

# One

## crime and punishment

### **I fought for my life.**

The sounds from us trying to kill each other were trapped inside this concrete toilet. My side kick had caught him in the gut, staggered him before he could stab me, and I went after him. We fought for the knife in his hand, a blade that could cut through bones, the knife he had tried to bring down in my back, only I'd seen his reflection. I gripped the wrist he used to hold the blade, threw my knee into his gut, tried to make him bend, then tried to sweep his feet, but he didn't give me space to maneuver. We slammed each other up against the concrete walls, walls built to withstand hurricanes, tussled and crashed into the metal bathroom door, collided with the sink and the unbreakable, reflective Plexiglas.

Violence echoed.

My elbows and knees gave him enough pain to make him loosen his grip on that razor-sharp blade, that moment enough for me to take control of the knife he was trying to put inside my throat, that moment good enough for me to send that sharp blade down across his arm, his DNA spilling in red.

Severe pain resided in his blue eyes.

We struggled, my jogging sandals slipping, his trainers squeaking, battled across the damp concrete floor, wrestled eye to eye, so close I inhaled his rancid breath, breath that stank like he drank nameless black coffee from a paper cup and smoked forty cigarettes a day. The killer's blood dripped down across my arm, splattered my skin and everything in sight as I found leverage and shoved him hard and fast into the concrete wall, that knife still in my control as I threw an elbow into his nose, a good shot with momentum and gravity on my side, a blow hard enough to shatter his face. I expected him to go down, but he surprised me. Still, that blow had stunned him long enough for me to get firm footing. I pressed on, went after him, used my weight and leverage to push that blade toward the center of his soul, his frame muscular, taller than me by at least three inches, his weight mine plus at least forty pounds.

He was strong, swift, as determined to kill as I was determined to stay alive.

I gritted my teeth, grunted and shoved the blade toward the assassin's chest, struggled with him, strength against strength, an arm wrestle that lasted for the better part of eternity, a battle that I refused to lose. I pushed the blade into his sweaty T-shirt, into his skin, inside his body, eased death his way a little at a time, fought and grunted with the killer as I pushed the blade a millimeter at a time, an inch at a time, then, with a rush, pushed it as the blade vanished, didn't ease up as the look on his dank face changed from anger to desperation to surprise to fear, pushed the blade until it stilled his rapid-beating heart.

The Grim Reaper claimed him, pulled him from this tropical world to a hotter place.

He collapsed, eyes wide-open, slid down the concrete wall, fell forward, let out his final breath.

His bladder emptied. His bowels would do the same.

Dying was never pretty. Death didn't have the scent of fresh roses.

I went down on one knee, wounded from the fight, struggling to breathe, exhausted, bruised, fists and elbows aching. Midday. Sun at its peak. Sweat drained down my face and neck, the heat from the Cayman Islands now a sweltering oven. I stared at the dead man. A man I'd never seen before.

He was a messenger. And the message from his employer rang like a noontime church bell.

Death's foot was on my shadow.

I took deep breaths, senses on fire, the bathroom hot, the stench of urine strong.

It had happened fast. Less than two minutes had passed since I walked into the bathroom.

Just like that my world would be different. Minutes ago I'd been scuba diving, thinking about the kid, my mind on the kid a lot lately. The kid had been on my mind when I had stepped inside the toilet, too preoccupied to realize I had been followed by an assassin with a blade. A man who, after our quick and deadly fight, I needed to drag inside the stall to hide his body, then let water run from the sink to the bathroom floor to wash away the blood on the tile. I stared at him, a blade in his chest, right in the heart of his University College of the Cayman Islands T-shirt. Once again a dead body was at my feet.

My heart raced. My mind moved faster than the speed of thought.

The peaceful part of my dark life was over, had ended almost as soon as it had begun.

I grimaced at the dead man. Blood dripped from his broken nose.

We'd shared no words, but he didn't come inside this bathroom for conversation.

I went through his pockets, took everything I could find. Copper wire was inside his pocket. The kind made for strangling. Wire I recognized. Anger in my eyes, I pulled the blade from his chest. No choice. Had no weapon of my own. I hurried and rinsed it off, wrapped it in paper towels.

Near the back wall I found a sign that said the bathroom was closed for cleaning, put that on the door as I hurried outside, clear blue waters in front of me, couples and families playing and lounging in the sand, snorkeling, parasailing, Jet Skiing, all unaware of the violence that had happened yards away.

I had stepped inside that toilet less than two minutes ago.

I paused, searched to see if the killer had come alone.

I had been living a hedonistic lifestyle with two beautiful women, had traveled and pretended all of my problems had been resolved. I nodded, understood the significance of that moment. That attack, that bathroom killing, would bring our hedonistic lifestyle to an end. It was time. I would have to say good-bye. Glad they weren't here. I was glad the women were checking out tourist attractions; the iron-shore landscape of Hell, the twenty-four-acre marine theme park Boatswain's Beach, and Cayman Turtle Farm.

When I felt safe I moved away, unseen, footprints in the sand the only trail I'd leave behind as I hurried toward Seven Mile Beach. I took out my cellular and dialed. She answered on the first ring.

I said, "Lola, where are you?"

"With Mrs. J."

"You okay?"

"We're having a blast."

I told her, "We have to go."

"Where are we going?"

"Not together. I have to go. And you and Mrs. J have to go."

"I don't understand."

"The party's over."

"Wait, talk to Mrs. J."

I told Mrs. J what had happened. Told her to get to the room, pack, and get on a plane.

She understood. I had had that same problem back in London.

Mrs. J said, "The kid."

"I know."

"Don't forget about the kid. I'm a mother. It would kill me if someone stole my daughter."

She was talking about a kid named Sven.

She said, "Find the truth. You deserve the truth."

"Spoken like an attorney."

"Old habits die hard."

I promised those women that I would talk to them; then I hung up the phone knowing that promise couldn't be kept. That had been our good-bye. Some friendships ended as abruptly as they started.

The hit man never had a chance to tell me who had sent him.

But I knew who it was. I looked at the knife I had pulled from his body and I knew.

His blade had been an MXZ saw knife.

When I saw that familiar blade, when I found the killer had copper wire in his pocket, the same wire I had left on the bed of my enemy, I knew the problem I'd had in Detroit wasn't over.

After I had been attacked in the Cayman Islands, I had returned to North America. Had gone to Detroit. Had gone after her, the woman I had been hired to kill for; our business association had left her bitter, made us enemies until death. Had gone to find my vindictive enemy and put her in the ground before she did the same to me, but she had made it impossible to get to her. Six men guarded her two-level home, hired from a private security firm, the kind where all employees had a license to carry. Those six men were left dead, guns at their sides; at least two of those men never had time to draw their weapons. The one who had shot me had hit my bulletproof vest. My shots had been head shots, in search of bulletproof brains. The last wounded man, as my gloved hand gripped his throat, begged for mercy as I applied pressure to the wound in his knee. Her rent-a-thug had howled and told me that she wasn't there anymore, hadn't been there since the last time I had visited that million-dollar home, that she had sent her kids away, that now she lived in the mayor's mansion but was never there, ran the city from other locations, locations that were well guarded, security better than Al Capone had used back in his day. His face bloodied, his body beaten, his eyes on the silenced gun at my side, he told me the police were on the way. Silent alarm had just been triggered. Before the sirens and flashing lights made it to the scene, I was gone, and he was dead.

I was dressed in all black, but he had seen my face, had heard my voice.

The last face he saw before he met his maker was the face of Gideon. Part of me wanted to put a plastic bag over his head, let him suffocate, as I had been suffocated. But I didn't do that. His end had been swift, my arms around his neck, then his neck quickly broken. I had taken out the guards at her mansion, but my anger hadn't lessened, and I did something else. Her children had four private bodyguards and she had two who stayed with her full-time. All carried guns. I went after the four, trailed them as they took her children to private school, watched as those four bodyguards picked them up. Four bodyguards they had found injured beyond repair, that pain and suffering not happening in front of her children's eyes. I had left a typed note with three simple words.

### **LET IT END.**

Now as I moved through London the hairs on the back of my neck refused to stop standing, warned me the way a spider was alerted when an intruder had touched its web.

The kid was on my mind. But that other problem remained with me as well. The storm that had started in Detroit had returned, surrounded me, had me in its eye. I felt its power even though I was back in London. I had avoided this place too long.

I was alone. Inside Thai Square Restaurant Bar, right outside Mansion House tube station. Soft music played, instrumental jazz, music that my heartbeat refused to let me hear. I'd stopped here because of that sensation of being stalked, had ducked inside and moved just behind the door, sat at a table facing the entry and the narrow street that ran down the back side of Mansion House toward Queen Street. Delivery boys on scooters went by. Smart cars that looked like adult toys. Hundreds of Londoners dressed in dark colors—men in dark and depressing suits, women in black dresses and fancy tights—walked the cobbled street, most heading toward the financial district.

Not knowing what I was waiting for, eyes on the door, my hand inside my bag, I waited.

Paranoia had owned me for two seasons.

Paranoia, the first cousin of a bastard named fear.

A chilly day. Overcast, as usual. Dark like the sun was too ashamed to come out.

I'd forgotten how ominous it was in the U.K. For months I had vanished to places where I didn't need too much more than shorts and sandals. This weather was harsh, called for a heavy jacket, Levi's, shoes with soft soles. The skully I wore had the same midnight flavor.

I took to Queen Street, passed Domino's Pizza, headed toward Southwark Bridge. So much noise. So many smells at once. A city filled with red buses and cars and motorcycles. An assassin could be anywhere. I tried to spy into the glass fronts of buildings, tried to see if I could catch the reflection of whoever was so interested in me. It had to be my paranoia. Being this close to where I had died, it was fucking with me, making me think that once again someone had been sent to kill me.

I turned right at the light, took Upper Thames Road and veered to the left, went between Victorian buildings and businesses so I could connect with the footpath that snaked along the Thames River. I moved closer to the Millennium Bridge, then paused, searched to see who was trailing me. Men. Women. Joggers. Kids. Tourists taking pictures with the Tate Modern in the background.

I turned and mixed in with people heading toward the Millennium Bridge.

I paused when I thought I saw a grifter named Arizona coming my way.

But it wasn't her. It was someone else, same height, same complexion.

It wasn't until that moment that I realized where I was, where my mind had taken me.

Last time I saw Arizona, we were close to this spot, surrounded by guns.

It was a day I wanted to disremember, but, eyes wide open, I saw it again, that horrible day as clear now as it was then. Saw the overcast skies, felt the drizzle, saw the Tate Modern and St. Paul's Cathedral. That day, no matter how I tried, I couldn't protect her. We had lost that battle.

On that same day, I was beaten and died a slow and horrible death.

I had died right here in London.

I hopped on the tube and got right back off at Embankment, looked back at swarms of Londoners; no one person stood out to confirm my uneasy sensation. While everyone rushed uphill toward the West End's theater district or hustled back down into the tube, I slowed my pace, my messenger bag on my left shoulder, my right hand inside the bag, my right hand holding a silenced gun, finger on the trigger, and hoped my paranoia didn't make me do something I would regret.

I mixed in with a group of Chinese-speaking tourists, left them behind and mixed in with a group of people from India, then broke away from my human shields and stopped at Starbucks, went inside but didn't buy anything, spied outside, did the same at Wasabi, looked in the window at Timpson watch repair, again used that reflection to see who was trying to see me.

A woman glanced my way, panic in her face, the look of a woman concentrating. She searched; then she saw me, her hurried pace faltered, and after she had me in her crosshairs she looked away. What I saw in a glance: hair strawberry blond, dark scarf around an oval-shaped face, generous lips. She could've been Russian, British, Brazilian, Spanish, Polish. Could've been anything.

Her purse was large enough to shelter more than a few weapons.

And her hand was inside her purse, same as mine was inside the messenger bag I carried.

My hand was on the .38-caliber message I had for anyone who came after me.

She was beautiful and I'd have to kill her, without remorse, I knew that; beauty had no value in the world I lived in. At moments getting caught up in physical beauty was the same as committing suicide. On these streets I would have to put her down before she put me down.

I strolled up the incline, moved through European locals and international tourists. Passed by Embankment Café and Holland & Barrett health foods. I paused in front of another Starbucks, the second coffeehouse five businesses away from the one right outside the Embankment tube.

People passed by, briefcases, backpacks, and big shopping bags in their hands.

The woman with the oval face and strawberry blond mane was gone.

She hadn't passed me. And she hadn't gone back inside the tube station.

She'd lost me, had turned this around already.

I ducked inside the Arches shopping center, an alley with a strip of businesses that headed toward Trafalgar Square. I took it upstairs and came out of Charing Cross tube station, that woman nowhere in sight. I made it to Covent Garden, took Neal Street through the din of the shopping area, paused at Sunglass Hut to spy back. Did the same at Foot Locker and Aldo. Remained on alert as I approached Shaftesbury. I made a quick left, moved out of sight, and stood inside Neal's Corner Sandwich Shop.

She reappeared. In the middle of a crowd of people. Tried to blend in.

She had breasts and curves, weighed between ten and eleven stone.

Cellular up to her ear, she came out of Neal Street, moved quickly, looked in all directions, searched before she crossed the two lanes that separated this side of the boulevard from the side that housed Forbidden Planet. She was on a cellular. That told me she was part of a team; how large a team I had no idea. Seconds later a European man wearing a long black coat over a black suit came from the other direction, hurried from the Odeon, the cinema on the other side of Forbidden Planet. His stride was deadly. Her stride was just as powerful as she hurried toward him. He could've been any one of a hundred nationalities. Just like her. She went to him, rushed words exchanged; then they both looked around, looked up and down Shaftesbury, before they gave up, held hands, and hurried away, conversation heavy, but they didn't look back. They rushed toward the darkness covering Oxford Circus.

They didn't make contact with anyone else. They weren't on the cellular phone.

This time there were two.

I followed them as they passed by *Les Misérables*, steak houses, and high-end Chinese restaurants on the edges of Chinatown. They remained side by side, doing as I had done, used the reflections from storefronts to look behind them. He bumped her, caused her to pause in front of the cinema; I saw their lips moving as they communicated while pretending to read the marquee. They walked away, their pace telling, not as fast as before; I saw them struggle to not look back at me, their eyes on the reflections. They knew I was there. They used the reflection to gauge our distance apart, moved through the crowd, followed me by leading. I glanced up. CCTV cameras all over.

Still, I needed to pop them and vanish. I would have to kill them here and now.

Before they had the chance to do the same to me.

The well-dressed man stopped the cat-and-mouse game, turned around, looked in my eyes, and nodded. I did the same, stopped where I was, some distance between us, and returned the gesture.

He had red hair, trimmed short and neat, almost military. Square chin, medium build, about six feet tall. His features were like a combination of a trustworthy schoolboy and a career bad boy, the amalgamation of Brad Pitt and Josh Hartnett, the square chin making him more Josh than Brad. The swank way they were dressed brought to mind soccer star David Beckham and his wife, Victoria.

The strawberry blonde was older than the red-haired man by at least a decade, maybe fifteen years, but he acted like he was the general on the battlefield. Killing was a man's world. He pulled back his trench coat, did the same with his suit coat, revealed he was carrying a gun. I took my hand out of my messenger bag, my restless piece at my side. His peacemaker was in a holster, a threat. Mine was in my hand, a promise.

The strawberry blonde eased her hand out of her coat pocket and let me see a .22 attached to her pretty wrist, her gun hand wrapped in some kind of plastic. I understood. Not because she was afraid it might get wet. She had the gun wrapped up so if she took a shot, no shell would be left behind.

Her eyes rested on mine. Since she had the gun, I obliged the attention.

We stared, evaluated, exchanged energy, anxiety hidden behind cold poker faces.

She was around five-nine with the heels on; that made her about five-six without.

They stared at me like my check had changed into their checkmate.

I'd have to beat her to the draw, shoot her first, then try to pop him before he pulled his gun.

That would be impossible to do, get a clean shot, not without hitting an innocent bystander.

The sidewalks were crowded, busy, people rushing by them and by me. On the streets were red buses, more cars, more black cabs with colorful adverts on the side; all of that added noise to the moment. Nowhere for me to duck or run; same for them.

Nobody in the narcissistic world noticed that we were moments from a shoot-out.

Nobody but maybe *them*, the ones who sat inside secret rooms and worked for Big Brother.

Rain started to fall. A mild drizzle on a street swarming with people, people moving through traffic, people on cell phones, people listening to iPods, people moving like the world was in their way.

I motioned upward, not because of the weather but to indicate that they were in plain view. The strawberry blonde looked up, saw all the CCTV cameras. She did that as if this were her first time in London, as if she had no idea that CCTV cameras were all over, as if she didn't know that Central London was a big prison with no bars, that it was possible for Scotland Yard to track every citizen's move once they entered Central London, that anyone could be tracked from point to point with no interruption. Terrorists had learned that years ago.

The man shrugged as if he didn't really care about CCTV, then he smiled a bit.

Two policemen zoomed by on BMW motorcycles. Then I saw more police were here.

Across the street two of London's bobbies were on Shaftesbury, both of the cops walking this way, those distinctive helmets on their heads, helmets that made them easy to spot from a distance. Not many bobbies carried guns in London. Those two were strapped. This would be interesting.

The man looked back and saw the police cross the street, come toward our side of the road, walk up on him and the strawberry blonde. My red-haired friend mouthed two words to me. "Next time."

My aggravated and exhausted expression said fuck next time, let's do this now.

Then the red-haired man did something that surprised me.

He hailed a black cab. I had expected him to have an exit plan. But he hailed a cab.

He stepped to the curb and hailed a cab without taking his eyes off me. He let his partner get inside the cab first. The strawberry blonde kept her eyes on me, did that like she was trained to always watch her target, her eyes looking deep into mine again, that stare once again connecting us. We shared the stare of death. I caught a better look at her frame. Nice curves leading to a decent backside. Not too thin, but not too heavy. Like her height, her weight wouldn't change overnight. Eyes on me, the red-haired man took his time getting inside after her, pausing to make sure I wasn't about to rush them, my drawn gun blazing.

Both assassins sat in the let-down rear-facing seats.

As sweat and drizzle drained down my neck and back, my attention remained unmoved.

They kept their eyes on mine until their black cab vanished, mixed with a sea of black cabs.

Umbrellas went up all over, pedestrians not missing a beat, light drizzle changing to rain as red double-decker buses spit out carbon monoxide, as the din of cars and motorcycles hummed in my ears.

With a sprint I crossed the street, vanished in the web of streets spreading out into the West End.

Once again Death had been close.

Once again I had outmaneuvered the inevitable.