements.* "We were working so hard, I just... we had a few drinks. That was all!"

She halted, surprising him. She glared at him. *That was all!* She said, "I called New York, asked if you'd been there." He blinked. "They said, 'no'." He sagged. "I asked if you'd been there last month. Or the previous." He looked away, defeated. "They said, 'no'." She turned to go, hoping he had gotten the message. He grabbed at her. His grip was vicious upon her bicep. She cried out then surprised herself by kneeing him in the groin. He went down, groaning. She was breathing hard, her fists clenched. But she felt good. "Don't come here again."

She realised her neighbour across the street was watching. His USMC t-shirt was taut across his chest.

"All good, Amanda?" he called.

"Fantastic!" she replied.

"Have a good one."

"I will. Now."

Back home, she kicked off her running shoes, pulled off her headband, helped herself to orange juice from the fridge. As she sipped, she winced from pain in her arm. Setting the juice on the kitchen counter, she rolled up her right sleeve. Her skin had bruised an ugly purple. A picture of Maurice writhing in the drive brought a smirk to her lips. She carried the juice to the bathroom, finished it while she showered. Ten minutes later, she was towelling herself. She opened her closet, withdrew a white blouse and beige pleated skirt. She dressed, opted to let her hair down. This was a day of new beginnings. She admired the stranger in the mirror, collected her Coach handbag with her laptop, snatched her car keys on her way out.

When she backed her Toyota Camry out, Tim's Porsche had disappeared.

# CHAPTER 19

Alerted by the collision recorded by the coastal monitoring stations and the explosion that was visible on the boardwalks, a Sikorsky HH-60J Skyhawk Coast Guard helicopter raced to the scene. A seagull flashed past, heading toward the mainland. The pilot and co-pilot peered at the sparking Pacific beneath them. "There!"

All heads snapped in the direction he indicated.

A speck on the waves resolved into a man clinging to flotsam. No, they realised, clinging to another body. The survivors were rising on the crests of the waves, then falling out of sight in the troughs.

The Skyhawk hovered over Basara. The downdraft from its rotors cast circular ripples. The bay door was thrown open and a figure in an orange life vest peered down.

Basara's eyes flickered open. A wave carried him on its crest. He slid in the trough his head disappearing beneath the waves. He resurfaced, sputtering water, clinging to Gunner's body.

The coastguard reached for an orange body harness attached to the helicopter's winch. He pulled on a dive-mask, jumped out. He landed near Basara and swam toward the men. The body harness was lowered from the Skyhawk.

The coastguard assessed the situation. Gunner was unmoving. A quick check revealed no pulse. Basara had a death grip on Gunner. He was wounded, a bandage over his shoulder was stained darkly; his eyes were nearly caked shut. Innumerable cuts adorned his face. "Hang on!"

Basara gave no indication that he comprehended. His lips quivered. The coastguard realised he was saying something.

"The frogmen attacked... attacked... trawler... they shot..."

The trio rode another crest. The body harness swung like a pendulum. The coastguard reached up. He grabbed it on its next swing. "I'm going to help you get into this harness, sir. You ready?" He began strapping the harness on Basara. He noticed the words on Basara's life vest: *Sea Breeze*. He flashed a sign to the pilot. The winch reeled the line in. The coastguard gently pried Basara's grip from Gunner. Basara was lifted, his water-laden clothes dripping.

He was secured in the helicopter and cloaked in an insulation blanket. The harness was sent down again to retrieve Gunner's body. The helicopter radioed Marina del Rey hospital and apprised the emergency staff that they were inbound with a survivor. Also, Carl Landis, the owner of *Sea Breeze* was notified.

The Skyhawk landed with a gentle bump in a parking lot at the marina. An ambulance was waiting, its roof lights flashing. Paramedics jumped out hefting a gurney. They rushed to the helicopter and carefully moved Basara into the gurney. Gunner followed in a body bag.

Landis was there, too. He thanked the coastguards, climbed into the ambulance, pulling the rear doors shut. Through the small windows in the rear doors, he watched as the Skyhawk rose, dipped its nose and swung back toward the ocean. Landis turned to watch as the paramedics started a saline line and slipped an oxygen mask over Basara's face.

# CHAPTER 20

---

## Marina Del Rey Hospital

The surgeon was competent, calm and reassuring. He suggested Landis should get breakfast while he tried to save Basara's life. Basara was wheeled into the ER. Landis located the cafeteria, but it was under renovation. There was a cafe on the corner of Lincoln Boulevard. He made his way over.

The cafe was empty save for an old guy poking at gnarled bacon with a knife. Landis ordered. While he waited to be served, he got Amanda Gunner's number from information, called her office and was connected to her private number. Her assistant answered and said Amanda was at an all-day meeting. He conveyed the urgent message and the assistant promised to inform Amanda ASAP.

His mind returned to the ride with Basara. He had rambled incoherently about being attacked by frogmen until the paramedics sedated him.

As Landis wolfed-down his breakfast, he prayed Basara survived, to describe the events that had killed Gunner and sunk *Sea Breeze*.

Leonel Novack and the survivors were holed up in a safe house. There was a knock on the door, and one of their number was let in. He laid out breakfast baggies on the table.

Novack inquired, "News?" He had tasked the man with finding out if survivors had turned up at the marina or nearby hospitals.

"Coastguard found Mikhail Basara. He's at Marina del Rey hospital."

Novack fumed. Basara was responsible for the loss of his boat and almost all his crew.

"Mr Novack..." Novack looked at him. "Let it go." When he failed to evoke a response, the guy continued, "Let's cut our losses, get out of the country. We can find this guy later."

Through clenched teeth, Novack said, "You know what he did to our operation. The *Plunderer* is at the bottom of the Pacific." He eyed his crew. "We lost good men."

The crew watched in silence. "Here's the plan," Novack decided, "Evans, Black and I will take care of Basara. We'll regroup in Mexico." There were no questions, only nods.

# CHAPTER 21

---

## Norton Electric, Culver City, Los Angeles

"Ms Gunner," Robert Norton, CEO of Norton Electric, said, "are you with us?" His tone was accusatory.

The law firm of Paterson, Kline & Westwood was representing Norton Electric against a multi-million-dollar patent infringement claim. Amanda Gunner was the lead legal counsel. Startled by the outburst, Amanda looked up, brushed an errant strand of hair from her face.

Norton, a bull of a man with neatly combed silver hair was glaring at her. His figure reflected in the polished surface of the boardroom table. The line of Norton executives seated opposite stared impassively at her. Norton's secretary, Beatrice shifted uncomfortably, adjusted her spectacles. The three lawyers who had accompanied Amanda to the meeting were suddenly preoccupied with their laptops.

Amanda should have been paying attention to the presentation which was the basis of their defence. Instead, she had been considering good lunch options. A carton of juice for somebody who usually enjoyed a hearty breakfast had left her famished and distracted.

"Ms Gunner, my company is on the cusp of making history and —"  
"Mr Norton —"

Norton raised a hand. Amanda sighed. She had intended to apologise and get past the moment. But Norton wanted to rant. She would have to weather the storm.



"I hired you," he pointed at her side of the table, "because I want to win, and I want to crush this upstart as a warning to anybody else. I need you to —"

A phone rang and Norton glared at Beatrice. "Who is it? I'm busy. So is everybody else."

Amanda Gunner realised it was her phone. Beatrice looked mortified. Amanda managed a tight apologetic smile. The call was from her assistant. She declined, switched the phone to silent, placed it face-down on the table. "Sorry." In the silence that followed, the phone vibrated on table, buzzing.

Robert Norton looked like he was going to explode.

Amanda read the text message from her assistant: *Call Carl Landis it's urgent about your Dad*. The text was trailed by Landis' phone number. *Who is Carl Landis?* Ignoring the purple faced Norton, Amanda called the number in the text message. Then before Norton could erupt, to everybody's shock, Amanda rushed out of the boardroom.

# CHAPTER 22

---

## Marina Del Rey Hospital

Landis was in the waiting room when the surgeon approached him.

"Mikhail will make it. We have sedated him. I have notified the police; a detective will be along soon. A patrolman will be posted outside the room."

Landis released the breath he had been holding. "Thank you, doctor. What about Gunner?"

"Has the family been notified?"

"His daughter is on the way."

"Okay." The surgeon considered his next words. "Was Gunner handling underwater explosives?"

"Why?"

"He was diving?"

"Yes."

The surgeon nodded. "An underwater explosive charge could inflict the kind of damage Gunner's body sustained. But I'm speculating."

Landis recalled Basara's delirious rambling during the ambulance ride. He decided to keep it from the doctor.

The surgeon said, "I'll be around later to check on him."

Landis thanked him. He massaged his temples with his fingertips, trying to organize his thoughts. His phone rang. It was Amanda.

"Carl, I'm at the hospital."

"I'm coming to you."

# CHAPTER 23

---

## East Los Angeles

"Hey," Kirk Ingram said, nudging Richard Depalma, "there he is." The two federal agents were in Ingram's silver Explorer, conducting surveillance on the bodega across the street. A chocolate-brown Dodge Sprinter had pulled up outside the bodega. A man from the bodega helped the driver offload groceries on the pavement. Then curiously, the man from the bodega got into the Sprinter. As the Sprinter pulled away, the passenger leaned out of the window and looked at the Explorer.

"That's the signal," Depalma concurred.

*This is it, Ingram thought, show time.*

The passenger, Vincent Medera, had approached the FBI a week ago offering to blow the lid off a human trafficking operation in Los Angeles. Medera had a rap sheet, but he was more a nuisance than a danger. In return he wanted protection.

"From whom?" Ingram had asked.

"Imer Qerim."

"He's the guy at the top?"

"He works for the guy at the top."

"Who's the guy at the top?"

"I don't know."

"Tell me about Imer Qerim."

"He's seeing a girl I know. They met at Bootsy Bellows where she works." Bootsy was an upscale night club. "A few months ago, he bought her a house. I was suspicious the guy was laundering money through the purchase."

"This girl has a name?"

"Rosalie Palermo."

"Who's she to you?"

"Step-sister."

"Go on."

"I asked Rosalie about him. I got a name. She described him: East European, six-three, close-cropped hair, a trio of tiny studs in his ears. And tattoos." He traced lines starting at his wrist, winding up his forearm. "All the way to his chest, she said. I wanted to meet him, see if he was... safe for her. It never happened." Medera's tone hinted he was insulted by Qerim's refusal to meet. A pause. "A month later Qerim tells Rosalie he's looking for drivers. He knew I owed people money." Medera shrugged. "I said, 'yes'. I made the delivery. I did, maybe, five deliveries before..." A pause. "Then I delivered *them*."

"Them?"

"Teenagers. Kids, man." Medera rubbed his head vigorously. "I wanted out. Qerim put a gun to my head. Told me I'm expendable... and so is Rosalie." He looked pleadingly at the agents. "You must protect us." Before Ingram could answer. "Send somebody for Rosalie. If he finds out —"

"If I do, he'll be alerted. Don't worry, we know how this works."

"And what about me?"

"What about it?"

"I'm going to be there, you know, when the feds come swooping in. And I do not want to be caught in the crossfire. Literally."

Ingram raised his eyebrows. "You anticipate a gunfight."

"These guys don't play around."

Ingram and Depalma shared a look. "You drive out of there in the confusion." A pause. "We'll have to make it look real."

"What do you mean?"

Later, outside the interview room, Depalma had asked, "You believe him?"

"We don't have anything to lose, Richie." He looked at Medera. The snitch was bouncing his knee. He was frightened. "Yeah, I believe him."

# CHAPTER 24

---

## Marina Del Rey Hospital

"I want to see him," Amanda demanded. She noted the apprehension on Landis' countenance. She steeled herself. "He's my father." Landis took her by the elbow. "How did it happen?"

"I don't know. Edward's student, Mikhail Basara survived. He'll be able to tell us. Hopefully."

They passed through pneumatic double doors into a corridor that smelled of antiseptic. "Edward Gunner," Landis told the orderly, "This is his daughter."

The orderly produced a form. "Please sign here."

Amanda signed. Landis said, "I'll wait outside."

She nodded her thanks. A little hesitation, then she stepped into the morgue.

A Fiat 500 pulled up on Lincoln Drive, outside the hospital. Novack surveyed the entrance.

"How do we get in?" Evans wanted to know. He was in the back with the safebox retrieved from *Ocean Spirit*.

Novack did not have any immediate ideas. "We wait."

Their opportunity showed up in the form of a waste disposal truck that turned out of the hospital property.

Novack instructed, "Wait here." He got out, pulling his hat low over his eyes.

Novack found an orderly in green scrubs standing beside the hospital's large garbage bins. The orderly's face mask hung around his neck; he was thumbing at his phone. Novack noticed a tattoo peeking out of the orderly's collar. A reformed con? This would be easy.

"Psst."

The orderly looked up. Novack flashed him a wad of money. "A thousand dollars if you tell me which room Mikhail Basara is occupying."

The orderly glanced at the money in Novack's hand. He reached for the money. Novack pulled away the wad.

"Tell me, first."

# CHAPTER 25

Ingram palmed a pill dispenser as he drove. He popped a painkiller into his mouth. Depalma found himself looking at his friend's waistline, where he knew, below the shirt fabric, was an ugly scar. Where the iron spike had impaled Ingram. Although Ingram never blamed him, Depalma knew he was responsible for his friend's injuries. That night had changed Kirk Ingram irreversibly.

"You okay?"

Ingram nodded but Depalma knew Ingram would never be *okay*. He recalled the frantic ride in the ambulance on that fateful night.

The spike protruded from Ingram's abdomen. It pulsed with each weak breath Ingram took. Blood bubbled around the entry wound. The paramedics – who had their hands full keeping Ingram stable – had tasked Depalma with keeping pressure on the wound. Ingram had been deathly white and his pulse non-existent when they wheeled him into the ER. Depalma was still holding a blood-smeared swab when they went to work on him. The surgeons and nurses were a blur as they did everything humanly possible to save Ingram's life.

When, after the second defibrillator shock, Ingram's ECG remained flat-lined, Depalma thought it was all over. He had closed his eyes. And then he had heard a single beep.

Miraculously, two weeks later, Ingram came out of a coma. The medical team's assessment was that Ingram's body was a ticking time bomb and nobody could tell when it would go. Ingram was cautioned to refrain from strenuous activity in the hope it might prolong his life.



Ingram had told them living did not interest him. More than the physical trauma was the psychological trauma. His psyche was a conflicting mess of grief, guilt, anger, vengeance. He entered a dark place, refused therapy, or any help. He began to wilt away until one of his psychiatrists had a brilliant – but terrible – solution: *Put Ingram back into the field.*

Everybody *understood* the risks. Depalma advocated for it, promised to watch over Ingram. FBI assistant director in charge, Dave Travis grudgingly acquiesced. Getting the Bureau to sign off was challenging. The request went to the J. Edgar Hoover Building. Travis and Depalma were called to present their case. Ingram and his doctors, too. After an agonising deliberation, reluctantly, and with draconian clauses, the director scrawled his signature on the page that put Ingram back into the field. Vindicating Depalma, fieldwork was cathartic. Ingram channelled his emotions to fighting the faceless, omnipresent enemy that had robbed him of his family: organised crime. His vendetta became the drug that kept him alive beyond everybody's expectations.

And like any drug, Depalma knew an overdose would kill Ingram. But for the moment, they were tracking Medera's phone. And they had a gunfight they were getting into.

Depalma spoke into a radio as Ingram maintained a gap of three cars. "All units, the package has passed Fox 1. Eagle 1?"

A voice came in, tinny over the radio, from the spotter helicopter above the cityscape. "Eagle 1 has eyes on the package."

"Fox 2 and 3, we'll be passing you in thirty seconds."

"Roger. Eyes peeled," came the reply from Fox 3, an unmarked black minivan.

Medera was fretting. The driver kept glancing in the rear-view mirror. He was agitated because of something he had seen. Medera's eyes flicked to his outside rear-view. He searched for and found Ingram's Explorer.

"You see it too?" the driver asked, "Explorer. Three cars behind."

"It could be anyone." He had to keep the driver from panicking.

"Slow down, see if they pass us by," He hoped Ingram would play along.

"They're slowing down," Depalma announced, as they turned onto Imperial Highway.

"They're onto us."

Depalma clicked the radio. "They're on to us. Hold your positions, Package is slowing down." All three acknowledged.

Ingram stepped on the accelerator and closed in on the van. The two vehicles coasted alongside for a few seconds. Then, as the Dodge slipped behind, Ingram and Depalma listened to Eagle 1 over the radio.

"Package is three cars behind Fox 1." They continued this way for a while. Without warning, the van pulled off Imperial, into the maze of roads at the intersection of Interstate 110 and 105.

"Package has left Imperial," Eagle 1 reported in an even tone. The helicopter ascended to get a vantage view over the intersection.

"Fox 2 and 3, where are you? Do not lose the package," Ingram said anxiously.

"Fox 2 in pursuit."

"Fox 3 on 105, in case."

Eagle 1: "Package is on 110."

Ingram stepped on the brakes, spun the Explorer around, facing the wrong direction. Horns blared; tires squealed as oncoming traffic swerved to avoid a collision with his silver truck. Ingram floored the accelerator cutting diagonally across traffic lanes toward the exit.

Depalma closed his eyes and ground his teeth. "Watch out!" The Explorer banked sharply, as Ingram sped south on 110.

"Fox 3 turning around."

"Fox 2. I have eyes on."

Ingram saw the van in the distance.

"Fox 3. On your six, Fox 1."

"They're heading for the port," Ingram realised.

# CHAPTER 26

---

## Port of Los Angeles

The Port of Los Angeles is vast. 23 cargo terminals, 270 deep water berths occupy 30 sq. km of land, 69 km of waterfront. It handles \$1 billion worth of cargo each day.

The Sprinter turned toward a stand of warehouses. Alleys shot off from the main road, amid the warehouses. Huge rigs moved slowly lugging freight containers. Overhead, crane booms swung in slow arcs. Workers in overalls and safety gear used walkie-talkies to guide the crane operators. Smaller flat-bed trucks were backed up to warehouse gates. Ingram stopped as a forklift crossed their path. Eagle 1: "Package is two lanes to the left of Fox 2, headed south. Fox 3, once that rig moves, you will see Fox 2. Fox 1, take the third left."

Ingram clicked the radio. "Fox 3, turn around and watch the exit."  
"Roger that."

Fox 2: "Package has turned into a warehouse."

Eagle 1: "Warehouse is marked. Requesting Port Police for details."

Ingram clicked the radio. "Fox 2, reconnoitre. Eagle 1, hold."

Medera stepped out of the van. The doors of the warehouse slid closed. Security cameras outside the warehouse beamed images to a wall-mounted screen. Medera glimpsed the silver Explorer slip by the warehouse. He looked away quickly. Nine vans were parked in the warehouse. All were ubiquitous models. They bore markings of

delivery, cleaning or maintenance services. The van crews were leaning against the vehicles. Medera caught more than one suspicious look coming his way. They did not trust him after the last time. Parked in two rows, gleaming under the lights were sports cars. Cherry red. Sunburst yellow. Lime green. Orange. Ice blue. Silver. Black. It was all he could do to not stare at the Corvettes, Ferraris, Nissans, Mercedes, Bugattis, Audis and Lamborghinis. And behind the sports cars was an eighteen-wheel trailer rig. His pulse quickened when he counted more security than usual, armed with automatic weapons, pacing between the cars.

The FBI would come to a slaughter. Medera was wondering how he could alert the feds when a foreman approached the Dodge. Two handlers accompanied him. The driver took up position to be frisked. That's when Medera realised: *Imer Qerim is not here.*

It took supreme effort for Medera to not betray his anxiety while he was frisked. When they were done, the foreman informed called, "Okay, open up."

With a resounding *clang* the container on the trailer rig was unlocked. *Where are the feds?* Medera screamed silently.

# CHAPTER 27

---

## Marina Del Rey Hospital

A lone policeman stood sentinel outside Basara's room, absorbed in a game on his phone. As Novack stepped into the corridor, the policeman looked up, returned to his game. A moment later he went inside the room. Mindful of cameras, Novack bowed his head and approached the door.

The policeman flushed the toilet, zipped up, washed his hands, fished his phone from his pocket. The game was paused. He restarted it as he stepped out of the toilet. And became aware of a presence in the room.

Novack shot him, then turned his attention to Mikhail Basara. He heard the soft beep of the monitoring equipment. Novack put the gun to Basara's forehead.

Landis and Amanda walked toward Basara's room. Amanda was lost in thought. The past year, she had grown distant from her father. Regretfully, her work kept her busy. She tried to replace the image of the battered body she had encountered in the morgue, with a more pleasant memory. One that she would hold on to. She wondered how she would handle the investigation. What would Basara reveal?

Landis interrupted her thoughts. "Basara said they were attacked by frogmen."

"Huh?"

"He was delirious when we found him." Landis' hand was on the door. "He said frogmen attacked them." He frowned. "Wonder where the police are..."

They heard a pop from within the room. Landis pushed the door open.

Novack spun at the intrusion. He saw Landis framed in the doorway. Landis' eyes widened. "Amanda, run!"

Novack double-tapped Landis in the chest and hastened to the door. Amanda heard Landis' warning and stopped. The next instant, Landis' staggered backwards.

A swarthy man raised his gun at her. Amanda screamed.

Instinctively, she dived to the right, into another door across the corridor. She did not expect it to be open. The door spilt her into the unoccupied room as Novack fired.

Novack ran to the door. He could see the woman's shoes kicking. He would end this immediately. The shoes disappeared. The door slammed in his face. He grabbed the doorknob.

Amanda regained her feet just as the doorknob began to turn. She slammed her body into the door, depressed the lock. The killer rattled the knob. The door shuddered. Her terrified eyes settled on the window. They were on the first floor. No choice. Amanda ran to the window, leaping onto the bed. She unlatched the window and looked down.

The doorjamb splintered. The killer raised his gun.

Amanda jumped.

Novack could not believe his eyes. He darted to the window in time to see the woman land hard on her feet. One foot buckled painfully, and she cried in pain. And attracted the attention of people outside

the hospital. She rolled away, toward the building, out of his line of fire.

Novack ran back into the corridor, called Evans on his phone.

"There's a woman in the drive; white blouse, beige skirt. She's limping. Run her down. Meet me at the marina. Go!"

"What was that about?" Black asked.

Evans spotted a woman limping from around the corner of the hospital. A bystander was reaching out to her in concern. Evans put the car into gear. "Her!" he growled in reply.

"Help me!" Amanda pleaded with the bystander. A car came roaring at them, its tires screeching around the drive.

"No!" Amanda cried as she read the determination on the driver's countenance. She tried to yank the bystander out of the way, but the woman did not understand and resisted.

Evans hit the wrong woman. Her body was tossed onto the bonnet, rolled off. He reversed. And saw his intended target scramble to her feet and run.

Every footfall sent stabs of pain up her knee and thigh. Amanda limped pathetically. She heard tires squeal behind her.



Novack ran out into pandemonium. Nobody paid him attention; everybody was pointing, talking into phones, cowering. He saw the woman limping to a Toyota Camry. He leapfrogged people and ran into the drive. At that moment, an ambulance swung into the drive toward the emergency entrance. It drove between the fleeing woman and Evans. Unable to stop, Evans rammed the ambulance.

Amanda tumbled into her car. She fumbled with the key, started up and backed out. In the mirror, she saw that the ambulance had blocked her pursuer. *Get out of here!* Her Camry leapt onto Lincoln Boulevard and out of sight.

"What the hell happened!" Evans screamed as Novack jumped inside. He executed a K-turn, bounded over the circular landscaping, out the drive. The Fiat 500 bumped onto Lincoln, hunting the Camry.

"Get us off the main roads," Novack said. "We have to ditch this car."

Evans seethed.

"What now?" Black asked.

"Give me the box." Novack took it. "I'm going to meet Boris Zarebski for our payment. You two locate Amanda Gunner. That was Gunner's daughter. She saw my face." He indicated a spot. "Stop here." He climbed out with the safebox, peered into the car. His eyes met Black's and Evans'. "Get her!"

# CHAPTER 28

---

## Port of Los Angeles

Port Police had informed the FBI the warehouse was leased to Gunther Trade. That information delayed the federal agents. Lars Gunther had half the city's top officials on speed dial. Travis was worried about playing everything by the book. The team on the ground was getting restless.

Finally, Ingram said, "I'll take the fall." And before Travis could protest, he spoke into his comms: "In five."

Lying prone on the roof of an opposite warehouse, sharpshooter Winters raised his Remington 700P sniper rifle.

He heard: "Four... Three... Two... Go, Go, Go!"

Fox 1, 2, and 3 pulled up in unison in front of the warehouse.

Agents with FBI stencilled on their flak vests, leaped out and ran to the personnel door of the warehouse.

Ingram led the charge with an M4 carbine. "FBI!" he announced holding his badge high. "We are securing the warehouse and —"

As two agents followed him, he saw:

A massive tractor rig and ten vans; a huddle of very afraid men, women, teenagers and children deboarding the rig's container; Medera with eyes wide in a warning... the security guards raising their Heckler & Koch G36 carbines.

All hell broke loose in warehouse number 46 leased by Gunther Trade.

Bullets whizzed in all directions. Ingram dived. The agents behind him writhed as bullets ripped into them. Sheltered behind a van,

Ingram realised the personnel door was a death trap. Richie and the others were helpless outside. He climbed into the cargo hold of the van and made his way to the grilled partition between the hold and the cab. He shoved his gun through and fired. The first bullets shattered the windscreen. The bad guys ducked for cover. He nailed one in the chest, clipped another in the knee. Luckily, the illegals were hurrying into the rig. They pulled the doors closed. With his cover fire, more agents poured into the warehouse and fanned out, joining the gunfight.

A few van drivers joined the battle, drawing off-the-street-guns of their own. There was a revving of an engine, and a forklift came straight at Ingram's van.

The forklift slammed into the van, the prongs piercing its flanks. Ingram was knocked off balance and the M4 slipped from his grasp. Then the forklift lifted the Dodge off the ground. The operator pressed down on the pedal, driving toward the gates of the warehouse to crush the van and Ingram.

Agents and warehouse security took casualties. Sparks flew as bullets ricocheted off the container and gouged the sleek cars with ugly holes.

"Flash bangs!"

The feds heeded the warning. Three flash bangs sailed through the air.

On the floor, Medera covered his ears, squeezed his eyes shut. The flash-bangs went off and his ears were ringing but he was not impaired as much as he would have, had his ears been unprotected. He saw the nearest gungel swaying on his feet, blinded and clutching his ears in agony. His gun had fallen to the concrete floor. Medera grabbed the gun.

The forklift slammed the van into the gate of the warehouse. The sides of the van caved in. Ingram rolled to the open doors. His M4 fell over the edge of the open cargo bay. He tumbled out and grabbed for the swinging cargo-hold doors. His right hand found purchase and he came to a jarring halt, dangling from the door by one hand.

The forklift operator levelled a revolver at him.

The forklift operator's head disappeared in a pink mist. Ingram saw Medera nod at him and slink away with his smoking gun. Ingram relinquished his grip and dropped to the ground.

The foreman had witnessed Medera's actions. He turned his gun on the snitch. But Ingram repaid Medera for saving his life. Medera scampered for the Dodge as the foreman crumpled.

Ingram angled behind the other vans. The air was thick with the odour of cordite. Winters was depleting the security force. High up, holes in the ventilator windows evidenced where his sniper rounds had come rifling through. Desperate now, the defence fell back on its last resort. Incendiary rounds came flying at the federal raiders. Explosions rocked the warehouse and fires sprouted. An agent was tossed into the air; another screamed as he was set ablaze. An incendiary charge came at Ingram. He rolled to douse the flames. Spinning tires squealed. The Dodge flew across the warehouse, in reverse.

The warehouse gate burst open. The Dodge Sprinter leapt out of the warehouse. Its rear doors torn from their mounts by the impact. An agent, poised by Fox 3, was almost pancaked between the Dodge and Fox 3. More explosions rocked the warehouse. Fire belched out through the jagged hole in the gate. Depalma stumbled out of the narrow personnel door.

The Sprinter turning a tight arc on its right-hand wheels and raced for the main road. By the time Winters reacted, it was too late. The van had turned a corner, out of sight. He ran across the roof shouting, "Somebody get that van!"

In reply Eagle 1 buzzed the warehouse and Winters leapt aboard. The helicopter chased the van. A bullhorn came to life, "Pull over now!"

Ingram leapt out of the shattered warehouse gate, took in the destruction around him, and ran for his Explorer. "Go! Go! Go!" he shouted to Depalma, who was already behind the wheel, turning the ignition. Ingram jumped in through the open passenger door as it passed.

The Explorer fishtailed behind the fleeing van. It drew parallel with the Sprinter.

*Make it look real.*

The Sprinter swerved hard. Its front fender rammed the Explorer. The Explorer veered away. An oncoming truck honked loudly and Depalma veered back again to avoid a collision.

Eagle 1: "Port Police have cordoned off the exits!"

Depalma caught up with the Sprinter and angled in from the right. The front fenders of the two vehicles locked in a tug-of-war. Metal shrieked and sparks flew.

Eagle 1 pitched its nose down. The door was thrown open; Winters raised his rifle. When the pilot manoeuvred to give him a clear line of fire, the sharpshooter fired.

The Sprinter's rear-left tire flapped on the wheel. The crippled van wobbled unsteadily, swerved wildly. Medera lost control. The van turned in a tight anti-clockwise arc and flipped over, skidding on its side.

The Explorer came in screeching, brake-locked tires drawing twin skid marks into the road and rammed into the van's cargo bay.

Ingram and Depalma shielded their faces as momentum sent the Explorer *inside* the bay of the van.

The helicopter hovered. Winters' rifle remained trained on the cabin.

Ingram and Depalma stared at the spiderwebbed windscreen.

"Too real," Ingram muttered in dismay.

They climbed out, fighting the airbags. Ingram examined the underside of the van for handholds and footholds. He climbed onto the left flank of the van, pulling himself over the running board. He made his way to the driver's door, which was facing the sky. He saw Depalma making his way toward the cabin from around the roof.

Medera was pinned in tight.

"It's me," Ingram assured him, "it's done." He signalled Winters to hold fire.

Medera raised his hands awkwardly in his crushed position.

# CHAPTER 29

---

## FBI LA Field Office, Wilshire Boulevard

Everybody was watching the televisions mounted on the wood-panelled walls. An ICE team was also present in a huddle. *Breaking News* flashed across the ticker. The TV showed the scene outside the warehouse in LA Port, an aerial shot.

Ambulances and an ICE bus were drawn up near the destroyed gate. Fire crews were bringing the last of the fires under control. Paramedics hurried through the aftermath with gurneys. The ICE agents were doing a good job of keeping the reporters from the illegals. But they could be seen boarding the bus.

A news reporter appeared before the warehouse. "...questions being raised about the recklessness of this raid..." She deftly tamed a stray strand of hair and continued, "The images you will see are disturbing, to say the least..." She walked away from the cameraman, toward the warehouse. She pointed at something, and the image jittered, swung low, settling on the body bags lined against one wall. The reporter could be heard off-camera. "The warehouse is leased by Gunther Trade. Chairman, Lars Gunther will cut short his business trip in Kuwait to address the situation here." The reporter reappeared. Revulsion and horror crossed her features. It was enough to lead her viewers' emotions and thoughts. "More on this story as it develops... I'm Maria Torres for NBC, live from LA Port." The camera caught the ICE bus leaving the scene. Its windows were tinted but everybody could imagine the photo that would occupy tomorrow's news headlines.

Ingram's mind had wandered. He shut his eyes. He had a vision of Madeline and Lisa in body bags. He clenched his fists; his breathing grew shallow. His faceless nemesis taunted him. He reopened his eyes and asked, "What's the update from the warehouse?"

Depalma said, "Six dead, two critical."

Ingram's nemesis gloated. *I win this round.* He stormed out of the room.

Vincent Medera was sitting in the interrogation room with his hands folded across his chest. A half-empty Styrofoam cup of coffee sat on the lacquered table. Medera affixed his gaze on the large two-way mirror.

On the other side of the mirror, Ingram and Depalma joined Dave Travis. They stepped aside for the ICE agent in charge, who exited in a huff. Ingram guessed the ICE was upset with Travis for not sharing intel.

Travis said, "This is on you? This bloodbath, Kirk? Is that what you want?"

"Dave..." Depalma began in a calming tone.

"And where's Imer Qerim?"

Ingram pursed his lips. *Where, indeed?* "Let me ask him."

Kirk Ingram drew a chair to the table. "What happened, Vincent?"

He was composed but the anger in his voice was evident. "We lost good agents today! Make this worth their sacrifice!"

Medera retorted, "I didn't know, I swear."

"And Imer Qerim?"

The answer came to them simultaneously.

"Please," Medera pleaded, "you have to make sure Rosalie is safe."

"Richie," Ingram called to his reflection in the two-way, "Let's go!"



# CHAPTER 30

---

## Santa Monica, Los Angeles

Leonel Novack turned the stolen Lincoln Town into an alley beside Paramount, a building owned by Gunther Trade. Every floor was leased out. Gunther Trade retained an office manned by a skeleton staff on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor.

Ahead of Novack, was a ramp with a loading dock. The dock was deserted as Zarebski had told him it would be. He walked into the dock and spied the elevator bank. He was making for the elevator when he bumped into a security guard. "Excuse me, sir."

Novack said brusquely, "I'm expected," and he brushed past the guard. Novack stepped into the elevator and pushed the button for the 4<sup>th</sup> floor.

Zarebski was waiting for him. Novack took in the sight of Imer Qerim behind Zarebski, arms folded across his chest. He made out the bulge of a weapon beneath Qerim's tailored suit. The third person in the office was an anxious man, whose eyes blinked behind wireframe spectacles.

"You had me worried with your tardiness, Novack," Zarebski said in greeting.

Ignoring the barb, Novack placed the Citex box on the table.

"Unopened."

"Good." Zarebski gestured to a chair. "Take a seat." Zarebski ran his fingers over the dented, scarred surface of the box. There was a nine-digit keypad on the side of the box. Zarebski pushed the correct combination and the box opened. The box's lid obstructed its

contents from Novack's prying eyes. Zarebski nodded to the bespectacled man. "Dr Reich, if you please." Without a word, Dr Reich carried the safebox into an adjoining room.

Zarebski turned his attention to Novack. "Are all traces covered?" "Yes," Novack said sharply.

"I see," Zarebski said looking directly at Novack. "What happened at Marina del Rey hospital?" Zarebski cocked an eyebrow. Qerim had moved ever so slightly.

"I took care of Basara."

Zarebski sighed. "In public."

"It's taken care of." Novack was emphatic.

"You are reckless!"

"The police won't come up with anything," Novack defended. "We'll be out of the country by tonight." One hand felt for his concealed Beretta Tomcat, ready to use it. "I did the job. I want my money!" They were interrupted by Dr Reich who stuck his scrawny neck around the door. He announced with a tremor, "It is Citex." Then he started because Novack had used the distraction to point his gun at Zarebski and Qerim.

Zarebski said, "You're making a mistake."

"My payment!" Novack levelled the gun at Zarebski's heart. "Now," Novack said. "Two million US dollars and an additional two million for my losses."

Zarebski hesitated.

Novack gestured menacingly with the gun. "You know the account number."

"Okay, okay," Zarebski said. "I'll do it." He paused. "But you will spend this money hiding from Lars Gunther."

"Get on with it!"

Zarebski called his banker. Novack paid attention while Zarebski relayed wiring instructions. "It's done," Zarebski confirmed after a bit.

Not taking his eyes off Qerim and Zarebski, Novack fished out his phone and dialled his banker in the Cayman Islands. His features relaxed when he got confirmation that he was richer by four million US dollars. He clicked off and said, "Toss your phones to the floor, kick them over."

Zarebski and Qerim complied. Novack stamped hard, crushing the devices.

Qerim moved. He swiped a paperweight off a nearby desk at Novack. The projectile struck Novack in the forehead. Novack's gun went off. Qerim had already pushed Zarebski to one side while he dived behind the desk. Novack stumbled backward, then fled for the door. He fired wildly as he went. Qerim popped up, gun in hand and calmly loosed three shots. Novack faltered, recovered, made it through the door.

"Did you get him?" Zarebski asked.

"Yes."

"He escaped."

"He won't get far."

"Go check!" Zarebski insisted.

And Qerim would have if not for the phone call he received. He frowned, answered it. And heard, "The warehouse was hit!"

# CHAPTER 31

---

## Marina Del Rey Hospital

LAPD detective James Connor was black. He was distinguishable by his mop of curly white hair, bushy white eyebrows, and a Van Dyke moustache. He was driving to Marina del Rey when the dispatcher told him there had been a shoot-out at the hospital. Connor gunned the accelerator while he called the Officer in Charge.

"How bad is it?" he asked the OIC.

"Three dead, one injured. Eyewitnesses say there was a woman who was being shot at. But she fled. Assailants were all male. We located the car they used, abandoned not far from here."

Okay, Connor thought confidently, there would be many eyewitnesses. They would get the guys soon. "Who are the victims?"

"Mikhail Basara, Office Pewitt, Carl Landis."

Connor closed his eyes at the mention of Pewitt's name. "I'll be with you in ten minutes." He clicked off, turned on his siren, weaving through traffic.

The hospital's façade was abuzz with activity. Patrol cars were in the driveway. Connor parked and hailed the OIC. As he walked over, he noticed gratefully, that most of the bystanders were more terrified than injured. Hospital staff were going around, checking on them. The OIC said, "Looks cut-and-dried."

"Show me."

Connor stood outside Mikhail Basara's room. Crime scene investigators crowded the hallway. Landis' body lay at the door. The opposite door was ajar, the lock splintered. Connor stepped into the room, noted the dead bodies, and concurred with the OIC's statement, "Yeah, cut-and-dried." He could piece together what had happened. "Basara was the target. Officer Pewitt used the toilet, and when he exited, the killer got him." He pointed to Landis.

"Wrong place, wrong time."

The OIC said, "Landis came up from the morgue with a woman, Amanda Gunner."

The name rang a bell. The Coast Guard had picked up an Edward Gunner. "Edward Gunner's daughter."

"CCTV footage shows they stumbled upon the killer. He got rid of Landis." As one, the OIC and Connor looked at the splintered door in the opposite wall.

"She ducked in there," Connor completed. He went into the opposite room, peered in. A CSI team was in the room.

"Jumped to the ground," the OIC said.

Connor raised an eyebrow as he looked down.

"They tried to run her down. She got saved by an ambulance that turned into the hospital just then, affording her time to get away."

"Can we ID the guys from CCTV?"

The OIC's expression fell. "No. Their features are concealed at all times. Everybody saw *what* happened. But not *who* the guys were."

Connor said, "Then the woman is our only lead?"

"That's my guess."

"Yet, she fled." *Why?*

# CHAPTER 32

Novack watched the speedometer needle rise into the red. He was bleeding profusely and felt faint. He let his foot off the gas and pulled up in a cloud of dust. Dragonflies buzzed over the grass on the side of the road. The setting sun highlighted the tops of the blades. A bird twittered. He had to get to a clinic soon, or he would die. The thought spurred him on, and he started the car.

He drove, hunched over the steering column. His vision was blurring. The Lincoln Town roared. His eyes strayed to the dashboard. He looked up... and saw the flashing emergency lights of a vehicle broken down in the road.

A split second later he was whiplashed against the steering column. His sternum cracked. Blackness overcame him. The kinetic energy of the car unleashed itself in a fantastic rebound. It whipped up into the air spinning away from the smashed tail end of the stalled truck like a propeller undone from its mounting. It landed on its tail and flipped twice. On the second flip, the tank blew, ripping the vehicle apart in flame. The force from the explosion tossed the wreck into the field. The car bounced off an embankment, into a gutter, rose again and smashed into a big tree.

Two men ran down the embankment to where the car lay. A gust of wind sent searing waves of heat at them, and they backed off to safety, their eyes burning.

One of them shouted. "Whoever was in can't be alive."

"Call an ambulance."

"Holy *shit*!"

# CHAPTER 33

---

## Virginia

Reed Michigan dined at Filomena on the Potomac every Wednesday. Unless he was travelling. The restaurant's management held a corner table for him until 9pm. If he did not show by then, they understood he was not coming. This was the comforting constant in his life. It was the place he knew he would be undisturbed.

So, when the maître d' approached him in the middle of his *costoletta di vitello* to say there was somebody to meet him, he was surprised. He dabbed his lips with a napkin, looked around the man toward the foyer.

He almost choked on his food.

"If I got into the country without raising flags," Caliph Deminksi said as he sat opposite Michigan, "you know you have a big problem."

Michigan was incredulous. Words failed him.

The Russian grinned. "Drink your wine."

Michigan obeyed. His composure failed him when he said, "What... how..."

"I'm the messenger, Reed." Deminksi slid a photograph across the table. "Recognise him?"

"Alexander Reich." Michigan's voice was hoarse. His mind was racing. He looked out the big windows.

"I'm alone," Deminksi assured him. "And this is Alexander's twin." Michigan listened in stunned silence.

"Alexander Reich is the mousey scientist Samuel Fisher recruited. He played you well." The way Deminksi was dropping names, Michigan's heart was racing. The guy knew everything, it seemed. Deminksi tapped the photo. "This man murdered Samuel and stole Citex from Kronj. Then he planted the facemask in his getaway car to throw everybody off. Had us fooled for a while."

"Who is he?"

"A nameless foot soldier for Osvetljiv Anđeli."

"I've heard that name. The Avenging Angels, a Croatian gang."

"The Reich twins have familial ties with Osvetljiv Anđeli."

"It doesn't make sense. Citex is a... step up from people trafficking."

"Extortion. You guys, my guys would shit bricks if somebody called and said they had Citex secreted across the country." He laughed.

"You know who else has ties with them?"

Michigan's look said: *I'm getting used to not knowing.*

"Lars Gunther."

Michigan had watched the news about the warehouse raid in LA. He could not help wondering if Deminksi's timing was planned.

"Look, Reed: Russia does not want to use Citex. We were going to store it and throw away the key." *Yeah, right.* "But then this happened. I nearly paid for it with my life. That's why I started digging. Like you." His tone mocked Michigan's lack of progress.

"Gunther has Citex. And he intends to produce more of it."

"He can do that?"

"You are the one who gave Alexander Reich an American passport."

"Reich is here?"

"In Lake Las Vegas. None of the original scientists are alive. But Reich might be capable of reverse engineering Citex."

"Why are you here?"

"Because I love America, man."



# CHAPTER 34

---

## Beverly Hills, Los Angeles

The shady street was lined with beautiful houses. The Hollywood sign was visible on the nearby hills. "There," Depalma said pointing. Ingram parked. They walked to Rosalie Palermo's house. Ingram unlocked the little gate. A paved path bisected a small garden, to the porch. *Nice*, Ingram thought, noticing that the open garage was empty. He joined Depalma at the front door. Depalma pushed the buzzer, and waited, tried again. "She's not in," he concluded. "Let's hope that's all it is," A trace of concern seeped into Ingram's voice. "Let's wait in the car."

Bon Jovi sang '*Superman Tonight*' on the Explorer's stereo. Depalma, more of a Clapton guy, knew Ingram was a fan of the band. He could not remember the last time he and Ingram had had a casual chat. "You still play the guitar, Kirk?"  
"No."

"I remember the impromptu jam sessions at Quantico."

"The last time I played, I sang *Always on my Mind*." He smiled sadly, his eyes brimming. "It was the evening of *that* day." Depalma was silent. He pressed his eyes, fighting memories. "Until that night, I hadn't realised how blessed I was, Richie. When I returned home from the hospital, the guitar was still where I had left it. I saw it and cried. I cried all night. In the morning, the guitar represented everything I loved and everything I lost. I never played it since." For a minute, they were silent, listening to the intro of Waylon Jennings' '*Don't Think Twice*'. Ingram had an eclectic mix tape.

"Life," Ingram said contemptuously, "is not fair."

Depalma was saved from having to comment. A silver sedan turned into Rosalie's garage. Ingram snapped out of his brooding. "Let's go!"

Ingram rang the buzzer. The door cracked open on a night chain. A woman peeked out at them. She was in her mid-thirties, well proportioned, stunningly beautiful. Her dark cascaded to her shoulders.

"Ms Palermo?"

"Yes."

Ingram flipped his credentials saying, "Special Agents Ingram and Depalma."

She yelped and started to close the door in their faces. Ingram's palm slapped against the wood, stopping the door. "Ms Palermo —" "Please leave!" She struggled with Ingram for the door. Her voice was pleading.

"Vincent Medera sent us to get you!" She hesitated. "He's working with us."

She was terrified by that revelation. "Why would he do that?" Her eyes scanned the street.

Ingram noticed her wrist. The skin was bruised. "Imer Qerim did that to you?"

"He swore he would kill me if Vincent —"

*Enough talk.* "Let's get out of here before Imer Qerim comes for you, yes?"

"May I see your badges again?"

They heard tires screeching. Both agents looked. A black SUV was hurtling down the quiet street and it angled toward the house.

"Get in!" Ingram shouted. He shoved forward, tearing the door open. Rosalie screamed as she was thrown backward. The night

chain swung on the splintered clasp. The agents piled in as the SUV smashed the gate in and skidded to a halt shy of the porch. Ingram fumbled to push the door shut. Depalma grabbed Rosalie and hurried her into the house.

Amid it all, Ingram's eyes strayed to framed photographs on the mantelpiece in the tastefully adorned living room. Medera was in almost all of them.

Ingram ordered, "Get below the windows and stay quiet!"

# CHAPTER 35

---

## Koreatown, Los Angeles

Amanda Gunner sat behind the neon sign in the window advertising Han Li's Pet Clinic. Han Li, a Korean, was an old friend. He had inherited the clinic from an aunt. The Labrador he had adopted regarded her with sleepy eyes; a goldfish (abandoned on Li's doorstep) puckered its lips at her; a single cockatoo eyed her suspiciously before ruffling its mending wing.

It was quiet, and she needed the quiet, to sort herself out.

But Han Li was concerned. He meant well but could get over-bearing. "You're limping," he observed.

She nodded. "Uh-huh."

"Hurt your lip, too. Looks bad."

"It's nothing. I'm fine."

"If you say so," He was unconvinced. "Uh, listen, you want something to eat or drink because you look hungry. I have Chinese. Pork Hunan and egg-fried rice."

She was grateful. For all her lunch plans at Norton's meeting...

"Thanks. I'm famished."

"You got it."

She used a small washbasin in the back to freshen up. Amanda kicked off her shoes, hitched up her skirt, rested one foot on a wooden stool. She examined her leg, twisting it for a better view. It was not broken, but there was a red welt running the entire length. It hurt to touch.

Why had she run when she should have gone straight to the police? Everybody would be looking for her. The answer was simple: Her father was dead; his chest had looked like a wrecking ball had struck him. Landis had been murdered before her eyes. Then, there was a guy shooting at her. She had jumped out of a first-floor window! She had nearly been run over. An instinct of self-preservation had told her she needed to get away from there. She had driven faster than she had ever driven. She had lost track of time, or how far she had gone until a horn blared. A semi-trailer barely missed T-boning her Camry. It was then she had come to a screeching halt. Right on an intersection. Amanda had her hands clenched on the wheel in a death grip, her foot still pressing the brakes. Gradually, she felt her shoulders and neck relax. As her vision focused, she realized people were staring at her. She looked around and found that she was in Koreatown. She had driven to a place her subconsciousness knew was safe from the numerous times she had been there, as a child, to be with the animals.

While she ate, Amanda recalled Landis telling her Basara had deliriously mentioned frogmen. What had Gunner and Basara stumbled upon during their dive, that warranted their deaths?

"Amy," Li interrupted, "how is your dad?"

She sighed and her face fell. "He's dead, Han." She said it so casually. "This morning from... injuries."

"Injuries?" He was still processing the information.

She decided to be glib. "He dived down to a wreck," she said. "It happened there."

He rubbed his hands nervously, cracked his knuckles. "Oh my God, Amy. I'm so sorry."

She nodded. "Everybody is."

"But why didn't you tell me? Amy."

"I'm trying to stop thinking of it. That's why."

"Oh my, god!" He began pacing restlessly. "Listen, anything I can do..."

"Thanks," she gave him a tired smile. "Really."

"You call me, you hear?"

"I will. Thank you."

"Yeah. Just call me. Anytime."

"I will."

"Shit!"

"I know."

He sat heavily, lost in thought. The cockatoo squawked to get his attention as if to ask, 'What's wrong, Mr Li?'.

Amanda's hand strayed to her skirt pocket, and she felt her phone. She got it out, regarded its cracked screen. She pushed the power button. The screen remained unchanged. She pushed it longer and was relieved when it came to life. It had probably been knocked 'off' when she fell out the window. One half of the screen was an iridescent splash of colour, but the device was working.

Amanda went online and searched for *Ocean Spirit*. She found mention of the Viking artefacts, which explained what her father was doing. Nothing else.

A thought struck her. Would she be safe at home? She felt blood rushing in her ears at that thought. Her hands grew clammy. A rational part of her mind voiced its opinion: call the police. She pushed 9, 1, 1. Her finger hovered over 'Call.'

# CHAPTER 36

The door shuddered as a body rammed into it. Ingram braced his legs. Bullets tore into the door jamb. He grimaced as splinters nicked his cheek, squeezed his eyes shut. Then he opened them wide. He had discerned two figures getting out of the SUV.

"Richie! The back door!"

The words were hardly out when the second assailant materialised in the through-corridor, from the back door. Depalma shoved Rosalie behind a big armchair, raised his Glock. Two loud gunshots were punctuated by Rosalie's screams. Depalma was thrown into a wall, his gun flying into a corner. Ingram freed his gun. He and the intruder fired simultaneously. The bullet cut a shallow furrow in Ingram's arm. He dropped the assailant. Rosalie shrieked.

The front door burst in, hitting Ingram in the back and pinning him to the wall. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Rosalie moving, the wounded assailant stirring, and Depalma's fingers twitch.

"Get back!" he warned Rosalie and pushed with his back. The door caught the front door assailant in the face. While the man staggered, Ingram threw himself clear of the door. He landed on his left shoulder, already firing upward. The front door assailant was thrown into the porch. No time to relax. Ingram pivoted and a bullet missed his head, zipping out the front door. He emptied his magazine. Rosalie covered her ears. The back door assailant fled the house.

Ingram went over to Depalma, turned him over gently. A chill hit him when he saw twin crimson blotches on Depalma's shirt, one at the base of the neck and the other at the belly. He felt for a pulse. There was none.

It took a few seconds to cut through to him. When he comprehended that Depalma was dead, Ingram sat heavily, staring at his friend in abject shock and grief. His fingers opened and his gun slipped to the carpet with a dull *thunk*.

From her hiding spot, Rosalie asked, "Is he..." The words caught in her throat when Ingram looked at her. She shuddered when it dawned on her that Depalma had taken the bullets intended for her. She spasmed and vomited.

Ingram watched her cry.



# CHAPTER 37

Evans found Amanda Gunner's photograph on the website for Paterson, Kline & Westwood. "That's her."

"She's probably at the police now," Black said. "Let's drop this."

"*If* she is with the police, *then* we drop it." With that, he called a guy who could get into the LA police databases. The answer surprised both men: Amanda had not yet been processed by the police. Evans asked the guy to locate her. The guy took time. But he came through. "I got her phone." He gave them the address for Han Li's clinic.

Evans put the car in motion. "Let's get this over with."

Amanda's finger inched nearer the screen to dial 911. The phone rang; she nearly dropped it. It was an unfamiliar number.

"Hello?"

"Amanda Gunner?"

"Yes."

"This is Detective James Connor with the LAPD. Amanda, are you safe? Are you hurt?" She felt comforted by his concern. His voice was gentle to her ears. But how could she be certain he was legit?

"I'm okay. Safe."

"Are you in a public place?"

The pet shop was a public place. "Yes."

"Many people around?"

It was deserted. "No."

"Okay, listen carefully. Do not move from there. Give me the address, and I'll come get you."

"How can I trust you?"

There was a pause. She wondered if she had insulted him. Hell with it, she thought. Somebody was trying to kill her. He said, "Call LAPD, ask for me." He clicked off.

She called 911, connected to LAPD, asked for Connor. She was connected. The same voice answered. "Satisfied?"

"Yes."

"Okay, give me the address, Ms Gunner."

She gave it to him.

"Meet you soon. Keep your phone on. I've been trying to –"

The phone went dead.

"Han, do you have a charger for this phone?" She indicated her iPhone.

He shook his head. "I use Samsung. You can use my phone."

All her numbers were on her iPhone. Connor would try to call on her phone. Nearby, there was a convenience store. They might have a charger or a USB cable.

# CHAPTER 38

Kirk Ingram flexed his fingers as he felt another panic attack coming on. He looked at the neat house across the street. The mailbox had 'Depalma' painted on it. Out of habit he palmed his pill dispenser. He popped two painkillers – the last ones – into his mouth and washed them down with the dredges of Depalma's coffee. He grabbed his jacket from where he had thrown it across the passenger seat and carefully slid his wounded arm into the armhole, gritting his teeth. He climbed out of the car and slammed the door shut, adjusting his jacket. Then with a heavy step and solemn air, he walked across to the house. The house looked peaceful and serene. Soon, Ingram thought grimly, it would not be so.

He wanted to be first to inform Erin Depalma of her husband's death before she heard it from the usual channels or on the news. Now as he opened the gate and neared the door, his legs began to wobble, and his knees turned to rubber. He wanted to run away than face Depalma's daughter and wife. He swallowed; he had to do this. He knocked twice, loud and resounding.

Erin Depalma, one of the nicest people Ingram ever knew, appeared at the door. She smiled and opened the screen door and exclaimed. "What a surprise!"

"Hello, Erin," Kirk said thankful that she had not noticed the bullet hole in his jacket.

"Richard didn't tell me you were coming over. Do come in." Ingram went in. Erin locked the door behind him. "I was just getting dinner. Richie's favourite. You'll stay, right? Why am I asking; you are going to stay."

"Where's Nisha?"

"On a date. Nice chap."

Ingram managed a smile. He sniffed the aroma from the kitchen.

"Smells delicious."

Erin blushed. "Sit. I don't have to tell you that. Be with you in a jiffy. Can I get you something to drink?"

"No, thanks."

"Sure?"

"Yeah, sure. Erin, I –"

"In a jiffy..." She flitted away.

He rubbed his hands and took a deep breath. Above the fireplace was a framed photograph of Erin and Richard at their wedding reception. Ingram had been Depalma's best man. Madeline and he had wed a year later. The other photographs were dedicated to Nisha.

"I hope Richard's coming home soon because this tastes good when it's hot."

When Ingram did not reply, she called out again, "Kirk?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Any idea when Richie will be home?"

"Erin," Ingram said. "Uh, listen..."

It must have been his tone because she came out of the kitchen. Her cheery disposition was replaced with a frown. She wiped her hands on her apron. "What is it?"

"Come here, sit down."

She came nervously and sat, looking intensely into Ingram's blue eyes, searching his face for a hint. Ingram shifted his wounded arm to a more comfortable position and when he looked at her again, she saw the tear in the fabric of his jacket. "Your jacket is – Has something happened to Richard?"

Ingram found himself saying, "Yes."

Her hands clenched in her lap and then when she saw his eyes welling, her hands flew to her mouth and she gasped, shaking her head. "No! It can't be!"

Her words broke Ingram's self-control. He covered his eyes as sobs racked his body.

Erin let out a scream. "Kirk!" she cried. She was suddenly at his side, clutching his hand, screaming in his face, "*Tell me it's not true! Kirk!*"

He reached over and embraced her. They clung to each other, sharing their grief, their bodies trembling. Her fingers dug into his wound. He flinched but held her. He needed somebody to hold on to, maybe more than she. "I'm so sorry, Erin," he whispered resting his chin on her head, stroking her hair. "So sorry."

Through misty eyes, Ingram looked at the photograph above the fireplace. And vowed to avenge Depalma.

There was a constant stream of neighbours and family. Travis and other feds had arrived to offer solidarity. The house was crammed. Nisha hugged her mother. Ingram could not bear to see Erin and Nisha so forlorn. A weathered lady with her grey hair tied in a bun offered Erin and Nisha hot tea. Mother and daughter clasped their cups, soaking the warmth. Ingram felt claustrophobic. He quietly exited the front door.

Travis found him in the front yard, staring at the night sky. "LAPD responded to a 911 close to Rosalie Palermo's house. They found a woman with a gunshot wound to the abdomen. Matches the description you gave us. They've taken her to Cedar-Sinai." Ingram was already moving to his Explorer. "I'll meet you there!"

# CHAPTER 39

The cockatoo squawked as the door tinkled open. Li was expecting Amanda or the detective. Instead, two men entered. They looked about the pet clinic, then at Li. One was like a brute out of a nightmare; the other was handsome.

"Good evening," Li managed, "how can I help you?"

The handsome man stalked to the counter. The brute locked the door, searched the back room, returned with a shake of his head.

"She's not here."

"This will take a minute," the handsome man said in a low voice, "or longer depending on how you want to play it."

Li swallowed.

"We're looking for her." Evans showed Li a photograph of Amanda on his phone.

Li hesitated.

Guarding the door the brute growled, "We *know* she was here."

A gun had appeared in Evan's hand. Li found himself confessing,

"Yes, she was here."

"And now?"

"I don't know."

He was a poor liar. Evans grabbed Li by the front of his shirt. He shoved the barrel of his Beretta XX-Treme into Li's mouth. Li's resistance vanished. "She called the police, then left to meet them. I swear."

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

Li was hauled bodily over the counter and thrown across the room.

Evans straddled him. Li squirmed as Evans started choking him.

Black watched with indifference. Li's eyes bulged; he became blue in

the face. The horror of it all settled upon him. He was going to die if he did not talk.

"Is that all?"

He managed a little shake of his head. The pressure on his neck let up a little, and he sputtered, "No, no, please. I'll talk." More pressure off his neck. He whimpered. "She has gone into the store across the street to buy a charger for her phone."

Black looked out the window and affirmed, "There is a store."

"You see her?" Evans was ready to resume strangling Li.

"No."

Evans said, "Wait here. I'll check it out." Then he threatened Li, "If she's not there..."

Li began crying. Evans stalked out, hunting Amanda.

Connor drove fast. Weaving through traffic. He had lost precious minutes in a traffic jam at a non-functioning signal. He tried Amanda's phone; the call did not connect. The world sped past his windows, streaks of light in a time-exposure photograph.

Ingram's insides were on fire. He needed painkillers before it got out of control. Ahead, he saw a sign for a pharmacy. He drove past Han Li's Pet Palace on his left.

# CHAPTER 40

Amanda Gunner stepped out of the convenience store with a compatible phone charger. A tall man approached her. He withdrew his hand from his jacket flap. And levelled a gun at her. She froze. The man did not shoot. He gloated at her plight. She backpedalled. The sensor operated door slid open. She crossed the threshold. Her injured leg gave. She fell to her butt. It saved her life.

The bullet whizzed over her head. The door began to close. Then exploded into millions of shards with the impact of another bullet. The clerk screamed.

Amanda scurried aside, knocked down a rack, spilling cans to the floor. They cascaded on her, rolled in all directions. The killer stepped into the store, onto one of the cans. He lost his footing with a startled cry. He fell to his back. The gun discharged into the ceiling.

Other patrons screamed.

Amanda grimaced as she placed weight on her wounded leg. Fright overcame pain. She hopped toward the back.

Evans regained his feet as Amanda pushed through the pneumatic door in the back of the store. His next bullet chipped the closing door. Three teenagers scrambled away from the aisle he was standing in. Fuming, he ran to the door.

Amanda looked over her shoulder and saw her assailant running toward her. The door closed. She was plunged into darkness. Her desperate hands settled on something long, circular and cold. A fire extinguisher. It felt heavy. It might work as a weapon.

The door swung open. Evans was silhouetted on the threshold. With a shriek, Amanda swung the cylinder at him. It struck Evans in the chest knocking him back. The weight of the cylinder threw her



balance off. She released it noisily to the floor. She staggered against a storage rack to remain upright. The door was swinging closed again. Amanda heard Evans wheezing. But he was recovering, and he had his gun. Sobbing with exertion and pain, Amanda pushed away from the rack. Now that her eyes were acclimatised to the dark, she discerned an exit door. She jumped at it. The handle would not budge.

"No," she pleaded as she tried again. Then her palm scraped against a key, and she twisted it. The door opened. She threw herself out into the night.

At that moment, her injured leg acted up and she collapsed, gasping for breath. One foot was still inside the store. The door rebounded on it, pinning her. She tried to wriggle loose but it was too late. She felt the grip on her ankle relax. She turned to look at the barrel of the gun. She saw her assailant's handsome face. She shut her eyes to the inevitable.

The explosion was deafening, and she heard a cry of pain. Strangely she was alive. Her fear-filled eyes opened into tiny slits. Her assailant was clutching his mangled right hand, his face contorted in pain and rage. She opened her eyes fully.

A voice behind her said, "Ma'am, I want you to get up if you can and walk to me. Keep to your left. Can you do that?"

Her assailant snarled, baring his teeth like a rabid dog, and her blood froze.

"Can you do it?" The voice was insistent. Amanda nodded and began butt-crawling, opening the gap. The assailant's cold eyes were affixed on whoever was behind her.

Her saviour said, "There's a Ford Explorer behind you. Get into it."

She regarded her saviour as she climbed into a battered Explorer. It looked like it had been in a head-on collision. The engine was running.

Ingram advanced on Evans. "Keep your hands in view."

Then he heard the growl of an engine and felt hot lights on his face. The woman he had rescued shouted a warning. Ingram jumped backwards. A Lexus zipped past him, screeching to a halt and then began reversing to run him over.

Ingram hauled himself over the Explorer's bonnet, spinning on his butt, to come down on the driver's side of the car. The Lexus rammed into the passenger door, rocking the SUV on its suspension. The woman screamed. Ingram yanked open the driver's door, jumped in. "Get down!" The passenger window imploded. The wounded man had recovered his gun and was shooting with his left hand.

Ingram jammed the pedal to the metal and the Explorer lurched forward. He swung the wheel, looking over his shoulder. The injured man was running toward the Lexus.

The Explorer hit the low flower bed that lined the pavement, ran over it and bounced onto the road. Ingram dodged around a truck, overtook it, one palm kissing the horn. In the mirror, he saw the Lexus swerve around the truck and give chase.

Connor knew it was not a good sign when he heard the sirens converging on the address Amanda had given him. He arrived outside Han Li's in time to see three squad cars screech to a halt outside a convenience store. All the activity was there. People were

streaming out, fleeing from whatever had happened inside. The flashing light bars cast blue and red light on the store, as officers went in cautiously, their guns drawn.

"They came for her!" Connor turned. A Korean was in the doorway of the pet shop. Han Li reiterated, "They came for Amanda."

# CHAPTER 41

"Who are these guys?" Ingram shouted to be heard over the roar of the Explorer, and the rush of wind from the non-existent window.

"I don't know!" Amanda shouted back. Shards of glass were entangled in her hair. They reflected the passing lights like spangles.

"Great," Ingram said as he dodged two more vehicles.

Misjudging his tone, she retorted, "Well, excuse me! I didn't ask for your help!"

"Would you rather have a bullet in your forehead?" he retorted coldly.

She had no comeback to that. Instead, she said, "Can I use your phone?"

"If it's going to help us." He tossed it to her. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched her dial a number from memory.

"Hang on!" Ingram warned. He had spotted the gunner in the Lexus readying himself for another shot and swerved.

The bullet shattered the rear-view mirror of an oncoming car in the opposite lane. The car careened across the road amidst screeching tires, vituperations, blaring horns and flashing lights. It rammed into a taxi, pushing the taxi into the path of a bus. The bus swerved hard to avoid a head-on collision, but it was too late. The bus smashed into the taxi like a charging buffalo. The taxi was hurled into the air, somersaulted twice. Some cars swerved to avoid colliding with the taxi, there were more collisions as the pile-up grew. All of this to the grinding and squealing of rending metal and screeching of brake-locked tires.

*These guys are pros*, Ingram thought. He had wounded the shooter, yet the guy was faring just as well with his other hand.

The woman was pushing redial. The call was answered.

Amanda said, "Detective Connor? Where are you? Wait, listen: I nearly got killed waiting for you and I'm in a Ford Explorer right now being chased – No it's not my car – One moment..."

She turned to Ingram. "Where are we?" Just then Ingram hung a left, downshifted, and slammed the accelerator. Amanda saw a road sign go by. She relayed the information to Connor and ended the call.

"Detective Connor's with the LAPD," she explained. "He'll be with us in a minute."

"Can we trust him?" Ingram said through clenched teeth.

"Why?"

"He was supposed to meet you. Because he was late you almost got killed." He glanced at her and saw that his assessment had rattled her.

She made up her mind. "I trust him!"

"Okay, then," Ingram said, "I'm going to open the gap."

Bullets pinged into the Explorer. Ingram dodged a pickup. The Lexus matched his moves. The rear windscreen of the Explorer disintegrated under concentrated fire. The gunner stopped to reload.

Ingram swung the Explorer across the road. "Under your seat! There's a spare gun!"

"I don't know how to —"

"You're going to drive."

Renewed gunfire pummelled the Explorer and tore away the taillights. Ingram threw the truck into S-curves. The road forked. The right lane went down an underpass while the other two went up a ramp. Ingram swerved into the centre lane and then veered into the rightmost lane. He aimed the bonnet right at the underpass and

pushed the Explorer to its limit. He lost sight of the Lexus. His sudden manoeuvre had gained them precious moments. The sound of traffic reverberated in the underpass. Amanda rummaged under her seat and retrieved a Glock. She looked at it like it was a rattlesnake.

Above, on the freeway, the Lexus pivoted a hundred-eighty-degrees, drove against the oncoming traffic, swung into the underpass, resumed pursuit.

Ingram drove recklessly. Amanda opined he was going to get them killed before the gunners in the Lexus did. Ingram's phone rang.

"Answer it," he said looking in the mirror.

Amanda held it to her ear, listened for a moment and then said, "He's busy right now and – it doesn't matter who I am and – Jesus Christ!"

She slammed the phone down on the dashboard. "Idiot!"

"Easy." *Yeah, right!*

"Sorry." She blew out air. "Travis or somebody. I tried to explain.

A wry smile spread across Ingram's countenance. The phone rang again. "Be polite, this time," he advised.

She lifted the receiver. "Hello – I'm Amanda Gunner. See? I told you it wouldn't matter and –"

"Put him on speaker," Ingram interrupted. He hit the brakes, swung the wheel left throwing the car into a controlled skid.

"Will you stop throwing this truck all over the road!" she yelled.

Ingram heard Travis' voice over the phone: "What the hell is going on!"

Amanda held out the phone to Ingram as he accelerated again. The truck fishtailed. "Travis, I'll be at Cedars shortly!"

"What are you doing?" Amanda was petrified. They were driving in the wrong direction. Toward their pursuers.

"Who is that?" Travis roared. "Where are you?"

Ingram yelled back. "I'm in a bit of a situation here."

"Situation?"

"Not now," Ingram said through clenched teeth. "I'll tell you when we meet." Then to Amanda. "End the call. Hold on!" He heard Travis swearing. "If it rings again, don't answer."

"Whatever you say," Amanda screamed. She had the *oh-shit* bar in a death grip, her face ashen. Then some more cars parted, revealing the Lexus, coming at them. Her eyes widened.

Ingram saw the gunner aiming the Beretta at them. The two vehicles raced at each other.

"Grab the wheel," he ordered, suddenly.

"What!"

He grabbed the Glock from her hand and relinquished the wheel. The Explorer careened out of control as she fumbled. Then she grabbed the wheel bringing it on track. Amanda screamed as a truck's headlights blinded her. She swung wildly missing the truck and then swung again, around a sedan.

Ingram instructed, "You see that break in the traffic? Cut into it now!"

Amanda shut her eyes and twisted the wheel to the right. The Explorer cut diagonally through the traffic. The two vehicles would pass each other.

Ingram pushed the Glock out the window and squeezed the trigger. Bullet holes arced across the bonnet, windscreen and passenger doors of the Lexus. The gunner was thrown inside the car. The two

cars passed within inches of each other. The Lexus hit the wall of the underpass and rebounded with a loud crash. It skidded on its side in a shower of sparks, turned onto its roof. Its wheels spun in the air.



# CHAPTER 42

Ingram took back control of the truck from Amanda. He swung the Explorer broadside, stamped on the brakes. The traffic in the underpass had come to a disarrayed halt. Occupants abandoned their cars, ran for cover.

"Stay inside," Ingram ordered. As got out, reloaded his Glock. The Lexus was forty feet ahead. Ingram darted from one stalled car to another. The silence in the underpass was broken by gunfire from the Lexus. He ducked behind a taxi. The car lowered as its tires were deflated. Ingram peeked and fired a short burst at the Lexus. Glass shattered.

Silence.

He crawled the other way, using the taxi as a shield. He sprinted for the carrier bed of the pickup truck in front of the taxi. He leapt into the bed of the pickup and sheltered behind the cabin. From the pickup to the Lexus was open road. Twenty feet.

Big hands reached out and yanked him *right out* of the carrier and slammed him into the road on his back. As he was tossed in the air, Ingram realized that while he was taking cover behind the cab, one of the men from the Lexus had extricated himself and had sprung a trap of his own.

Ingram tried to bring the Glock up, but Black knocked it away and punched Ingram in the face. Two more blows winded him. There was a *zing* as the man unsheathed a combat knife. Its serrated edge came for Ingram's neck. In the nick of time, Ingram grabbed hold of the Black's wrist, halting the plunge. The tip of the knife was inches from his face.

Black put the full weight of his body behind the knife.

Evans coughed blood. The Beretta XX-TREME had fallen from his hand. A bullet had ricocheted off the Lexus's B-bar and hit Evans in the abdomen. He was tough, but he knew when he was beaten. With great effort, he unbuckled his seatbelt. His body fell to the roof of the Lexus. He rolled over, kicking glass, plastic, and other debris of the crash. He crawled out of the car and rested a moment, breathing heavily, clutching his mangled hand to his chest. He spied his Beretta and grasped it. He used it to lever himself to his knees. Then he stood, eyed the fight between Ingram and Black. Police sirens were nearby. Evans spotted an abandoned Volkswagen. Panting, he climbed into it, coughed more blood. His vision blurred, but he put the car in motion and fled the scene.

Ingram's grip was failing, and he decided to use the brute's strength against him. He pushed the knife to the right while craning his neck far to the left and releasing his grip on the man's hands. The blade's tip jabbed the road instead of Ingram's neck. Ingram took advantage of the split-second surprise his manoeuvre had won him. He bucked his knees somersaulting the brute over his head. Both men scrambled to their feet. The brute pivoted and, quick as a flash, threw the knife underhand at Ingram.

Ingram ducked and the knife embedded in the carrier of the pickup truck. Ingram charged the brute, knocking him down. Yet the man was not undone. With an animal cry, he tossed Ingram aside like a doll.

Ingram landed near his Glock. His fingers closed around the gun as the man charged. Ingram fired at point-blank range. The rounds ploughed into the giant but still he came, his big hands open wide to crush Ingram's head.

Amanda watched as the giant smothered Ingram. Then she saw Ingram extricating himself from under the body and drag himself away. Ingram propped himself upright against the pickup truck. She unlocked the door and ran toward Ingram. She leaned over him.

"Are you okay?"

"I guess," he groaned. "Here, help me up." It was a bit of a struggle worsened by her injured leg, but she managed to get him to stand. They looked at each other properly for the first time since they met. Ingram wondered aloud, "Did you shut your eyes when you were driving?"

The underpass was thrown into flashing lights by the LAPD cars. Detective Connor weaved past the barricades and spotted Amanda Gunner sitting in one of the paramedic ambulances. She was holding an ice pack to her cheek while a paramedic gingerly picked pieces of glass from her hair.

"Ms Gunner?" Connor queried.

The paramedic nodded a 'hello' to Connor. "This will sting a bit," he warned Amanda. He held a swab in his hand. She winced as the antiseptic touched a shoulder wound. "It's not bad," the paramedic said in a comforting voice.

Connor placed his jacket about her shoulders. "I'm terribly sorry I was delayed. Traffic was horrible."

"I was attacked outside Han Li's," Amanda explained in a quivering voice, "and would have not made it if not for Kirk Ingram." She gestured to another paramedic van nearby.

Connor noticed Ingram sitting there, sizing him up. Ingram's face was a bruised, and he had a cut above his right eye. He put out a hand, "Detective."

Connor shook his hand and said, "Thank you for what you did tonight." Then he looked around at the traffic pileup, the overturned Lexus, the bullet-ridden Explorer, the police cars and paramedic vehicles, and whistled. He asked Amanda, "Do you recognise the men who attacked you?" He elaborated, "Are they from Marina del Rey?"

She shook her head ruefully. "I hope I'm not a target for two groups of killers."

He nodded at that logic. He spied the man whom Ingram had shot and went over. Ingram and Amanda joined him, peered over Connor's broad shoulders. Connor asked one of the officers, "Any ID?"

"No," the officer said. "Just a cell phone in the car." He gestured to where the evidence team was combing the crash site with plastic baggies and tweezers. Connor, Ingram and Amanda went over to the Lexus, careful to step around the markings the forensics team had used to circle evidence.

Ingram started. "Where's the other guy?"

"What other guy?" the forensics officer asked. He was holding up a phone for Connor to inspect. "There's nobody else. No other personal effects."

"Show it to me." Connor put his hand out for the phone. The officer hesitated. "This is my case, officer," Connor said. "I want to look at the phone."

The forensics officer handed Connor a pair of gloves and gave him the phone. The phone was unlocked. Connor found the call log, then found a photo of Amanda in the Downloads folder.

Ingram said, "There were two of them, detective. Comb the area."

Connor nodded. "Okay."

Ingram addressed Amanda. "You're safe now."

Amanda stared blankly at him and said, "What is *happening*? Who are these people?"

"That's what we are going to find out," Connor interjected. She did not acknowledge that he had spoken. "Amanda?" he said, "we'll protect you." She looked at him with sad eyes. "Okay?"

She nodded.

Connor's phone buzzed. He glanced at the screen and took the call.

"Yep," he said. He became excited. "Get somebody on it. Ok, thanks." He pinched his brow and squeezed his eyes shut in deep thought. "She's a rookie, but she's good. Put her on it and I'll check with her in the morning." He ended the call, stared at Amanda.

"This morning, a Lincoln Town was reported stolen near Marina del Rey. We found it. It crashed into a truck."

Ingram asked, "Related?"

"Could be." He shook Ingram's hand again. "Thanks, once again. We'll take it from here."

"No problem," Ingram said. To Amanda: "Take care."

"I'd like to pay for the damage to your car," Amanda blurted. When he hesitated, she persisted, "Please, it's the least I can do."

Ingram reconsidered, "If it's no problem."

"It's not; give me your contact number."

He handed Amanda his card. "'Night!"

As he passed by Connor, he stopped and said in a low voice, "Those guys were pros. You need anything, call me."

"Thanks," Connor said, "I'll let you know if we need anything."

Ingram noted his tone. "I'm only offering to help."

Then he walked away, climbed into his battered Explorer, backed the truck out. He still needed painkillers. Then he had to go to Cedar-Sinai. Then he needed to be alone.

# CHAPTER 43

---

## Gunther Trade Tower, Inglewood

The Gunther corporate jet taxied to a halt at LAX. A Rolls Royce Phantom limousine was waiting as Gunther disembarked. A chauffeur, dressed in an immaculate uniform, opened the door for Gunther.

Gunther settled comfortably into the plush seats and looked at the woman waiting for him. NBC news reporter Maria Torres twisted her body seductively, smiled at him saying, "How was your trip?" "Eventful," he replied, accepting the vodka she had poured out for him. The Rolls began moving. "Come here." He patted the upholstered seats beside him.

She slid over and he put the vodka to her lips. She sipped, her lipstick staining the crystal. His hands caressed her back, dropped around her slim waist. He breathed into her ear. "You handled the warehouse story well." She presented her neck to him. He kissed it. His hand rose to her breasts. She placed a palm atop his crotch. As the limousine turned onto the freeway, she climbed atop him.

The 29<sup>th</sup> floor of Gunther Trade Tower was a *massive* aquarium. It was designed around a coral reef and tropical theme. On occasion, brilliant lights floodlit the aquiline blue water, showcasing the tropical fish and marine flora for miles around. The aquarium was self-cleaning, could dispense food for its occupants, and perform a

host of functions automatically. Additionally, Gunther employed a dedicated team for its upkeep.

The Rolls Royce pulled into the parking lot. Zarebski's Cadillac was already there. Gunther had no second thoughts about what he had decided. Both his top guys had failed him. But he needed one more than the other.

The security guards at the reception stood to attention when he strode into the lobby. Maria's heels echoed in the atrium. Gunther and she took his private elevator to the penthouse on the 30<sup>th</sup> floor. "I won't be long," he told her.

A secret door admitted him to his executive office. He pushed a button that activated an intercom in the waiting room outside. "Zarebski," he said, "come in."

The lights in the expansive office were dimmed. The floor was the roof of the aquarium. The water tank cast an undulating reflection everywhere. A school of brightly coloured Imperial Angelfish slid beneath Zarebski's polished shoes. He looked hard for Gunther among the shadows, reflections and optical illusions.

Lars Gunther was standing by the windows that overlooked Los Angeles. Without turning, he said, "I had promising meetings with our partners in Kuwait."

Zarebski sensed movement underfoot. The broad, milk-white back of a great white shark slid beneath him. The nineteen-foot-long fish seemed to take forever to slip by. Zarebski shivered at the menace it exuded. The apex predator's enclosure was directly beneath Gunther's office and penthouse.

"You promised me Novack was the man for the job."

"He got us Citex."



Gunther turned. "Then he shot up a hospital and extorted me of four million dollars!"

"Which he won't be spending."

Gunther was not finished complaining. "I'm overseas selling this great idea and back home our cash cow is hit by the feds! They were laughing at me, Boris!"

Zarebski pounced at the opportunity to deflect the heat. "I warned you, sir, about Qerim. He has lost focus. America has gotten to him."

"Qerim led the feds to our warehouse?"

"One of his drivers, Vincent Medera, is on the FBI's watchlist."

Gunther was silent, pondering this. He was enraged Qerim had neglected to mention this suspicion. The guy was at Lake Las Vegas already, with Reich. Gunther glowered at the thought of Qerim and his goons gambling, drinking and flirting in Las Vegas. His fists clenched.

Zarebski pressed on, "We need to get him in line or..."

"I need to give the feds somebody, Boris," Gunther said, "Qerim is good with the foot soldiers. I can't do his job."

With a start Zarebski understood the implications. "Sir, you –"

Gunther cocked an eyebrow. "You hear that?"

Boris Zarebski looked around. "No, I don't."

"Thought I heard somebody calling for help."

"It must —"

Gunther pushed a button at his desk. The concealed trap door in the glass floor opened. Zarebski dropped *into* the aquarium. The trapdoor slid shut, cutting off his scream. Gunther watched Zarebski twist and turn in extreme terror. Bubbles streamed from his mouth as water flooded his lungs. Zarebski's fists banged futilely against

the thick floor and his horror-stricken face pleaded with Lars Gunther.

Zarebski lungs felt like searing hot irons were pushed into them. His mind screamed: curses, prayers, expletives, pleas. He began to spasm. Blackness encroached on his vision. A deadly form rushed him.

The great white shark slammed into him and clamped his torso within its razor-sharp jaws. A dark cloud of blood billowed out into the water as the shark streaked away with its dinner.

# CHAPTER 44

---

## Cedar-Sinai Hospital

Travis looked up as Ingram entered, noted the fresh bruises and cuts. And the glassy look in Ingram's eyes. Ingram was on painkillers, he knew. His look said, *'We'll discuss it later'*.

The ME cleared her throat. If she wondered about Ingram's dishevelled appearance, she did not show it. She indicated the body on the autopsy table and stood back. "Recognize her?"

Ingram stared at the young woman. She was pretty, East European features. He was shocked at his feelings. He had expected a rush of anger and satisfaction. He found the puncture wounds beneath the left breast and in the stomach. His hand flew to his own side and through the fabric, he felt his scar.

Travis asked, "Kirk?" Ingram frowned with concentration. He had presumed the killer was a man. He shook his head. "It was dark."

The ME nodded. "I'm sure a ballistics test will settle the matter."

"I'm sure," Ingram said, distractedly. He was peering at the woman's arms. A tattoo of a thorny vine began at her wrist, climbed up her forearm and arm, terminating in a tattooed necklace.

Interspersed in the vine's tendrils and runners were representations of a Middle Eastern sabre, a scimitar.

He clicked pictures of the tattoos on his phone and emailed the set to the agent assigned to protect Rosalie Palermo. He added a note: "Ask her if she has seen these tattoos on Imer Qerim."

"Get some rest," Travis advised when they stepped into the corridor. "Let the guys handle it. We've sent the tattoos to Quantico, too. Anything turns up, I'll call you." Ingram did not say anything. Travis caught him by the arm and stopped him. The two men stared at each other. "You hear me?"

Ingram sighed. "You'll call?"

"I will. Now, get some rest."

Ingram nodded, "All right."

"That's better."

Outside, Travis watched Ingram climb into his battered Explorer and drive away. Travis shook his head. Ingram was hurtling toward self-destruction. With Depalma gone, Travis was the only person to vouch for Ingram. How long could he do it?

# THE HAUNTING

Rain. Impenetrable, driving rain. The drops are acidic. Where the rain falls, it sings his skin. He is not alone. He can hear them. The cannibals howl as they skitter amid the ruins of the city. The city has fallen to the cannibals. He hears the drums beat the call to war. They brought this war upon the city with their insatiable thirst for the blood of the angels. Let them come. He will rip their heads off their gargoyle bodies.

His hands tremble. His fingers shiver as his claws are unsheathed. He growls and snarls. *Come.*

They emerge in hordes from the ruins. They have come to fight on his turf. They have followed him into this hallowed sanctum of his consciousness.

They run like rabid animals. He roars and charges into their ranks. There is no turning back as they converge on him, pounce on him, surround him. He can feel their claws and their teeth sink painfully into his flesh. He slashes at them, he bites. They are numerous but they are weak, cowardly, dependent on their numbers. He is but one. But he is enraged and beyond any care.

There is intense pain. Agony. He has been eviscerated. They smother him, but he fights back. Ripping into them. Tearing them apart. There is a ringing in his head. Sharp and shrill. He shakes his head to clear it. Everything is spinning. Everything is a blur. The ground opens to swallow him. He falls...

# CHAPTER 45

...and falls.

Kirk Ingram awoke, drenched in sweat and breathing heavily. He looked around wildly. The pounding in his head subsided. The fire in his abdomen faded. He gasped.

His phone was ringing. He reached over and held it to his ear.

"Kirk?" It was Dave Travis. "Meeting with Lars Gunther."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"We got called about the raid on the warehouse."

"I see," Ingram said.

"No painkillers. Last night —"

Ingram understood. "Sure"

"And on the way there, I want to know how you got involved in a highspeed chase that's straight out of a Michael Bay film."

"Okay."

The line clicked. Ingram rubbed his eyes. His nightmares kept getting more vivid and macabre. He had a prescription for it but was irregular with his medication. Like he wanted to be tortured.

He swung off the bed, dropped to the floor, ran through a set of

push-ups. With each exhalation, he breathed the names of the

agents lost in the raid. When he came to Richard Depalma, he

paused, muscles tense, staring at the floor. His chain, a gift from

Madeline, glinted in the sunlight from the window. Ingram sat on

the bed. Atop the side table was a framed photo of the Ingrams.

They were all smiling. Happy times. Lost times. He traced Madeline's features. Then Lisa's. He kissed them. He closed his eyes, savouring memories.

"I love you, Madeline. I love you, Lisa."

This was his morning ritual.

"I couldn't save Richard, Madeline." He buried his face in the photo.

"I couldn't save you and Lisa."

*Can I save anyone?*

He grabbed breakfast at IHOP. His phone buzzed with email. He scrolled through it while eating eggs and pancakes. The woman's tattoos had been identified by Quantico.

'The tattoos are borne by members of *Osvetljiv Anđeli* — The Avenging Angels. The Croatian human and drug trafficking organization was founded in the early 1900s. Gullible peasants are promised their children would be settled with wealthy families. Instead, they are addicted to narcotics and trafficked across the globe. Some are imbued with hatred for certain ethnicities and races to disrupt peace abroad. Recently, *Osvetljiv Anđeli* is training teenagers across the Balkans in the use of weapons. Terror and crime organizations can contract these expendable mercenaries.'

The next email was a reply from the agents protecting Rosalie Palermo. "Yes, Qerim has similar tattoos. His has more scimitars and the more loops."

So, Ingram thought, Imer Qerim and the pair who had been sent to kill Rosalie were *Osvetljiv Anđeli* recruits. The number of scimitars might represent ranks among the recruits. Qerim was higher up.

# CHAPTER 46

---

## Lake Las Vegas, Nevada

A Gulfstream touched down at McCarran airport in Nevada. It taxied to a private hangar, and a single passenger deplaned. A nondescript sedan was waiting. He climbed in and raced toward Lake Las Vegas. Lake Las Vegas comprises an artificial lake and the resorts surrounding it, about 27 km from McCarran. Conceived in 1967 by actor, J Adlair, Lake Las Vegas has changed hands over the years because of bankruptcy filings by the holding companies. Today, a few resorts, hotels, and convention centres operate, but the project is the subject of a million-dollar lawsuit.

The sedan sped along the eastern shore of the lake, kicking up clouds of dust. It headed for a property leased to a company that was a front for the CIA.

Reed Michigan's expression was stony as he eyed the solitary villa at the north-eastern tip of the lake. The villa was owned by Gunther through a shell corporation. Michigan had been up all-night processing the information from Caliph Deminksi. Begrudgingly, he marvelled at how the Russian had uncovered so much... on his own. Michigan had sent people ahead of him and then he had boarded his flight.

He turned onto a dirt track. The car bounced as it climbed a grade, halted outside a house. Michigan's guys were waiting on the porch. Every case handler kept a couple of contractors close at hand. These guys were ghosts. Loyal to Michigan.



The porch offered a vista view of Lake Las Vegas. Michigan relished the serenity and silence of the lake. The warmth of the morning was soothing. He was handed binoculars. *Back to business.*

"Alexander Reich is there. He has company. They're having breakfast."

Michigan raised the binoculars to his eyes. His jaw clenched as he recognised Reich. The men in Reich's company were armed even at the breakfast table. Their tattoos were on display. *Osvetljiv Andeli.*

"Okay," Michigan decided, "get photos. Plenty. Let's get this underway."

# CHAPTER 47

---

## 100 West, Los Angeles

Detective Connor rubbed his eyes and suppressed a yawn as he walked into the police station. After processing Amanda Gunner, he had returned home at three in the morning. Much to his wife's consternation, he had stayed up until four with paperwork. At four-thirty, just when sleep was getting to him, he caught his teenage daughter attempting to sneak out of the backdoor to meet some idiot. They had had a violent argument. She was still bolted up in her room on the phone with the idiot. He got himself instant coffee, sipped it, and felt it clear the cobwebs in his mind. Whatever was said about bad instant coffee in movies and books, Connor liked it. "Connor!"

He turned. It was Lakisha Tamura, the rookie. She was petite, Asian by birth and had recently been assigned to Connor. He had taken a liking to her almost immediately. A strange father-daughter relationship had blossomed between them. Tamura, too, had been working late on the Lincoln Town crash. But Connor had been so inundated with his notes from the surgeon who had operated on Basara, Marina del Rey witnesses, Amanda Gunner, Han Li, and the clerk and patrons at the convenience store, that he had not the time to catch up with her.

"Hey."

"Good morning to you, too."

"Yeah, 'morning,"

"The body was nearly unidentifiable. I threw up at the crash site." He loved her honesty. "We managed prints, sent it to Quantico." She paused.

"And?"

"A guy from the FBI is here."

They had rattled a cage. Connor crushed his cup, tossed it into the wastepaper basket.

FBI agent Mark Ricardo was seated at Connor's desk. He sprang to his feet when Connor arrived, clumsily knocked over a pen holder, then scrambled to clean his mess. Connor knew he would not be a hindrance to his case. Ricardo was fresh-faced, young enough to be Connor's son. And Lakisha's husband, Connor mused, judging by the looks he was grabbing from the rookie.

"Ahem."

Lakisha reddened.

"Agent Ricardo, what brings you here?"

"The prints Lakisha — um, Detective Tamura lifted from the car. They belong to one Leonel Novack. INTERPOL has a red alert on him. He runs a salvage outfit and is an arms runner."

Connor stroked his beard. "A salvage outfit, you say." He thought aloud, "Dr Gunner was diving on the wreck of *Ocean Spirit*. Gunner's daughter told me Mikhail Basara said something about being attacked by frogmen. I pulled up the manifest for *Ocean Spirit*.

Other than the Viking artefacts, most of the cargo was consigned to Gunther Trade." He eyed Lakisha and Ricardo meaningfully.

Lakisha's phone buzzed. She read her text. "A patrol car spotted the Lincoln Town, before the crash."

"Where?"

# CHAPTER 48

---

## Santa Monica, Los Angeles

Connor pulled up outside Paramount. Lakisha pointed to the alley and the loading dock. The corrugated gate was raised; there was a single security guard. Connor, Lakisha and FBI Agent Mark Ricardo approached the loading dock.

"Morning," Connor called.

The guard said, "Hi."

Connor flashed his badge. "Detective James Connor." He indicated the others. "Detective Lakisha Tamura. Agent Ricardo."

"How can I help you?"

"We're tracking a stolen Lincoln Town. It was spotted in this alley, yesterday." Connor pointed to the security cameras outside the dock. "You keep the footage from those cameras?"

"Yes. I'll call our head of security."

They waited while the head of Paramount's security was summoned. He was a soft-spoken, dapper man, who was very forthcoming. Maybe, a little too forthcoming, Connor thought suspiciously. After explaining what they were after, the trio was taken to a room where the surveillance from the building's cameras was stored. Five minutes later, they were looking at the footage from the previous day.

"Let's get to 5:45pm?" Connor requested. The time the squad car had spotted the Lincoln Town.

They watched 20 minutes of footage. The camera had a wide angle over the loading dock. Nothing. No Lincoln. The chief shook his head, "Sorry, detectives."

"That's it?" Connor asked, wondering if the patrolmen had been mistaken.

"Yeah, tell you what, we can give you this footage. But you would need a court order." He looked at them apologetically.

"Footage of nothing?"

The guy shrugged. Connor scowled. They left the office, were on their way out, when the guard at the loading dock asked, "Find what you're looking for?"

Connor kept walking. Lakisha was not raised to be impolite. She said, "There was nothing to see. Looks like we were wrong."

"But the guy was here."

They stopped in mid-step. Turned as one. Connor asked, "Which guy?"

The guard said, "Yesterday, nearing 6pm. I was called to an urgent meeting. Only I returned for my phone. That's when I saw him. I told him this entrance wasn't for visitors. He brushed past me, anyway."

"Which floor did he go?"

"Fourth."

"What's there?"

"Satellite office for Gunther Trade."

Connor and Lakisha exchanged looks. "You let him go?"

"Come on, man. A stranger shows up at the rear dock the same time I'm called away. I'm guessing I was not supposed to see him."

Connor eyed him with renewed respect. "You're pretty smart."

"What's your name?"

"Jon Straight," the guard replied. "Patrolman Straight, a long time ago." He smiled tightly at Connor. "I made some mistakes, detective. But I'm clean now."

Connor understood what he was asking. "This pans out, I'll put in a word."

"Thank you, really."

"No promises."

"No, it's great." He was beaming.

"Any idea who the meeting could have been with?"

"Sorry, no."

Ricardo said, "Looks like we need to pay the head of security another visit."

"Let's just go up to the fourth floor," Tamura suggested.

Connor smiled. "I like that, kid."

# CHAPTER 49

---

## Koreatown

Evans opened his eyes. He was disoriented. He was lying in darkness. He waited until his memory returned. He had driven the Volkswagen until his injuries began to impede his motor skills. He had ditched the car and walked. He had passed out in a gutter and had been startled awake by the horn of a semi-rig. Afraid that he had lain in the open and angry at his weakness, he had determinedly stumbled on until he found himself behind Han Li's Pet Clinic. The dead-end alley had two large garbage bins. He had spent the night inside one.

Evans gingerly raised his hand above his head, feeling the cardboard sheet he had pulled over. He gasped in pain that brought tears to his eyes. With his fingertips, he nudged the cardboard aside and let in the morning light. He took stock of his wounds. He was surprised he had not bled to death. He needed a doctor. He had an idea.

He struggled out of the bin. He sagged against it, marshalling his strength. He made it to the clinic's back door. With the butt of his gun, he smashed in the glass near the doorknob, reached in and unlocked the door.

Han Li heard the tinkle of glass. The Lab started barking. He wondered if it was Philippe, the cat. He came by every morning for milk and upset the dog. Frowning, he went into the back of the

shop. He shushed the dog. "It's only Philippe," he explained. Then he spied the glass shards on the floor. *Philippe could not have done that.*

He started. The handsome man from the previous night was pointing the same gun at him. But the face was contorted in pain. His right hand hung limp and his shirt above his waist was stained with blood.

"I need a doctor," the man rasped. The gun did not waver.

"You need a hospital," Li said, genuinely.

"You can treat me."

"Me? No. I'll call for a — "

The gun discharged and Li jumped. The dog went into a barking fit.

"You will do it," the man rasped. "You are a doctor."

"I am a veterinarian."

"I don't have a choice. Neither do you."

Li resigned to his fate.

"Do you have customers waiting?"

"No."

The man stood with effort. He locked the backdoor. "Help me."

Grudgingly, Li supported his weight. They staggered into the main area of the clinic. The man leaned against the counter. "Shut the clinic," he ordered.

Under his watchful gaze and the threat of the Beretta, Li reversed the 'Open' sign on his front door to 'Closed' and locked the door.

"Good," the man with the gun said. "Now let's get started."

Outside the back door, Philippe arrived and stood expectantly, mewling for his breakfast.



# CHAPTER 50

The first thing that Evans got Han Li to do was affix the Beretta to his left hand. Li wrapped a bandage tightly around the gun's grip and Evans' hand, up to his forearm. This was a precaution. If the pain made Evans' fingers flex open, he did not want to lose the gun. Under the bandage, Evans placed his trigger finger against the trigger guard. He wriggled the finger so that the bandage was not constrictive. He did not want to shoot Li accidentally. Yet he wanted to be able to squeeze the trigger if the need arose. Evans lay on the operating table, his torso propped with pillows. He refused to be sedated. "Painkillers," he ordered. "And be careful, doctor." Li rummaged in his supplies and found morphine. Under Evans' watchful eye, he injected a dose. "That's enough," Evans snapped. "Strap my hand down."

Li put a tourniquet on Evans' other arm and then steadied the wrist of his mangled hand to the table so that it would not jerk when he sutured it. He sterilized his instruments. The Labrador watched in silent interest. Li said, "Ready?"

The morphine was taking effect. "Give me a bit." Evans clacked his teeth. Li placed a wooden ruler in the man's mouth. Evans nodded. Li began. He washed the wound. Evans squirmed, he clenched the ruler in his jaw and hissed. Li looked at him, for permission to proceed. Evans nodded. He looked away as Li began suturing the wound.

Each piercing of the needle must have been agony, but the man bore it. Li could feel the tremors that coursed through his patient's body. He focused on the task before him and tried not to think of the gun. When he was done, Evans was gasping. He spat out the

ruler and examined the doctor's work. The patchwork on his hand was concealed by a neat bandage.

Evans said, "Take out the slug." His voice was weak, but time was of essence.

"Wait," Li said, mopping his brow. "I need a break." He had visions of struggling with the embedded slug, unable to get a firm grip on it. He licked his lips, planning the procedure: he would cut away the shirt, he would need to wipe the wound, he would need to sterilize it, he would need to shine a light, hold the wound open...

"No time," Evans interrupted his thoughts. "Give me the ruler." Li did so, and Evans bit down on it. Then he urged Li. "Come on!"

The CSI team had finished collecting evidence from the convenience store where Evans had made the attempt on Amanda's life. The glass doors were being replaced. The events of the previous night had helped sales. Only one LAPD patrolman lingered. The neighbourhood was Hwang Kim's beat, and he wanted to ensure everything returned to normal.

He became aware of a homeless woman approaching him. He recognised her. Her hair was straggly, a heavy coat fell to her knees, flannel trousers were tucked into military-issue boots. She had served. Which was why he did not write her up for vagrancy. "Officer."

She had never called him before.

"Something's wrong with Han Li."

Patrolman Kim observed Han Li's clinic was closed. The previous night's episode must have exhausted the veterinarian. Kim believed Li had decided to take the day off.

The woman continued, "Phillipe is meowing in the alley. Mr Li never ignores that cat. I'm telling you — "

"The clinic's closed."

"It was open earlier." Kim sighed. "The back door is broken into."

That got his attention. "Broken into?"

"I saw."

*You didn't think to lead with that?* He looked around at *his* neighbourhood. The peace had been disturbed last night. And now Li's clinic had been broken into. He clicked his radio, informing LAPD control he was going to investigate.

# CHAPTER 51

Li grimaced as he struggled with the slippery bullet. Evans' abdomen was taut, his eyes wide as saucers, sweat glistened on his face. His teeth were clenched so hard on the ruler, Li thought he would bite through it. His hands were pressed hard on the table, veins popping.

With a grunt of determination, Li went all out. The forceps clasped the bullet. With a *clink*, he dropped the crushed lead piece into a stainless-steel bowl. It spun a little.

Evans' body slumped; Li retreated a few steps and dropped his tools into the sink, wiped his brow. They exchanged mirthless grins.

Evans spat the bit out. "Clean it up!"

Li came forward with a swab wetted in antiseptic. Evans bore the process without any reaction. With new-found confidence, Li sutured the entry wound and bandaged it neatly. He had hardly finished when Evans attempted to stand. And promptly collapsed to the floor. At the last moment, he grasped the edge of the operating table to arrest his fall. The room spun. It was the drugs and exhaustion. Li helped him up. "You need to rest."

Evans knew the man was right. He nodded. Only for a little while. Then he would leave.

Patrolman Kim peered into the front windows of Han Li's clinic. The drapes prevented him from seeing anything but his own reflection. He followed the homeless veteran into the alley. Phillipe was still there. The cat looked at the newcomers with big mournful eyes that made Kim want to —

The woman scooped Phillipe into her arms and petted his head. The cat snuggled against her jacket for warmth.

That had been what Kim had wanted to do.

The woman indicated the broken window in the back door. Kim rattled the door; it was locked. Without a warning, she reached through the broken window, popped the lock. "It isn't, now." The door swung ajar.

With an irritated look, Kim put a hand on his sidearm and aimed his torch into the clinic.

# CHAPTER 52

Kim entered Han Li's Pet Clinic, with the woman close on his heels. He could hear low voices from inside. His hand gripped his sidearm. He froze.

Han Li was in the clinic, with another man, who was sitting up on the operating table. The man's right hand and abdomen were heavily bandaged. Bandages hung loosely from the man's left hand. The gun in his hand was steadily pointed at Kim.

"Turn off your radio," the injured man commanded. Kim complied.

"Slowly," the injured man continued, "put your gun down. You," he indicated the woman, "step into the light, where I can see you." She complied, staring at the gun without concern. Kim put his gun down.

"Kick it across." He did so. "Dr Li, bring me his gun. Hold it by the grip in two fingers."

Kim watched as Li obeyed. He clenched his teeth. Li had an opportunity and had not taken it. Li placed the patrolman's gun in the injured man's lap. "All three of you, kneel, lock your hands behind your heads." Li took his place with the newcomers.

Evans stood beside the table, unsteadily. He shoved Kim's sidearm into the waist of his jeans. "Okay."

The veteran protested. "What about Phillipe?"

"Kneel, lock your hands behind your head!"

She released the cat, who went over to Li, rubbed its head on Li's trousers.

Evans addressed Kim, "How much time do I have before they notice you are missing?"

# CHAPTER 53

---

## Gunther Trade Tower

They stood in the atrium of Gunther Trade Tower.

Travis said, "Heard from a friend. Gunther and this building are going to be featured in the next issue of Time."

Ingram looked around appreciatively. A woman in a pantsuit appeared and said, "Mr Gunther will see you now." She handed them visitor badges, gestured to a bank of elevators. Travis and Ingram clipped the badges to their lapels. They were about to get into the elevator when Ingram's phone rang. It was a number he did not recognise.

"Kirk Ingram?"

"Yes.

Travis was in the elevator with the woman. She beckoned. Ingram put up a finger. *One minute.*

"This is agent Mark Ricardo."

"What is this about, Mark? I'm about to get into a meeting."

"It's about a potential link between an LAPD homicide and Gunther Trade."

"Agent Ingram, Mr Gunther doesn't like to be kept waiting," the woman hissed.

"Mark, one moment." Ingram regarded the woman. "30<sup>th</sup> floor?"

"Yes."

"I'll take the stairs." Then to Ricardo, "Tell me."

"I'm with detective James Connor."

"I know that name."

"From last night."

"That's correct. This is partly conjecture but I know you and Travis are at Gunther Trade about yesterday's raid. Thought you might like something in your arsenal."

"Good thinking."

Ricardo told Ingram that Connor and he had a timeline: Dr Gunner had dived to the wreck of *Ocean Spirit* (chartered by Gunther Trade). He was attacked by Leonel Novack's divers. Mikhail Basara, the survivor, was killed at Marina del Rey. Ricardo and Connor reasoned Novack was cleaning up. Gunner's daughter was a witness which was why Novack's guys went after her. Meanwhile, a car stolen from the vicinity of Marina del Rey, showed up at Paramount. Novack met with *somebody* at Gunther Trade. There was no video record of Novack at Paramount. Ricardo and Connor suspected the CCTVs were purged.

While Ricardo was apprising Ingram, Lars Gunther received an urgent call from Paramount.

"Mr Gunther, sir," said the head of security, "I have a situation on my hands at Paramount and am unable to contact Mr Zarebski."

"What is the situation?"

"The FBI and LAPD are here. They are asking about a meeting that happened yesterday with Mr Zarebski."

"Did you cooperate?"

"I did. I showed them the surveillance recordings." *Which Zarebski had ordered to be purged.* "I told them to return with a warrant. But one of our guards used to be LAPD. He told them about the visitor. They returned and went to the 4<sup>th</sup> floor directly."



Gunther cursed. This was unexpected. Perhaps the FBI knew more than he thought. He decided aloud, "Ibrahim, if I call you back, it will be in the presence of federal agents."

"Sir?"

"Just listen," Gunther snapped, "Zarebski will take the fall for this."

"Yes, sir."

"*Only* Zarebski. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

The elevator *dinged*, Travis and the woman stepped out onto three inches of toughened glass. He admired the fish tank. His chaperone crossed over to an elderly receptionist near an ornate door. The portal to Gunther's throne room, Travis mused. The women spoke in hushed tones. Neither was comfortable with the delay. Travis did not mind making Gunther wait but he was more than curious about the phone call Ingram had received.

Five minutes later, Ingram huffed onto the floor.

"What's up?" Travis wanted to know.

There wasn't time to brief him, so Ingram said, "I'm not sure. But trust me."

"We are already in enough trouble, Kirk."

"I know."

"This way," the woman insisted. She opened the door with a flourish, stood aside for them.

"Good morning gentlemen," Gunther said coming around his desk, buttoning his jacket. "I'm Lars Gunther." He wore a broad ingratiating smile. Another man stood off to one side, dressed in a demure suit. Gunther shook their hands with a vice-grip. Ingram noticed Travis' grimace, and when it was his turn, he returned

Gunther's grip with one of his own. Gunther's eyes flashed momentarily. Ingram knew he had him.

"Please," he gestured to chairs.

They sat. Travis cleared his throat and cut right to the chase, "Mr Gunther, you wanted to see us."

"Before we begin, this is my lawyer, Fred McKinsley." The lawyer bowed slightly. Gunther continued playing the part of a gracious host, "Can I offer you anything to drink?" Both agents declined politely. "I will abstain as well." He made himself comfortable, composed, then, "Yes, I asked to see the agent responsible for the raid and his boss."

They waited.

"Gentlemen, I am not pleased. My stock has tumbled over allegations of involvement in human trafficking."

"Then," Ingram said, "please explain a tractor rig filled with illegals and the heavily-armed security at the warehouse."

Gunther said, "There was *no* shipment due from that warehouse yesterday. You can check our official records." Gunther looked at the lawyer.

Fred McKinsley took his cue and said, "We have a disturbing investigation in progress, involving a senior executive at Gunther Trade."

"We're listening," Travis said.

"Boris Zarebski," McKinsley went on, "seems to have been running his own business right beneath Mr Gunther's nose. It's appalling."

"Do you know where Boris Zarebski is?"

Gunther spread his hands. "Boris Zarebski is missing. This is also as disturbing, as it is condemning."

Ingram's eyes strayed to the floor. It took him a second to register the great white shark gliding beneath them. He felt an involuntary

chill and caught his breath. Its iconic dorsal fin glided by inches beneath his shoes. The shark slid past him, and he resisted the temptation to look behind and watch it. McKinsley and Gunther were observing him keenly.

Ingram said, "What about Imer Qerim? You know the name?"

McKinsley's ignorance was genuine. "No."

Gunther's poker face was a dead giveaway.

"And Leonel Novack?"

"The name is unfamiliar," Gunther claimed.

Without giving them a breather, Ingram pressed, "What about a ship called *Ocean Spirit*?"

Gunther was smooth. "She was lost at sea." He looked at McKinsley, "This was before you joined us." What he meant: *McKinsley, keep your mouth shut*. Then back to Ingram, "What's this about? How is this related to the raid at the warehouse?"

Ingram went on, "A marine archaeologist, Edward Gunner dived to the wreck to recover artefacts that were aboard."

"Artefacts?"

"Yes." In his periphery, Travis was giving him a look that asked: *what are you doing?* Ingram plunged in. "Dr Gunner and his assistant were killed by Leonel Novack who later visited the 4<sup>th</sup> floor at Paramount. Gunther Trade maintains a satellite office on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor of that building."

# CHAPTER 54

Evans had Kim barricade the clinic's back door with a medicine cabinet. He would not repeat the same mistake twice. The man was panting when he resumed his kneeling position in between the homeless lady and Li.

"Doctor, I need steroids."

Li was about to object when his phone rang. He looked at Evans for permission to answer.

"Put it on speaker."

Li put the call on speaker. "Dr Han Li, this is the LAPD."

Evans nodded. "Yes?" Li asked tentatively.

"Sir, there is a report of a break-in at the pet clinic owned by you.

Are you at the clinic?"

Evans shook his head.

Li said, "I'm not."

"Are you nearby? Could you go to the clinic?"

Evans nodded.

"I can."

"Thank you, sir. Patrolman Kim will meet you there." The call ended, Kim and Li exchanged looks.

Li's phone rang again. It was LAPD again. "Dr Li are you at the clinic yet?"

Looking to Evans, Li replied, "No."

"Sir, please refrain from going there. Patrolman Kim is not reachable. Back up is on the way. Please remain where you are."

"Okay," Li said. LAPD hung up.

Kim spoke, "You don't have much time."

At Paramount, Connor's phone buzzed. "Connor here."

"There's something going down at Han Li's Pet Clinic."

"The one from last night?"

"Yes, a patrolman reported a break-in. Now he is unreachable. We have contacted Han Li. He says he is not at the clinic, but E911 tracking of his phone indicates that he is. A squad car is on the way."

"I'll meet it there." Connor turned to Ricardo and Lakisha,

"Something's come up; I have to go."

"Go. We've got it covered. We're only twiddling thumbs as it is."

Connor ran for the elevator.

# CHAPTER 55

"Are you implying," Gunther asked, "That this killer — Leonel Novack — met Zarebski?" A pause of projected concern. "Zarebski was at Paramount yesterday. This can be clarified immediately." He pushed a button on his desk phone and asked to be connected to security at Paramount. Gunther fretted, "If Boris *is* involved..." He let the sentence hang, as he pushed the speakerphone button and sat back. A connecting ring could be heard.

Then a male voice answered, "Mr Gunther, good morning, how may I help you?"

Gunther leaned forward and said, "Federal agents are in my office. I would like to speak with you about certain incidents that *may or may not have* transpired at Paramount yesterday."

"Yes, sir."

"Ibrahim, speak freely. We must cooperate with the authorities. Was Mr Zarebski at the office yesterday afternoon?"

"He was."

"Did he meet with anyone?"

A pause during which Gunther prompted, "Ibrahim, speak freely. This is an order."

"Yes, sir, he had a visitor."

"Describe him, please."

McKinsley shuffled his feet. He was clearly on edge unaware of where this might lead.

"Broad, flat nose, a unibrow. I didn't get his name."

"Anybody else?"

"Nobody else, sir," Ibrahim lied, as he had been instructed by Gunther.

Gunther asked Ingram, "Does the description match Leonel Novack?"

"Maybe," Ingram said cryptically.

"No matter, we can get surveillance footage." Into the phone, he asked the head of security to hand over the footage to the authorities.

"Sir, yes, I will, but —"

"That will be all for now!" Gunther disconnected before anything more could be said. He formed a steeple with his fingers, appeared concerned. "What is Zarebski up to? I had no idea about this meeting."

"Was there any cargo of importance on *Ocean Spirit*?" Ingram queried.

"I can make a manifest available," Gunther promised. "I'm unaware of anything out of the ordinary. Agents, I did not endorse Zarebski's actions. I will assist you in making all information available. But I do not want this matter interfering with my business. I wish to be updated – daily if necessary. If you need to access Gunther property, you may contact Mr McKinsley. And I insist that we proceed without untoward incidents."

Travis said, "I cannot run everything through your office."

Gunther smiled condescendingly. "Once again, I'd advise you to tread lightly." His tone was icy.

"Is that a threat?" Travis looked evenly at Gunther.

"Interpret it as you may. I am equipped to legally fight back. And I pack a nasty bite."

While Gunther loomed behind his threat, McKinsley shrunk into oblivion.

Ingram was not intimidated. He matched Gunther's tone. "I lost a friend in the course of this investigation. I will destroy anyone remotely connected with his death."

"I hope your loyalty to your friend's memory does not cloud your judgement. If you cause me or this company damage, I will come after you without remorse."

"The difference between you and me is you care about your life, business and all that; I don't. Not anymore."

"I will have you off the case if you go astray."

"You seem concerned about what I'm going to do."

"I'm not going to throw away everything because an FBI agent wants to avenge his friend."

The two stared each other down. Travis put a restraining hand on Ingram's shoulder.

"Rein-in your agent," Gunther advised Travis.

The intercom clicked. "Mr Gunther, sir, your next appointment is here."

"You know your way out," Gunther said dismissively.

"Come on," Travis said.

Reluctantly, Ingram stood. The two agents walked to the door with Gunther's lawyer in tow. Abruptly, Ingram pivoted and stormed back to Gunther's desk.

"Ingram," Travis hissed.

Ingram rested his knuckles on Gunther's desk. "If I'm taken off the case, I will simply follow it unofficially, without Bureau restraint."

Gunther's face betrayed nothing. "You're no longer welcome, Agent Ingram, in this building." Then to Travis, "Expect a call from the governor this afternoon."



As soon as the agents had left, Gunther dialled the governor. Luckily, the man was between meetings. Gunther toyed with Ingram's business card while he waited to be patched through.

"Good morning, Mr Governor."

"Lars, how did the meeting with the FBI go?"

"That's why I'm calling. An agent Kirk Ingram is committed to implicating me. I believe he is looking for somebody to blame for the death of his friend."

"I've heard this name before. Ingram has ruffled feathers before. I'm surprised he was even allowed back into active duty."

"What do you mean?"

Instead, the governor said, "Let me talk to Travis about this."

"I'll check back with you?"

"Tomorrow."

Smiling, Gunther was about to get into his next meeting when his phone rang.

He frowned at the number, answered, "Why are you calling me?"

"Who else knows about our arrangement?"

"Nobody."

"Zarebski?"

"Is not anybody's problem anymore."

"Qerim."

"He follows orders."

"Lake Las Vegas is compromised."

Gunther started. "How?"

"Get Qerim out of the country."

"What about Reich?"

"I'll move him."

"Okay."

"And you, too, get out. Just in case."

The call ended. Gunther was no longer smug. Worry flickered on his countenance. He spoke to his secretary, "Cancel my meetings. Get my jet ready!"

Travis fumed. "What the hell, Ingram." Ingram grit his teeth. He did not look at his boss. "Threatening him? Are you serious?" They arrived at the elevator. "Depalma had your back. He kept you in check. Or tried to. And I had both your backs. But without him..." Ingram looked at the floor. Travis' tone softened. "Without him, I don't know if this is going to work."

The ride down in the elevator was spent in silence. When they exited, their phones had service again. Both devices buzzed with notifications. The agents checked.

Travis frowned. "Tip off from Las Vegas."

"Property leased to Lars Gunther on Lake Las Vegas." Ingram scrolled. "Domestic terror threat..." There were photos. He flicked through them, stopped, zoomed in. *What were the odds?* "Guy matches Medera's description of Imer Qerim." He shared an excited look with Travis. "That's him!"

They ran for their cars.

# CHAPTER 56

Evans positioned himself out of sight from the windows. He sat in a corner of the clinic's reception area, with the Beretta XX-Treme trained on his hostages. Patrolman Kim's gun lay within close reach on the countertop. The cockatoo squawked at the proceedings. Outside, a squad car had pulled up. The roof lights of the car flashed across the front windows. Another car pulled up, a voice said, "Officers, Detective Connor. What's going on?"

"Front door is locked," one of the officers told the detective, "Back door is barricaded."

"Do we have a line inside?"

A moment later Li's phone rang. Li went through the ritual of answering, putting it on speaker. "Mr Li, this is Detective Connor. We met last night."

"Yes, detective."

"Are you in the clinic? I heard the phone ringing inside."

"I am."

"Is patrolman Kim with you?"

Evans nodded. "He is."

"Who else is with you?"

Evans answered, "Detective, I have three hostages. I want to get out. I need you and the officers to let me go."

"Who's this?"

"Doesn't matter, detective. Yes, or no?"

Connor knew it was too early in the game for the guy inside Han Li's to begin whittling down his hostages. "You won't get far."

The officers signaled Connor a Hostage Rescue Team was being scrambled. The voice over the phone said, "Leave that to me."

"Are the hostages hurt?" Connor wanted to know.

In reply, a woman's voice called out, "He's injured and weak!" That was followed by a gunshot.

Connor and the officers ducked behind their cars, drew their guns.

Connor spoke into the phone, "Is anyone hurt? Have you shot her?"

After a long pause, the voice said, "No, that was a warning shot."

"Give up," Connor persisted.

"I *will* kill them."

"I want to speak to patrolman Kim and Dr Li. And the woman. I want to ascertain that they are okay."

One-by-one, Connor heard Kim, Li, and a woman say that they were unhurt. He said, "Thank you, sir." He looked at the officers and mouthed, *how long?*

# CHAPTER 57

---

## Nevada

The Dodge Durango sped toward McCarran airport on a dark grey ribbon of road that snaked through the desert. A traffic pileup on I-515 meant they had to take the longer I-215. The desert stretched away on either side in shades of reddish-brown until it met the blue sky in the distant horizon.

A drone shoomed across the desert skies, camouflaged against the clouds. Its powerful cameras captured crisp, nearly three-sixty-degree images. On this 'observe-only' mission, it had not been loaded with Hellfire missiles.

On monitors at the FBI Critical Incident Staging Area, Ingram and a roomful of federal agents watched the video feed relayed to them from the UAV's command centre, at Nellis Air Force base in Nevada. Unknown to the occupants of the Dodge Durango, the drone had been following them from Lake Las Vegas.

Nearby, smaller monitors were displaying information from INTERPOL linking Imer Qerim and Osvetljiv Anđeli. Ingram looked at Rosalie Palermo. They had roped her in to identify Qerim or his companions.

From across the room, somebody said, "The Dodge was earlier at McCarran." Images from McCarran's surveillance cameras were brought up on a screen. It was a grab from a camera mounted at the airport's gate. The picture was at a good angle: they had a good

look at the driver and his passenger, and three people in the back.

"They arrived on a jet registered to Olympia Pharma. The airport says the jet is being readied for departure."

Ingram raised an eyebrow questioningly. She nodded. "That's him in the passenger seat."

Ingram was excited. "Okay, people. Let's nail this guy today. I'm heading there."

On the screens, the drone kept pursuing the truck as it sped down the ribbon road, the crosshairs of the camera centred on the glinting roof.

Wearing a vest with 'FBI' across the back, Ingram jumped into a helicopter and signalled the pilot with a swirling finger. The helicopter lifted off the tarmac, dipped its nose, and clattered off in the direction of the Las Vegas.

"We have a small window of opportunity," Reed Michigan told his team of two, "before the feds come bumbling in. Ready?"

The *shuck-shuck* of weapons being readied answered him. They piled into the sedan. Michigan reversed crazily, executed a J-turn and sped toward the villa where Alexander Reich was being held. The car skidded to a halt and the three men scrambled out in a crouch-run. Their assault rifles were pressed to their cheeks. An armed man appeared on the porch. Michigan got rid of him before he could shoot. Michigan leapt over the falling body, leading the charge into the house. The trio fanned out and systematically cleared each of the rooms in the villa. Except for another guard in the dining room, the place was empty. They convened in the dining room.

Michigan paced around the dead body. He paused. "You hear that?" His companions went still. He retraced a few steps, then stepped forth again. The trio shared a knowing look. The floor sounded hollow. Within seconds, they flipped a corner of the carpet to reveal a trapdoor. Leaving one man to guard over the trapdoor, Michigan and the other agent descended a ladder. They arrived in a short tunnel. There was a light at the far end. *The light at the end of my tunnel*. They moved stealthily.

"Woah," Michigan mouthed as they entered a subterranean laboratory. The equipment was new, several were stamped *Property of Olympia Pharma*. The man in a hazmat suit stared at them. When he saw their guns, he raised his hands.

Michigan said, "Dr Alexander Reich." The man in the hazmat suit nodded. Michigan smiled mirthlessly. "I never got the opportunity to welcome you to the United States."

# CHAPTER 58

The street outside Han Li's Pet Clinic was abuzz with activity. The HRT had arrived, and police had cordoned off the street. A crowd of onlookers had gathered. Another incident, on the heels of the previous night's shooting, had sent ripples of excitement through the neighbourhood.

Connor conversed with the negotiator. Hunkered behind a car, the negotiator called Li's phone.

"Good afternoon, sir," the negotiator began, "my name is Joel Daniels. May I have your name?"

"I don't want to talk to you, Joel. Put Detective Connor on. Give me Connor or I put a bullet in Kim."

"Sir, you don't want to — "

A shot rang out, followed by a bellow of pain. They heard a scuffle, then, "Tell them." They heard a moan of pain. Then Kim's strained voice came on the phone, "He shot me in the leg." His voice rose by an octave. "He has a gun to my head. Please put Connor on!"

Connor grabbed the phone. "I'm here. I'm here," he said placatingly.

"Come in here, detective. Let's have a chat." The negotiator shook his head. "Take off your flak vest." Connor shrugged off the vest.

Then into the phone, "I'm coming in."

"I'm waiting."



# CHAPTER 59

Imer Qerim drank from a bottle of mineral water and passed a sleeve across his forehead. The road shimmered in the desert heat. Ahead, he saw a silver intercity bus heading toward Las Vegas. The Dodge Durango overtook the bus. In the rear-view, the bus grew smaller.

Suddenly, two black Bell-UH helicopters with FBI painted across the flanks dropped in from the sky like angry insects. They took up positions, one flying abreast of the Dodge and the other swooping down to hover, blocking the road. The helicopters had their bay doors open. FBI agents were braced inside the helicopter, guns trained on the truck.

A voice addressed Qerim over a bullhorn, "Imer Qerim, pull over and step out of the truck. Now! Or we open fire."

The truck screeched to a halt but the engine idled.

In the FBI CIR staging area, everybody watched the standoff. The black Dodge was in the middle of the road with two helicopters hovering beside it.

Voices came in over the radio: "Imer Qerim, you have five seconds to comply."

"What's he waiting for?" somebody in the darkened video room wondered.

"Oh no," came the reply as realisation dawned, "the bus."

The pilot from the FBI's tactical operations unit saw the intercity bus approaching and understood what Qerim intended. "Take out the tires," he ordered frantically. "Now!"

The Dodge lurched backwards, reversing directly at the bus. The sharpshooter sighted through his scope and let off a round. The bullet did not stop the Dodge.

"Wound the driver!"

Another shot.

The driver jerked. Blood splattered the Durango's window. But the driver's foot had jammed down on the gas. The man in the passenger seat reached for the steering wheel. Still reversing, the truck fishtailed on a collision course with the bus.

"Cover fire!" Qerim shouted as he pushed the button to lower the windows. He stuck a futuristic-looking XM8 lightweight assault rifle out and let loose a volley at the helicopter on the right.

Under the onslaught, the pilot pulled to a safe distance.

Another of Qerim's henchmen emerged from the sunroof. He carried a shoulder mounted Soviet-era Igla rocket launcher. He did not need the Igla to lock to its target. At this range, a blind man could not miss. He pulled the trigger and the rocket zoomed away.

On the video monitors at CIR staging, they saw the white trail of the rocket as it zeroed in on the helicopter. The pilot tried to out-maneuvre the rocket. At such close range it was impossible.

The rocket seared the tail boom in half. The broken section spun into the distance. It landed in a puff of red sand. The impact knocked one of the agents off balance. He was spilled out the open

bay doors and dangled on his harness. The helicopter spun in an arc, fell the short distance to the ground. It crumpled in on its nose. The rotors spun as the body leaned over. The rotors touched the immobile road, and, amid a fountain of sparks, they were torn off their mount. The blades cartwheeled, coming to rest in a larger cloud of sand and dust.

When the XM8 opened fire, the second helicopter banked sharply. The FBI agents were aware of the destruction of the other helicopter and felt rounds striking their helicopter. It would not be long before the Igla was reloaded. The helicopter circled and rose higher to have a better chance at evading the Igla. The FBI agents opened return fire as they came around, targeting the man with the rocket launcher. Their onslaught sent him into the Dodge. The sunroof was pulled shut.

Then the Dodge swung sharply and was hidden from the helicopter, by the bus.

The driver of the inter-city bus slammed his brakes. The bus jolted to a stop. Passengers yelled in surprise. Overhead luggage bins spilt open. Bags tumbled onto the passengers. Through the windscreen, the driver saw the truck swing to the right, narrowly missing his bus.

The man in the passenger seat of the Dodge yanked on the hand brake. The Dodge rammed into the side of the bus.

"Out, out, out," Qerim herded his henchmen.

Qerim and his gang left their wounded companion to his fate. They made their way to the door. Gunfire blew it open. They boarded.

The sharpshooter cursed. "They're on the bus!"

The FBI agents saw three figures moving in the bus. This had become a hostage situation.

Qerim brandished his XM8 and shouted above the cries of the hysterical passengers, "Everybody shut up!" He grabbed the driver and propelled him roughly into the aisle. "Sit!"

One of Qerim's men secured the rear of the bus. Qerim stood in the front and watched the FBI helicopter. He turned to the man with the rocket launcher. "How many left?"

"One."

"Save it."

They set the rocket launcher behind the driver's seat. Some passengers were whimpering, some were sobbing. "Everybody! Quiet!" Qerim fired a round into the roof of the bus.

A collective yelp arose as the gunshot reverberated explosively in the close confines of the bus. But after that outburst, the passengers settled into a forced silence. A baby started bawling; its mother tried to soothe it by rocking the baby in her arms and stroking its head.

"Imer Qerim, is anyone in the bus hurt?"

In response, the FBI agents in the helicopter saw a face pushed against the door. Then the door opened and a young girl, brown hair

flying in the helicopter's downdraft, stood there. Qerim was using her as a human shield. She shouted, "Nobody is hurt. Yet."

The FBI agent with the bullhorn was silently thankful. He wasn't a trained negotiator, but he said, "Qerim, are there women and children aboard? You want to let them go?"

There was a moment of silence, as Qerim relayed his reply to the girl. The girl shouted, "I have a jet at McCarran. You allow us to reach McCarran airport, I will set the mothers free. You let us board my flight, I let the children go." A pause. More whispering to the girl. "You can collect the remaining hostages when I reach where I'm going. If I do not get on my flight, I will start killing hostages every five minutes."

Qerim pulled the girl inside and the pneumatic doors swished closed.

On the CIR's video screen, the bus stood still, with the truck rammed into its right side. On the other side the helicopter hovered. Everybody watched the seconds ticking away on the digital clock above the screen. Ingram, who had been listening in on the radio as he flew toward McCarran, said, "Mark the time."

Qerim had ordered the air-conditioning to be turned off. The inside of the bus soon turned into an oven. It was a tactic to pressurize the FBI. They might not be concerned about his wellbeing, but they cared for the hostages.

Outside, the bullhorn announced, "Qerim, we are going to lead you to McCarran. Follow us!"

The helicopter took point, its shadow undulating on the desert floor.

"Drive," he instructed his henchman.

The bus started with a single turn of the ignition and the air-conditioning turned on. The passengers sighed in relief. The bus made its way through the wreckage of the FBI helicopter in the road. It knocked aside a spar that lay in its path. The passengers looked at the wreck in awe, as if it were a prehistoric insect on a prehistoric tour.

# CHAPTER 60

Oblivious to the hostage situation unfolding in Nevada, Connor focused on the hostage situation in the pet clinic. A situation he was about to become an integral part of. The front door opened, and the woman was framed in the doorway. Connor stepped across the threshold, into the darkness of the shop.

"Close the door," the voice from the phone said.

Connor complied. He discerned the hostage-taker in the shadows of a corner. Connor indicated the wounded Kim. "This man needs medical attention."

The shadowy figure disagreed. "I'll decide when he needs attention."

"What do you need?"

"Your car. We're going for a drive."

Connor's eyes adjusted to the dimness. The man was hunched over in pain. He was breathing heavily from exhaustion. His words were spaced as if speaking was an effort.

"I told you before: you won't get far."

"Dr Li will come with us. One threatening move from you or the police, and he gets it." A pause. "You," he gestured to the woman, "get his car keys." Connor handed her his key fob. "Tell them we're coming out!"

Connor shouted, "He's coming out with hostages. Hold your fire!"

"On the floor with Kim, detective. Spread eagled." Connor got down on his knees, then on his face.

The door opened and the woman appeared on the threshold, hands raised. The fob glinted in her fingers. Li was next. Evans had his Beretta jammed into Li's ear. If he fired, the bullet would also hit

the woman. Weapons were trained on the door, but nobody was going to shoot. Evans shut the clinic door and slid the lock.

"Blip the locks!"

The woman pushed the unlock button on the key fob. Connor's car's lights flashed. Evans did not want the police surrounding him. "All of you, get on this side!"

He waited until the police were on one side of them. They shuffled to the car. The woman got behind the wheel. Li and he got into the backseat. "Go," Evans ordered, peering over the seat at the phalanx of police, who were watching helplessly.



# CHAPTER 61

Ingram and the FBI HRT arrived at McCarran. Ingram, and the leader of the HRT had agreed on a plan of action. It was reckless but their only shot at capturing Qerim alive, without risking hostages. Ingram got a status update from the helicopter escort. "He's approaching," the agent told Ingram. "Will be at McCarran in fifteen minutes."

The HRT team leader stood beside Ingram. "It's time," he said softly. Ingram nodded and jogged the distance to the private hangar where the Olympia Pharma jet awaited.

The bus approached the airport. "Qerim, release the mothers and babies."

"Movement," the sharpshooter called out.

Qerim looked out the window and signalled the driver. The bus rolled to a halt. Qerim beckoned the girl. Once again, with her as his shield he opened the doors.

The girl shouted, "Where's the jet?"

In the private hangar, the pilots were readying the Gulfstream for flight. Outside was a phalanx of agents and vehicles.

"What have we gotten into?" the pilot wondered aloud.

Unknown to the pilots, they were getting a stowaway. Ingram was climbing into an underbelly hatch. This hatch accessed a crawlspace under the cabin. Ground engineers used it to access hydraulics and

electricals. He shone his torch around the cramped recess. He set his M4 carbine down. He accepted the insulated blanket that was passed up to him. It would get freezing cold during the flight. Next, he was handed a facemask and three bottles of oxygen in case of an emergency, and ten bottles of drinking water. And thermogenic diet pills. The pills triggered the sympathetic nervous system to burn fat, thus raising body temperature. Ingram would use the pills only if the insulated blanket did not work. He flashed a thumbs-up, and the hatch was sealed. Darkness enveloped him. He set himself up, as comfortably as he could, for the long flight.

# CHAPTER 62

Evans started to relax. It was not over, but he was nearly home free. The pet clinic receded.

"Floor it," Evans ordered.

The woman did. She locked eyes with him in the rear-view. "I'm guessing you were a team. But the other guys abandoned you. Or got arrested." A pause. "Or died."

*It's only a lucky guess*, he thought. He refused to let her rile him.

"Shut up and drive!"

"You're on your own, you know."

"I'm getting away, is what it is!"

He failed to notice she was accelerating. They were coming up on an intersection. Suddenly, she swung the wheel right, while pulling on the handbrake. The car was thrown into a drift, across the intersection. The front bumper clipped a station wagon. The car spun; its left flank rammed into a building. The windows imploded. The veteran, aware of she was planning, had already balled herself up.

Evans was unprepared. He saw the building rushing toward him. He was whiplashed against the door panel, cracking his head. Li fell across his lap.

The veteran struggled past the shock of the impact and unclipped her seatbelt. In a flash, she was wriggling between the front seats. Evans' Beretta was pinned between his knee and Li's body. He tried to heave Li off. The woman's hard knuckle gloved fist smashed into his face. Evans saw stars. His head lolled. The veteran snatched the Beretta, pointed it at him.

When Connor and the police caught up and encircled the crash, she had disarmed Evans and had him face-down on the road.

Connor hurried over and relieved her of the gun, made it safe.

"You okay?"

She nodded.

"You handled yourself pretty good."

"Feels good to serve again."

He understood. "Thank you, soldier." Then he turned his attention to Evans. "Told you, you won't get far."

# CHAPTER 63

Qerim surveyed his prisoners. He ran his fingers through his hair and paced like a caged animal. There was no sign of the Gulfstream. He could see the FBI helicopter still holding its position. They were stalling, he realized in anger. "Turn us around," Qerim said putting a hand on the driver's shoulder.

He grabbed the girl, put his gun to her head.

"Where's the jet?" the girl demanded.

"Fuelling up," came the reply.

Qerim pulled the girl inside. He spied the mother with the restless baby. He paced over to her. She screamed. A young man tried to be brave. In the ensuing scuffle, he was knocked aside by a vicious blow to his forehead from Qerim's rifle butt. The mother sobbed as Qerim dragged her, with her baby, to the door. Another passenger helped the young man sit and pressed a palm against the angry welt on his forehead.

From the helicopter, the bullhorn clicked. "We heard a scream."

The mother pleaded, "Please, not my baby. Please."

Qerim was callous. "The younger the victim, the more pressure on everybody out there." He breathed in her face. "I'd pray for a miracle. You pray, don't you?" When he got no reply, Qerim grabbed her chin, twisting her head to face him. The baby began crying. Ignoring its plaintive wailing, Qerim asked the mother, "Do you pray?"

The woman trembled. "Please..."

Qerim gave her a withering stare. "Now is a good time to start. Maybe when this is all over, you will be religious. Spreading God's word." The henchman behind him chuckled. Qerim hit the button to open the doors and stood in the doorway. "This is the first casualty."

"Qerim, don't do this."

"I warned you." He put his gun to the baby's head.

"Please..."

"Where's my jet?"

"Qerim, the jet is here. It's here. Look!"

Qerim looked. He watched the tow vehicle lugging the Gulfstream out of the hangar. He pulled the woman and her baby inside, the doors shut.

The bullhorn said, "Qerim, release the mothers and babies and children." No response from the bus. "Qerim —"

"Slowly," Qerim warned the mothers. "Just as we told you."

The three mothers filed past him. As they went, they caught the glances – some indignant, others relieved – from the prisoners. The girl, whom Qerim had used to communicate his demands, was sobbing. When they alighted from the bus, the mothers stood shoulder-to-shoulder.

The bus turned around, re-entered the airport.

Through the rear window, some passengers on the bus watched forlornly as HRT members sprang up from concealment. The HRT crouch-ran to the freed hostages and pulled them to safety. Other HRT operatives covered their retreat with Heckler & Koch MP5's.

# CHAPTER 64

"Time to move," Qerim addressed the hostages. "A little longer and this will all be one bad dream."

The bus headed for the Gulfstream's airstairs. It halted behind the starboard wing and the doors opened. Federal agents trained their guns on the bus. HRT sharpshooters readied to take a shot.

Six scared children stepped out of the bus and stood shoulder-to-shoulder between the bus and the wing.

Qerim's gang herded the adults out, mingling with them.

The HRT leader queried his sharpshooters but got negative responses all around. "No clear shot."

Qerim and one henchman were armed with assault rifles. A third carried the Igla. They made their way into the Gulfstream. Qerim stood behind the door, looked at the line of boarding hostages. He shouted, "Welcome to Qerim Airways!"

Morosely, the hostages took seats, and strapped themselves in.

Qerim's second henchman boarded with the last of the hostages.

"Search the pilots!" Qerim ordered him. "Then ready the launcher!"

The pilots submitted to a search. Qerim appeared in the cockpit.

"Turn off the transponder and radio," he instructed the pilots. When that was done, he said, "We are flying to Panama."

The engines kicked in with a whine. Qerim hunched to look out the windscreen as the jet's nose wheel lined up with the marker line on the runway. Qerim muttered a warning, "No tricks, Captain. If we drop altitude unnecessarily, I will kill a hostage for every five minutes we remain under altitude and then when I have exhausted them all, I'll kill you. And if Mr Sidekick here," he patted the co-pilot

on the back, "decides to continue the game, I will kill him too. And then I don't care what happens. Clear?"

"Very," the pilot replied hoarsely. "The door is still —"

"Doesn't concern you. One of my men will keep you company during the flight. You will not leave the cockpit for any reason. If you want to shit or piss, do it in here! Now, get us into the air!"

The pilot edged the throttle open. The jet began moving away from the ranks of federal agents.

Outside, in the sunset, the federal agents discerned one of the armed men kneeling in the doorway of the taxing jet. A warning rang out. "Take cover!" The HRT helicopter banked sharply and pulled out of range. HRT operatives whisked the six children to safety behind their vehicles.

The rocket *shoomed* out of the Igla and smashed squarely into the bus lifting it off the ground in a ball of flame. The explosion sent debris in the air. Everybody hit the ground.

Under cover of the explosion, the jet's engines screamed, and the plane raced down the runway. The runway lights streaked in a blur. The pilot pulled back on the yoke, the nose lifted. The Gulfstream headed south.



# CHAPTER 65

---

## Northern Panama

The twilight sun peeked between scattered clouds. The cockpit was bathed in pink light. The pilot clicked the intercom and announced they had entered the airspace over Panama.

Imer Qerim entered the cockpit. He looked past the pilot's shoulders at the blanket of clouds spread before them. He handed the pilot a scrap of paper with coordinates scribbled on it. "Fly there!"

"No airstrip exists at those coordinates," the pilot argued unnecessarily.

"You don't need an airstrip to land, Captain; you need the earth. Now do as you're told!"

Qerim addressed his henchman, jerked his head in the direction of the passenger cabin. "Get back there; I'll take it from here."

A short while later, the jet began losing altitude. They flew low enough to see mountainous terrain flashing beneath them. The pilots knew that ATC in Panama would be attempting to raise them over the radio. When they did not respond the air force would be scrambled. Neither fancied being shot out of the sky.

Qerim pointed out the windscreen. "There it is!"

The pilots saw they were heading toward a field. It was bisected by a narrow dirt track. At the far end of the field, at the end of the track, were two low buildings in a fenced compound. Lights illuminated the far end of the track. Beyond that, was a ravine.

The Gonzales brothers were waiting. They smuggled drugs into the States through Gunther Trade.

"They're here," said the older of the pair. He wore a wide-brimmed straw hat, sported a handlebar moustache. He lit a cigarette and watched his younger brother check a Smith & Wesson 459. "No need for that." He tossed the match to the track, leaned against the rust-pocked doors of the derelict pickup that was an end-marker in the track. They had placed halogens on the roof of the cab.

"We'll see," the younger Gonzales said darkly. "Qerim is a snake. Everybody is expendable." He was more pessimistic than his brother. "I don't want to end up in this field with flies buzzing around me. So, I take precautions. One thing," he eyed the older man, "I am not gonna be watching your back. And that's not because I don't love you. It's because I won't be able to."

"I'm packing." The older Gonzales assured him. He lifted his shirttail revealing a Brazilian-manufactured Taurus pistol tucked into the waistband of his jeans. He winked. "And now let's give them a hug." They watched the jet align itself with the dirt track.

The pilot clicked the intercom. "We're landing in a field. Assume brace positions! Hang on." Up close, the landing strip was only fifteen feet wide. Also, it looked too short for the Gulfstream.

The track zipped underneath them, a brown streak bordered by tall grass. The wheels touched down, throwing up clumps of mud. The wings brushed the grass down. As the jet passed, the stalks lazily resumed their upright positions.

"Brakes! We're coming up close!"

The end of the track was rushing up to greet them. The end-marker lights were blinding. Through the dust, in the aura of light, Qerim could barely discern two human silhouettes.

The cigarette fell from Gonzalez's lips. The jet hurtled toward them. "She's not going to make it!" the pessimistic brother cried. "Get out of here!"

The two jumped off the derelict and ran into the fields to a safe distance.

"Pull to the left!" the pilot yelled, twisting the control column. He prayed the landing gear did not come apart with the strain. If they did not stop, they would plummet over the lip of the ravine. "Damn! *Damn!*"

The nose turned. The jet tilted. The Gulfstream rode on its nose and starboard wheels. The dust obscured visibility.

"She'll turn turtle," the co-pilot yelled, feeling the weight of the off-balance jet. The mass of the jet entered the apex of the turn. The dipping starboard wing swept over the derelict vehicle, scything the halogens away. Then the G-forces began easing off.

"Yes!" Qerim shouted despite himself.

The port wheels hit the earth and the jet ploughed into the grass. With most of the kinetic energy spent, the Gulfstream halted. Its nose projected over the ravine. Its tail stabilizers stretched over the edge of the field.

Qerim was in an expansive mood. He had evaded the authorities. From Panama, he would make his way, south, into hiding. He

stepped into the main cabin and looked at the hostages. Several had thrown up. They were terrified.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," Qerim said loudly. "Thank you for flying with us." He made a grand flourish. "I no longer need you." They squirmed, worried at what he might mean. He laughed. "Thank you and all the very best in your lives."

# CHAPTER 66

The older Gonzales whooped. He tossed his hat into the air. They ran toward the jet, shielding their eyes from the settling dust. The airstairs lowered. Qerim deplaned.

"The Gonzalez brothers!" His arms were spread wide. He grinned.

"Some show, huh!" He resembled a heavenly figure in a gesture of 'come-to-me'.

"Don't party," the younger brother said darkly, "you're not safe yet, and you're a danger to me and my brother every second you spend with us."

Qerim did not lose his smile. "I've been through a very thrilling experience. Let me unwind, hey?"

"Let's leave." The younger Gonzalez looked around nervously. "I bet ATC is all worked up by now." He counted two goons deplaning and stepping into line behind Qerim. He wet his lips. "Get this over with soon." He began walking through the field.

Qerim pulled the older Gonzalez aside. "Your brother doesn't like my visits, huh?"

The older brother shrugged. Qerim and his gang fell into step.

Ingram had been knocked about during the landing. He groaned, as his body complained about the torture it had been subjected to. It was a wonder he had not broken any bones. The jet had been stationary for some time. He tossed aside the blanket, grabbed his M4. He shimmied to the underbelly hatch. He opened it as the jet's engines kicked in. The aircraft started reversing. The hatch door dropped open. Ingram saw the earth sliding by. He steadied himself, judged the speed, then dropped out.

He rolled aside immediately. The nose wheel passed inches from his body. Ingram crouch-ran beneath the wing, his M4 held at the ready. He entered the concealment of the tall grass.

In the cockpit, an alarm blinked, indicating the hatch was open.

"What's that? How did that hatch open?"

"Could be a fault. After the landing, who knows..."

Neither pilot wanted to investigate. They ignored the warning.

The Gulfstream raced for a take-off. Still running in the field, Ingram heard a dog barking. Then he came to the edge of the field and paused. The barrel of his M4 parted the stalks.

He was looking at a compound. The building nearest to him was a two-storied, stone and brick affair. A porch encircled the ground floor. The upper floor had a balcony on one side. A motorcycle was propped against the porch. He saw the dog, a Beagle. It was straining against its chain, barking, moving in restless circles.

"Diego! Quiet!" somebody called. The command was unheeded.

A second structure adjoined the first. It was a garage. Ingram guessed there was a doorway between the two buildings. He cautiously crossed over to the building.

The Beagle's barking intensified when it saw him. It clawed at the earth, straining to be free.

"Diego!"

"Go and shut him up if you're so bothered about the mutt!"

"It's the damn jet engines; that's what bothered him!"

The voices emanated from the garage. Ingram side-stepped along the porch. He came around the garage door and the first thing he

did was empty a round into the right front tire of the GMC Sierra pickup parked in the garage. The shot sounded like a cannon blast and the five men in the garage froze. The air hissed out of the punctured tire. The vehicle listed.

"Nobody moves!" Ingram ordered sharply. "Slowly lay down your weapons, kick them toward me." Qerim eyed him with a bemused expression. "Drop your weapons!" Ingram repeated. He watched them, knowing they were a tough and desperate lot.

"Do it," Qerim said, unslinging his XM8. He put his gun on the floor. Then abruptly, he unsheathed a Bowie knife and threw it underhand at Ingram. In that same instant, he grabbed the older Gonzalez, nearest to him as a human shield.

Ingram fell on his back. The knife zipped by his ear. Qerim pushed Gonzalez toward Ingram and dived behind the truck. Gonzalez's body shook as it absorbed bullets intended for Qerim. It hung there, unsure whether to stand or fall and then collapsed.

Everybody was reaching for their weapons.

But there was a split in the ranks.

The younger Gonzalez took one look at his brother and, screaming obscenities, drew his Smith & Wesson, put it to the temple of the nearest of Qerim's lackeys, and blew the man's brains. The gangster's body spun, his eyes bulging in shock, brain matter spraying into the air.

The last of Qerim's men saw this happen and turned to confront the new danger. His FN FAL came up as Gonzalez riddled his chest with bullets. But his assault rifle continued rising as the man staggered with each hole blown into him. His finger depressed the trigger and

he sprayed lead. Bullets streaked across the air, punching ragged holes into the GMC.

Ingram butt-crawled out of the garage. He realigned his aim, messed up Gonzalez's thigh. Gonzalez staggered, slumped against the GMC's carrier. His fingers hooked on the tailgate in a desperate attempt to remain standing. Then his head whiplashed as one more bullet went into him from the rifle in Qerim's henchman's death grip. Bullets stitched the ground near Ingram's feet. Qerim was armed again. Ingram returned fire. Above, the Gulfstream jet roared over the buildings, heading north.

With a deep breath, Ingram peeked around the shot-up GMC. He saw Qerim running to the door to the house. He slammed into the door expecting to break it down. Except, the door was unlocked. So, when Qerim hit it, it swung wide open. Propelled by his momentum, Qerim went through with a cry of surprise. Ingram heard a crash. Giving chase, he saw Qerim in the corridor, extricating himself from the remains of a sideboard. Saucers, plates, knives and forks littered the corridor. A fish-tank that had reposed atop the sideboard lay in pieces in a pool. Fish flopped in the puddles. Qerim's XM8 had fallen to one side.

Ingram bounded into the house, kicked the XM8 out of Qerim's reach.

Qerim grabbed Ingram's ankle and yanked his feet from under him. Ingram fell, lost the M4. He recovered and was on Qerim before Qerim could retrieve either assault rifle. One hand circled Qerim's neck. He pushed down with all his might. Qerim's face went into the floor. He sputtered in the water. His hands were pinned under his body. The two maintained their positions, unmoving, breathing



hard. In a burst of energy, Qerim pushed upward, slamming Ingram into the wall. Winded, Ingram's stranglehold let up. Qerim rammed his elbow into Ingram's stomach following that with a quick reverse headbutt. Ingram was dazed. Blood smeared his lips from a cut in his tongue. Qerim grabbed Ingram's arm that circled his neck with the intention of pulling Ingram from behind and throwing him into the opposite wall. As Qerim jerked and shifted his body weight, Ingram allowed Qerim to pull him clear and then used Qerim's swing against him. He grabbed Qerim's shirt and yanked. Qerim crashed into the opposite wall. Qerim staggered. Ingram landed a roundhouse punch in Qerim's face. Qerim's nose snapped. It came to rest flush against his face. Qerim bellowed. Blood streamed down his lips. Ingram drove a fist into the Qerim's gut, doubling him over. Ingram grabbed him by the shoulders, kneed him in the groin, pulled him away from the wall. Qerim swayed. Ingram balled his fist and finished the fight off with a powerful uppercut. Qerim fell against the overturned sideboard, tumbled off onto the floor and then lay still.

Ingram regarded the crumpled form on the floor. He was panting. His legs trembled. He sat, hung his head between his knees. Outside, Diego, the Beagle continued barking.

# CHAPTER 67

---

## Jaco, Puntarenas Province, Costa Rica

Lars Gunther sat in a dusty SUV as it bounced down the pot-holed street. Loud music screeched from the radio. Warm air streamed through the windows. They passed white, stone adobes. Children and stray dogs chased the taxi.

The SUV turned into a bustling market street and slowed down as a hen cluck-clucked across the street. Hawkers called their wares from both sides of the road. Their carts and stalls held colourful arrangements of fruits and vegetables stacked on high. Cauliflower, red peppers, carrots, watermelon, radish stalks, beet. More fruit and vegetables hung from blue awnings. Some of the locals noticed the white-skinned man sitting in the back and approached the windows, displaying their wares. Gunther declined with an irritated wave of his hand. He asked the driver, “Cuánto más?” *How much further?* The driver pointed ahead. “Otros dos minutos.”

Gunther could see crowds blocking the road. It looked like a procession. The driver muttered curses. Gunther was impatient. He barked an order. He and a pair of bodyguards got out. The trio pushed their way through. Presently they came to a break in the crowds. It was quieter here, outside the market centre. Gunther looked out of place in his white suit. He took off his hat and dabbed at his forehead with a handkerchief. He spotted the rendezvous. It was a two-storied bungalow with a veranda running around each floor. A wooden staircase climbed from one veranda to the next.

Bracketed between his guards, Gunther climbed to the second floor. His men were armed. He was carrying, too. He cocked the revolver in his jacket. He held it out of sight as he approached the door. The dirty windows prevented him from looking inside. The door was unlocked. The lead bodyguard pushed it open, went in. Tense second later he reappeared.

"All clear."

"Wait outside," Gunther ordered. The men took up position. Gunther entered. He discerned a figure in the spartan room.

Gunther produced the revolver.

Michigan eyed the weapon calmly. "I see you came prepared. Push the door. It doesn't shut properly."

"What the hell, Reed! How did it happen?"

"Caliph Deminksi is one hell of a detective. Relentless in his investigation." A pause. "He mentioned you."

"But not you?"

"Not yet."

"What about Reich?"

"I got to him in time."

Gunther sighed in relief. The feds would find nothing, then. "So, take care of Deminksi," he fumed. "Or do you want more money?"

"Oh, I will. Take care of Deminksi, I mean. But this, you brought it on yourself."

Gunther was confused. "What do you mean?"

"Citex was supposed to be lost at sea."

Gunther's eyes narrowed. Then widened. "The boiler room explosion," he gasped, "That was you?"

The silenced gun that Michigan was concealing bucked twice.

Gunther staggered. He stared at the blossoming red stains on his chest. His revolver fell from his fingers.

Michigan kicked Gunther's revolver away. The Osvetljiv Anđeli agent's eyes were locked on his executioner. Michigan crouched beside his co-conspirator.

He explained, "I'm a patriot, Lars. So, what if I want to get rich while I am at it? Yes, I sank *Ocean Spirit*. But you could not let go, could you."

"Help!" Gunther called weakly.

The sounds of two bodies dropping answered his call. Michigan shook his head, "They won't be coming to your aid, Lars."

"You..." Gunther wheezed, struggling for a curse. "You..."

"Goodbye Lars. Nice doing business with you."

Michigan exited the house. His mercs were standing in the veranda over the dead bodies of Gunther's bodyguards. Michigan pulled the door shut with a *click*. Contrary to what he had told Gunther, the lock worked very well.

Gunther was fading. His trembling fingers found his phone. He had trouble unlocking it. He recalled a number from memory. He used the last iota of command that he had over his fingers to tap it in. He pushed dial. He found it ironic, that he was hoping for the owner of the number to answer. The call went to voice mail. With his blood pumping out of him, Lars Gunther chose his words carefully.

# CHAPTER 68

---

Virginia, 5 days later

Reed Michigan walked along the Potomac lost in thought. The lights of Filomena came into view. He paused, looked up and down the path to ensure he was alone. He heard the *put-put* of an outboard motor. A little boat went past. Michigan waited until the sound of its motor had faded. He thought about the events of the past few days. Lars Gunther was a dead end. Literally. Imer Qerim would keep the feds busy, but he was unaware of Michigan's complicity. The feds would find nothing at Lake Las Vegas. When they cleared the rubble caused by the 'lab accident', they might recover Dr Reich's body. No Citex.

He regarded the safebox in his hands. He approached the water's edge. Without further thought, he tossed it into the Potomac. It disappeared with a small splash.

*With Citex in our hands the world will be a safer place.* He smirked.  
*It was safer at the bottom of the river.*

It would be difficult to explain how he came to possess Citex. This way was better. Nothing would be traced back to him. And his offshore account in the Caymans, richer by ten million USD... he had been very clever about it. There was one more detail and it would be sorted in a few minutes.

He arrived at Filomena where his usual table was waiting. He placed his phone on the table. He was served his usual: *costoletta di vitello* and wine. He did not eat immediately. His phone buzzed with a text message. It read: '*It's done.*'

The final detail was sorted. Caliph Deminksi was not a problem anymore.

Now, Michigan could enjoy his dinner. It tasted better than ever. He was interrupted by the maître d'.

"There's somebody to meet you, sir."

For a paranoid moment, he thought it was the Russian. Instead, it was an American.

"Okay." Seconds later, the newcomer was sitting opposite him. "You look familiar."

"Kirk Ingram, FBI."

Alarm bells went off in Michigan's head. He sipped his wine. "What can I do for you?"

Ingram placed his phone on the table, found his messages and pushed play.

Michigan heard rasping. Then, "This is Lars Gunther. Reed Michigan shot me. I am dying. Works for the CIA. We plotted to steal a Russian nerve agent codenamed Citex, smuggle it into the States." Heavy breathing. Michigan's heart was thumping. "I paid Michigan ten million USD. Michigan double-crossed me. His Caymans numbered account is —"

Ingram pushed 'pause'. He eyed Michigan. "Bet you weren't expecting Gunther to call me. Me neither. There isn't much more, but the prelims tell us he isn't lying." Gunther tapped his fingers on the table. "There's a car waiting outside."

Kirk Ingram escorted Reed Michigan into a GMC Suburban. Front grille lights blazing, the SUV raced away from Filomena. Thirty seconds later, Caliph Deminksi emerged from the shadows of the riverside walk. *Guess I won't be needing this after all.* He pocketed the SIG he'd taken off the merc Michigan had sent to kill him. Deminksi regarded the restaurant. It could become *his* weekly haunt. After all, the corner table with the view of the Potomac, was available.

# CHAPTER 69

---

## Holy Cross Cemetery, Culver City

A small crowd lingered at the edge of the expanse of white and green. White crosses and freshly mowed green grass.

Kirk Ingram stood on a knoll. He solemnly regarded the ivory cross that marked Richard Depalma's final resting place. The funeral service was well-attended. Ingram's eulogy had brought tears to Erin's eyes.

The breeze in his face brought him to the present moment. It was so quiet, he thought, and peaceful. Depalma's wife and daughter were standing by their limousine, conversing with Dave Travis. Ingram's gaze swept over the cemetery.

It took him a moment to spot Amanda Gunner standing a short distance away, surrounded by a small congregation. He watched as people came up to her, and pecked her on the cheek, or hugged her, or shook her hand. Ingram realized it was her father's hearse. He watched as another man hugged Amanda. They stood for a while talking. It looked to Ingram that he wanted Amanda to accompany him. But she turned him down.

Ingram sunk his hands into his pockets and sighed. He breathed deeply.

"Agent Ingram!"

She was waving to him, smiling. The wind blew her hair across her face. She walked away from the man leaving him in mid-sentence.



He raised his hands in exasperation, looked around to see who had witnessed his humiliation.

Ingram hugged her fleetingly, kissed her cheek. "Accept my condolences."

"Thank you."

He jerked his chin at the departing man. "He was trying hard."

"Who, Tim?" she smirked. "It must have been sincere, for once."

She noticed the bandage on his left hand and that his arm was in a sling. "What happened?"

"Work."

"You don't say," She smiled sincerely. "I appreciate all you and Connor have done." Their eyes locked. "I really do."

"I heard Connor arrested one of the men who tried to..."

"Yes," she said with relief, "thank God it's over." A pause. "Although what my father, Basara and Landis died for remains a mystery." She was watching him keenly.

He considered all he knew about the investigation. The CIA did not want their dirty laundry made public. They had swooped in and claimed Michigan, but Travis and the FBI were holding on doggedly. At the Lake Las Vegas property, the feds found a caved-in laboratory. No Citex.

But all that was not Amanda's worry to have. Her concern was closer to her heart.

Maybe it was because he was hurting from Richie's death. Maybe it was because he had witnessed how much closure meant to Erin and Nisha. How they had wanted to believe Richie had sacrificed his life for the greater good.

With a sigh, he decided. "Between us?"

"I'm a lawyer. Confidentiality is second nature."

"They stumbled upon a terrorist plot." Raised eyebrows was all the reaction he got from her. He was assured she would keep it secret. "Even if it's hard to believe, your father and Mikhail Basara are heroes."

She nodded, sniffed, wiped an errant tear. "Somebody you knew?" She was referring to the hearse behind Ingram.

"Close," Ingram said.

She saw the pain flicker in his eyes and took his hand comfortingly.

"I'm sorry." He acknowledged her. "You'll separate the pain from the memories."

He had never been able to. He was reticent.

"Do you have any evening plans?" She hastened to explain. "I was wondering if you had time for dinner. As a gesture of thanks."

"You've already taken care of my car. You've thanked me enough."

He thought he detected disappointment flash across her features for the briefest of moments, replaced by a forced smile. "If you change your mind..."

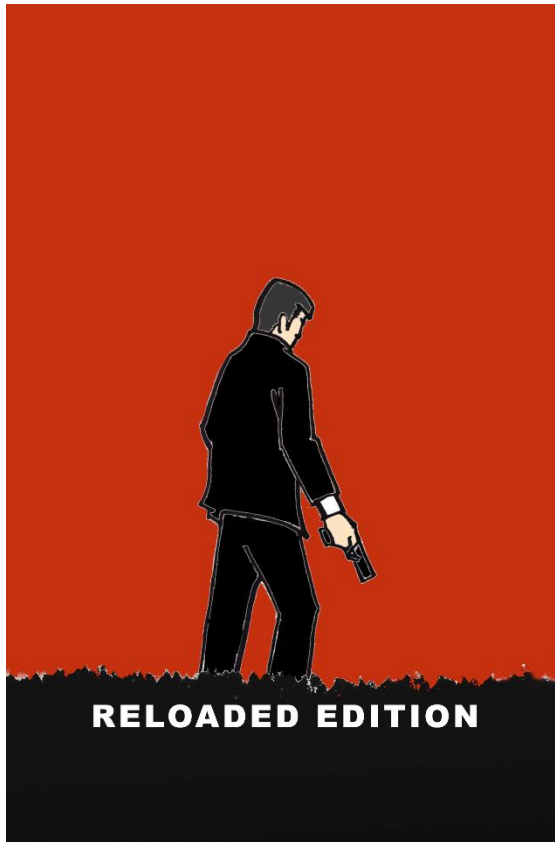
"I have your number."

She backpedalled, then pivoted and left him alone on the knoll. Silence enveloped him. A setting sun cast golden hues everywhere. Ingram closed his eyes and faced its waning warmth. He heard the distant wail of a siren. His eternal nemesis never rested.

And neither would he.

## THE END

# A REQUEST



Thank you for reaching here. Feedback is priceless. It encourages me, humbles me, keeps me on my toes to deliver better entertainment to you. It spreads the word. If you believe Haunted deserves attention, this is how you can contribute.

Please take a minute or two (at least) to review and/ or rate the book. I would be grateful. And if you'd like to buy me coffee for the entertainment, [paypal.me/douglasmisquita](https://www.paypal.me/douglasmisquita).

— Douglas Misquita

---

# AUTHOR'S NOTES

Haunted was written between 1999 and 2001, under the working title of *Ingram*. I chose the name because that's the weapon I loved most in the Max Payne game. At the time, I did not even think about publishing the book. I *did* know I wanted to write a thriller that flowed like a big-scale action movie. When the manuscript was accepted and published by Leadstart, I was thrilled. I had tears of joy when I unboxed the first copies. But I still had to pass a real test: reviews. I sent Haunted to reviewers in the USA, and to several in India. I waited with bated breath. I received the US review first... and it praised the book. From then on, Haunted has received honest, critical, and positive reviews.

This edition was prompted by my wish to incorporate the critique I have received, and the skills I have developed as a storyteller, since 2010. It is lean, mean, raw... as it was always meant to be. I hope you have as much of a thrill reading as I had writing it.

— Douglas Misquita (2021)

---

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A book is a mosaic of emotions, inspiration, influences, state of mind and ambience. I would like to thank my parents for ensuring that I was always inextricably a part of that mosaic. Thank you, to my wife and children for sparking my creativity in this later edition. Namod Kunder and Dallyn Misquita for the base cover artwork that still holds good. Your efforts are deeply appreciated.

The team at Leadstart Publishing for recognizing my work and seeing it through production. Swarup Nanda for being patient in guiding me through the nuances of producing and marketing a book.

My college mates: Shankar Mahadevan, Abhishek Sohani and Abhishek Ardey. While I delighted with ideas and fumed with lack of them, you inquired about the progress of the book. You pushed it to completion.

The 850+ anonymous readers at scribd.com: you rated the manuscript an average rating of 4.5/5, thus providing me with the confidence that the work was worthy of being published.

Vivek Pereira, who introduced me to Leadstart Publishing, and Avril Braganza, for her encouragement. João Jesus for the Pexels photograph which I incorporated as grass in the little Ingram artwork in this edition.

Newton Lewis, and everybody who will be instrumental in spreading awareness of the book across the world.

- Douglas Misquita (2010, 2016)

