

“a riveting read from start to finish”

D. Donovan, Sen. Reviewer, Midwest Book Review

the former Assassin

Nikki Stern

THE FORMER ASSASSIN

by
Nikki Stern

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PART ONE

Chapter One

Today is not a good day to die.

No day is, not really. We humans are hard-wired to survive. By most standards, though, this morning is exceptional. The weather is balmy, even for May. The fierce winds that often pound the Welsh coastline have remained offshore. Purple heather blankets the emerald cliffs that encircle Bristol Bay. Small breakers gently lap the shoreline and wash the sand clean of debris. The water sparkles in the sunlight. Shades of azure and aquamarine yield to cyan and lapis further out. In the distance, the sea meets a cerulean sky just where the earth curves. No slate clouds gather at the horizon. All is calm.

Nothing suggested that today I would find myself on a bench in one of the most breathtaking spots in the world with a gun to my head, held by a predator who speaks just two words: “Don’t move.”

Not that the sea would have volunteered a warning. When it comes to human concerns, it can be a withholding bitch. That’s what Brian would have said. A sea-going man, he described the ocean as a kind of temptress: a teasing, unpredictable, mysterious, sexy, seductive sort, all surges and curves and hidden treasures. I’ve never looked at nature that way. To me, neither earth, sky, nor water are particularly interested in either our needs or our fears.

I sigh.

“I said, don’t move.”

To add emphasis to his orders, the demanding speaker pushes the barrel more firmly against my ear. No, two barrels, which tells me he’s holding an AF2011a1. I’m impressed. The pistol is new. The first double-barreled .45

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ever made, it was released at the beginning of 2011, just a few months ago. As a deterrent, it's overkill. Still, it's an effective way to make a point. I should feel flattered my assailant thinks me worthy of such a weapon. Then again, the man he works for is prone to flamboyant gestures.

My eyes wander to my hands. Despite careful grooming, they look worn. These hands have stroked a loved one's cheek, held a newborn, signed contracts, dug in the dirt, and caused the deaths of more people than I care to remember. That last thought makes me flinch. This in turn triggers a movement near my shoulder. I hold my breath, waiting for a reaction. Nothing. I exhale.

My gunman (I'm already feeling possessive) stands just out of my sightline. He's alone; that much I can tell. The acrid smell of his sweat mixes with the salt air. I cut my eyes hard to the right and catch a glimpse of him. He's young, perhaps twenty-two, average height but well-muscled. He's outfitted in the typical mercenary uniform of tight black leather jacket, worn jeans, and thick-soled shoes. He speaks with a heavy dialect, most likely Slavic. I can make myself understood in several Eastern European languages. I can't tell if he speaks more than a few words of English. Not that we'll be having a conversation.

It's impossible to know how long we'll be here. We seem to be waiting for something. I'm not going to be able to hold still for much longer. The gun barrel is giving me a headache. Something somewhere on my body itches. In order to even shift my weight, I'll need to establish some sort of rapport with the triggerman. What simple gesture could I make, some small sign to communicate that, yes, we're on the same page? A nod of the head or a thumb and forefinger pressed together (got it) might reassure him. A simple "okay" could convince him I know who's calling the shots, so to speak.

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I'm making jokes. That's a good thing, isn't it? Humor in time of peril?

I settle for palms forward, the universal sign for "stop" or "I surrender." Apparently, this doesn't get the message across. The man with the gun thumps the side of my head.

"What did I tell you?"

Don't move, I answer silently. I get it.

I project calm, although I am anything but. It takes everything I have not to curse him and his boss and, while I'm at it, my own past indiscretions. Everyone makes choices, and choices have consequences. Dwelling in the past is chancy, though. Regret makes you sloppy. There's no room for error when life is at stake. I remind myself I've been in dire situations many times before.

The gunman comes to stand in front of me, blocking my view. His right hand lightly roams my body, searching for weapons he knows I don't have. He's already done this. I suspect he takes a perverse pleasure in reminding me I'm apparently defenseless. Or maybe he's received his own set of instructions; he seems to be wearing an ear bud. I hold my tongue. He knows I'm unarmed. I know he's left-handed, a useful piece of information I file near the front of my brain.

He concludes his search and looks me up and down as if I were past my expiration date. "So, you are Susan Smith," he says with a faint note of wonderment. "The former assassin." Perhaps he expected something other than a slender, blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman of a certain age dressed in Wellies and a shawl. I appear to be the wife of a prosperous country squire, not a notorious ex-employee.

Suzanne, I want to scream, my name is really Suzanne. And not Smith, either. It was all a charade, a subterfuge, a misunderstanding. What's the use, though? I've lived so

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many lies wrapped inside other lies, I doubt I even know who I am anymore.

“You are very important to Mr. Kemp,” he continues with a shrug. “I wonder why that is. No matter.” He makes no attempt to disguise his disdain, yet his interest is palpable.

What would I tell him? “I am important to Victor Kemp. He forced me to work for him for decades. Then I went against his orders, and he decided to have my family murdered. I left, but not without taking back something he’d tried to steal from me. That didn’t sit well with him, and here we are.”

I might also add that although I blame Victor Kemp for many of my life's heartaches, I bear some responsibility. One impulsive decision and he owned me. Until the day I quit, I answered only to him. I worked only for him. I killed only for him.

I doubt my guard would be shocked at the notion of a female assassin, even a former one. Women nowadays fly drones, drop bombs, hack into intelligence programs, and pummel assailants twice their size and half their age. We have more opportunities than ever to prove we can be as amoral as men, assuming we want to quibble about the morality of killing.

After all these years, I wonder how I managed. I must have murdered more than a hundred people over twenty-five years. I suppose I compartmentalized, just as any CIA operative or drone operator might. When it comes to thinking about either the person who hired you or the person you’ve been hired to kill, you don’t. You employ a kind of tunnel vision. You just do the job. I recognize that as being the transparent excuse of brutal enforcers everywhere. It’s not personal; it’s professional.

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One of Brian's friends, Bill Poplar, was a profiler for the FBI. He described contract killers as high functioning, analytical types, capable of the most elaborate sort of pigeonholing. They're likely to be living a socially acceptable life complete with homes, partners, pets, and even children. Overall, they're pretty much indistinguishable from the rest of the population, except they're of above-average intelligence. That, and they kill for a living.

Bill especially wanted me to understand most contract killers aren't responding to a need to murder. "They aren't necessarily narcissists," he insisted. "Nor are they crazy. They're efficient workers. What most people don't realize is that killers for hire view themselves as people with tasks to do. Morality doesn't factor into their performance."

"So, contract killers aren't really immoral?" I asked.

"You might say they're amoral, although contemporary thinking doesn't see it quite that way. We tend to throw around the word "psychopath" quite a bit. Professional killers likely live by their own version of a moral code. We know they can still function as loving parents or loyal spouses. They might even view lying as unacceptable or cheating as unconscionable."

"They must be hard to profile," I suggested.

"They are." He looked at me, his eyes assessing. "Did you know that a number of profilers now suspect more women might be working as assassins than previously thought? Many psychologists tell us the fairer sex is calmer in stressful situations and steadier under pressure. Unfortunately, there's little in the way of substantive data to support that particular theory."

"Really?" I murmured. "Fascinating."

Calm. Unflinching. Less prone to stress. These are the characteristics profilers and psychologists have ascribed to

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people like me or the version of me I used to be. It's easy to imagine I'm exactly as cold and unfeeling as those words imply, nothing more than an emotional cypher. Victor might have believed as much. For all I know, the gunman believes it as well.

I sigh again.

"Don't worry," says my captor with ill-concealed pleasure. "It will be over soon enough." I expect him to remind me once again to stay still, but he doesn't bother. And where would I go? I'm pressed into this bench, held down by the weight of the choices I made and the choices that were never mine to make.

I suspect my gunman is bored, but he remains alert. I doubt he expects me to try anything. He nonetheless keeps the gun trained on my right temple, perhaps in deference to my reputation. I admire his discipline.

"Tell me," I begin. "How long have you been working for Victor Kemp?"

"Shut up," he replies, not unkindly. He doesn't seem invested in making conversation as a way to pass the time. He could study his phone, apart from stealing furtive glances, but that would mean he has to take his eyes off me. Something must be telling him it's not a good idea.

"Three years," he says suddenly. "You?"

I answer without moving my head, "I was in his employ for twenty-five years."

"Long time," he says.

That seems to be the end of it. Too bad. I was ready to tell him how Victor and I crossed paths. Serendipity, one might say. I was at the time newly out of the Army, a twenty-two-year-old engineering major at Vanderbilt. I was having a good time, having survived negligent Haight-Ashbury parents and my own brief time on the streets.

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Would my story impress the young gunman? Probably not. These Eastern Europeans are a hard lot.

Curiosity gets the best of my captor. “How did you meet Mr. Kemp?”

“I shot someone who worked for him.”

He moves just within my line of sight, eyebrows raised. I’ve impressed him.

Chapter Two

Victor Kemp had already created a substantial empire in 1978. Nominally CEO of an energy company, he oversaw an international underworld conglomerate with tentacles in high-stakes gambling, arms trading, sex trafficking, money laundering, bio-weaponry, genetic engineering, cyber-terrorism, and the buying and selling of information. The man could have procured an army, sabotaged a fail-safe system, or overthrown a government. Any number of formidable men were in his pocket or in his debt.

A cosmopolitan man, Kemp retained apartments in New York and Paris, along with a house complete with wife and daughter in London. He kept company with a very attractive Brazilian woman, an international real estate broker by whom he fathered two sons. He was wealthy, but wealth was never more than a means to an end for Victor Kemp. He used it the same way he used intimidation: to accrue power, including the power to purchase people to do his bidding.

I didn't know any of this. I was focused on my studies, content for the first time. I loved university life. A few years older than my classmates, I remained apart from most of them, save for a few carefully chosen liaisons.

While in the service, I'd discovered a talent for marksmanship, but I never expected to make use of it after I discharged. Then a vindictive drug dealer named Rico beat my roommate Greta nearly to death over a missed payment. Maybe if he and his associates hadn't deposited her, bloodied and barely breathing, back in the room we shared, I would have let the authorities handle it. I didn't know her attackers, but I had to assume they knew me. I must have determined they constituted a threat to my well-being. I

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don't remember my thought process or even if I spent time thinking, which I realize is a little too convenient.

Kemp, on the other hand, never forgot and he never forgave.

What I can say with certainty is that on October 30, two weeks after Greta's beating, I pulled my Remington M-700, a gift from an army buddy, out of my storage locker and headed to Nashville.

According to the news reports, four people in the middle of a thick crowd of patrons outside Tootsie's Orchid Lounge were conducting a drug deal around midnight when the shots were fired. The dealer and his companion went down, one bullet each. The buyers, two college students, ended up traumatized but otherwise unscathed. Precision shooting, the police said. An experienced sniper.

Someone reported spotting a slender figure dressed in a fatigue jacket and carrying a duffle bag. The empty second floor storefront had been swept clean. The detectives had little to go on and even less incentive to focus on the crime. A bad man and his crony were taken off the street; they considered it a blessing in disguise.

The cocaine Rico sold came from a supply line that extended from Nashville to Biloxi to the Bahamas and all the way back to Colombia. By any measure and regardless of what intermediaries stood between, he ultimately worked for the Medellín cartel. His companion, I later learned, had been dispatched by Kemp as a favor to a Southern congressman with ties to the Dixie Mafia. That man's role was to observe and negotiate, if necessary, in order to guarantee no one encroached on anyone else's territory.

A bad man, but not a man who had anything to do with Greta's beating.

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It took Kemp four months to find me. No one assumed a female shooter, but Victor Kemp always thought outside the box. Given what I've since learned about him, I'm not surprised he located me in the days before computers, cameras, or digitized data. The search likely required patience, persistence, personnel, and plenty of money. He had all of those.

He didn't send men to threaten me. He simply called one evening and invited me to dinner. When I demurred, he pointed out that a woman with the ability to hit not one but three targets in a crowd at night must be much sought after—or soon would be.

We met in Nashville on a warm and windy March evening. I wore a black stretch sheath, the only dress I owned, added a cheap locket, and pulled a comb through my hair. I can't recall where we ate. Perhaps on the same block where I fired the shots that defined my future. That would have appealed to Kemp's sensibilities. I remember two men standing at the door with not so subtle bulges under their boxy jackets.

The food might have been delicious; I know it was expensive. My appetite failed me. I would never learn to enjoy a meal with Victor Kemp, and I would have occasion to endure many of those.

When he stood to greet me, I saw a short but powerfully built man in his late thirties, his wrestler's body encased in a well-tailored suit. Pale blue shirt, relatively subdued tie for the times. Wide soft hand with blunt fingers tempered by manicured nails. He wore his sable hair fashionably long. His face was broad and flat below thick brows and a much-broken nose. He would always bear the trace of a shadow, though he was nominally clean-shaven and fastidious about grooming.

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His most arresting feature was a pair of eyes the color of a Siberian lake in winter.

He wasn't conventionally handsome, although he radiated a feral sort of masculinity. I suspect any number of women and even some men found him appealing. I was never one of them. To me, he came across as a barely tamed monster in a suit.

We made small talk about the advantages of a higher education, especially at a prestigious university like Vanderbilt. He knew I was a few years older than my classmates, that my scholarship came courtesy of the Army, that I'd spent two years stationed in Berlin. He seemed to know a lot about me.

He smiled at one point, if you can call what he offered a smile. It was more a display of large bright teeth that looked as if they'd been sharpened.

"Miss Smith. May I call you Susan?"

I raised my shoulders. It was the name I'd adopted after I'd been put out on the street by my mother when I was fifteen.

"Susan Smith." He spoke like a purring cat. "What an interesting name. Very plain yet very American."

"Blame Mom," I said. And instantly regretted those words.

"Of course, your mother. Although normally the father would bear some responsibility as well. Where did you say you grew up?"

"I didn't say." I pulled my cheap shawl tightly around my shoulders. It felt as if the temperature had dropped several degrees. I cleared my throat. "Mr. Kemp, what can I do for you?"

"A no-nonsense woman of business. Very well, then." His smile evaporated.

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“You killed an employee of mine, Miss Smith. I don’t care about your foolish roommate with the bad habit or the dealer who had her beaten nearly to death. I don’t even care about my man, who had unrelated business with the dealer and who died because some college girl with a rifle decided to become a vigilante.”

I had an argument ready. I opened my mouth to speak, but he held up his hand. It was a gesture I would come to know well.

“You will let me finish,” he said. “I hold all the cards here.”

He made his proposal, which amounted to a blueprint for how I would live going forward. Immediately upon graduation, he informed me, I would start work in his New York office. My title would be corporate security manager. My primary task would be to keep his various subsidiaries safe from espionage. Since I was already up to speed on threat assessment, thanks to my Army training, he had every confidence in me. He could guarantee substantial bonuses. The company would provide me with a rent-free apartment in a nice neighborhood right in Manhattan.

“Perfect for a single woman.” He winked.

In addition to my legitimate job, he told me, I would moonlight as his assassin. I’d eliminate, remove, or discharge (“use any euphemism you like”) those individuals he and his associates deemed a hazard to their business ventures or alliances. My assignments would be sprinkled throughout the calendar year, dovetailing whenever possible with legitimate meetings I took with clients. Every target would be outside the city, often abroad. My skills as a long-distance marksman would almost always suffice. Almost always. Occasionally, close-up work would be required. I would be

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trained so as to fill in any gaps. I would learn to overcome any inhibitions I had.

“You don’t seem to have a problem with killing at a distance. That will be your primary task, although you won’t always have that option, I’m sorry to say.”

I sat in stunned silence.

“I understand you learned Russian as well as a smattering of German. Excellent. We’ll add another language. Probably Farsi or Arabic. Later on, perhaps Chinese. I have a highly qualified instructor in mind.”

He cast his frost-colored eyes over my shabby outfit and shook his head.

“You’ll require a complete makeover to appear as a successful business person. Really, what woman wouldn’t welcome that?”

Kemp paused to take several hearty bites while I pushed my food around my plate. He took a long draught of his Margaux.

“So, Miss Smith, tell me. Do you accept my offer?”

I swallowed. “Do I have a choice?”

He dabbed almost daintily at the corner of his mouth. Then he fixed me with his arctic stare.

“You really don’t.”

Nine months later, I graduated mid-year. In January of 1980, I began my new life.

My position near upper management would have appeared quite an accomplishment for a woman in the 1980s and ‘90s. I built on what I already knew about secrets and risks and created protocols that impressed my coworkers. Once or twice a month, I handled the “other” work. I went where I was told and did what I was designed by training and temperament to do. At least that’s what I convinced myself.

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I had no supervisor. I reported directly to Victor. If anyone within the legitimate organization found this odd, they never said. I must have been the only mid-level manager with direct access to the boss. In twenty-five years, I never received a promotion, never became a senior officer or even a director.

As a long-range assassin, I still faced risk. I planned every detail, reviewed every action, and tried to account for every potential glitch with the help of specialists Victor assigned to me. There were never any guarantees. I nearly got caught a couple of times. Usually I managed to extricate myself without causing further harm. Usually, but not always.

I hated the rare close-up assignments; Victor knew it. No doubt he had other resources, other contractors better equipped and less squeamish. He was willing nonetheless to risk his high-value specialist. I think it was his way of exerting control over me.

As for whom I murdered, I must have decided they were bad people. Who else would populate that world? Let's be honest, though. Most people would conclude my actions were immoral. I deprived someone of a father, a son, a lover, or a friend. My observations as to their fitness to live are irrelevant. If anything, they may reflect my shortcomings as a human being.

I did refuse a job once. Something in my research led me to doubt the victim's guilt even in Victor's morally relative universe. I said nothing about my reservations; I simply invented some physical issue. If my boss privately questioned my action, he never told me. Perhaps he believed I'd never willfully take such a chance.

Did the intended victim die? I'm certain he did. Not by my hand, though.

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As promised, the company paid for both my apartment and wardrobe. The one-bedroom, located in a doorman building on the East Side, came fully furnished and tastefully, if impersonally, decorated. Kemp also sent me to a stylist named Dmitri. The man shopped for me and even custom-designed a few outfits. He helped me with hair and makeup. We got along well. We never discussed my work.

Dressing up helped me feel as if I were playing a part, and that may have shielded me from sinking into the moral abyss. I let myself believe I was simply a career-oriented single woman. Other times I pictured myself as the fictional heroine of a spy novel. Or I pretended to be an employee of the CIA, something I'd actually considered as a career choice. At the same time, I learned to become the other characters I occasionally needed to impersonate.

When the reality of my double life began to intrude, I willed my mind to go blank. I tried meditation, although I never became good at it. I perfected *ujjayi*, a yoga technique that teaches the practitioner to slow her breathing. At first, I intended it as an exercise designed to banish my pervasive anxiety. Instead, I perfected an ancient practice popular among peace-loving yogis to prepare for a kill shot.

I never slept with Victor Kemp. The very thought makes my skin crawl. Fortunately, he didn't believe in mixing business and pleasure. I dated appropriate and eligible men he always prescreened and sometimes preselected. I even became engaged to one of them, which amused my employer no end. He had instructed me to live my life as a modern woman, someone who could juggle my work and social lives. Love was not to enter into it. On that point, he and I agreed. Until we didn't.

I can't say whether I had a choice in what happened next. The heart always seems to have a mind of its own. I let my

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heart persuade me that love and marriage and even a family were all possible. That despite my unresolved past and encumbered present, I might have a normal life.

I should have known better. Assassins don't get happy endings, even retired ones.

Chapter Three

I've stopped talking. Or maybe I've stopped thinking. At any rate, my throat closes. The pain of loss is like a physical blow, but I don't move.

The gunman has shifted his position. He's lost interest in my sad tale.

I stare out at the water, willing myself to breathe as long as I'm still able. For five years, I've lived on this remote coastline. Despite the constant threat of discovery, I've known moments of peace and even joy. Today might have been one of those occasions. Except for this gunman and his employer, the man who tried and failed to control my life.

All because I fell in love.



Brian Foster. Who could have seen it coming? Not my mother, who probably believed me incapable of any feelings. Not Victor, whose comprehension of passion's power has always been incomplete. He knows how to manipulate human emotion in order to prey upon his subordinates' weaknesses or vanquish his enemies. I doubt his ability extends to recognizing love in all its raw glory.

And not me, for whom such feelings have always carried too much risk.

Had I been younger, I might have understood how I could develop a crush on my teacher. As an adult, I considered myself immune to any such adolescent impulses. When I first encountered the language teacher Kemp hired for me, I was nearly twenty-eight. I'd been working for Kemp

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for four years. I was a jaded woman of the world, or so I thought.

If I expected a fussy sort in a bowtie, I was in for a surprise. A tall, broad-shouldered man awaited me in the conference room. He looked like the type who worked outdoors. I noticed his tousled red hair, bright green eyes, and big hands. A lopsided grin kept him from being model-perfect. It didn't matter. He combined masculinity with an appealing boyish quality.

I tried to ignore the heat that rose in my body, ascribing it to a weird hormonal surge. Slow breathing didn't work and neither did thinking of the luckless man who'd been recruited to be my latest boyfriend. I can guarantee Arabic studies weren't on my mind. I'm amazed I ever managed to learn enough to carry on a conversation.

Belgian-born and Cambridge-educated, Brian Matthew Foster left a career in the Navy to start a consulting business after his father was killed in a car accident. He was fluent in seven languages and conversant in eight others. His talents as both instructor and meeting facilitator were much in demand; he marketed exclusively to high-end international corporations. His widowed mother resided in Bruges; his sister Juliette lived in Brussels with her banker husband and twin boys.

Brian maintained an apartment in London, although he was on the road most of the year. In his mid-thirties, he'd never married. He had little trouble attracting beautiful women, I soon learned.

Or so Victor Kemp told me. No surprise my employer knew so much about his language consultant. Any hire would be subject to his stringent vetting process. It did occur to me to wonder why he chose to fill me in about a short-term

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instructor. One never asked, though. Kemp had his own reasons and kept them close.

He couldn't have known how Brian would affect me, akin to lust at first sight. I'd never experienced anything comparable. The only thing that kept me from fleeing the room in embarrassment was that Brian looked as if he'd been hit by lightning. Mutual attraction. We could have powered a mid-sized city with the charge that ran between us.

Even after we'd been together awhile, I denied ever being pulled to him so forcefully.

"You might have sparked a bit of interest. You're tolerably good-looking. I was mostly attracted to your mind, however. And your wit."

He laughed, something he did with ease and frequency.

"Really? I don't know whether to be flattered or insulted. You must be either blinded by love or in denial. Or both. I'm much more than tolerably good-looking, as my mother will tell you. Although I'm not in the least surprised that you recognize how truly clever I am. I've my Irish great-grandmother to thank for that."

We went to bed. The physical pull couldn't be ignored. I told myself it would be a one-time-only experience and knew I couldn't keep that promise. At first, I put it down to lust. The need went beyond that, though. Brian reached into me. His desire filled me, suffusing parts of my being that had been dormant for years. To my surprise, something about me answered a longing on his part as well.

Our affair went on for more than half a year. We arranged to meet in odd little corners of the city far from work. We even met abroad from time to time. My job performance didn't seem to suffer. In retrospect, however, I wasn't as alert as I might have been. For instance, I refused to ask

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myself how Brian found it so easy to get to Munich, Madrid, or wherever I happened to be.

My biggest fear was that the man I worked for would find out about the man I loved, would sniff out our connection like an animal on the hunt. Every encounter mixed anticipation with apprehension. I often felt physically ill. Simply passing Brian in the corridor set off a tidal wave of emotion. Even in those pre-cellphone days, before the ubiquity of cameras on street corners and buildings, I felt exposed. What did Kemp suspect? What did he know? Brian couldn't have understood how truly vulnerable I felt. He might not have understood how devious my employer could be. Not the way I did.

I shouldn't have been surprised to discover what Kemp really expected of me. Yet he caught me off-guard.

"How are you feeling, Susan? You're looking a little thin."

We sat in his office one afternoon drinking the strong tea he favored. It was a ritual I could not avoid when he was in New York. At that point, I'd been studying with Brian for nine months and sleeping with him for five.

Victor Kemp's concern for my well-being didn't fool me. He wanted something.

"I'm fine. Working hard."

"You've been studying hard as well. Tell me, what do you think of your teacher?"

"He's a good instructor."

Kemp raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"What do you want me to say, Victor? He's good-looking and sort of charismatic if you like that type." I couldn't meet his eyes, so I preoccupied myself with my tea.

"I want you to get close to him."

I choked and flushed at the same time.

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“Hot. The tea.” I cleared my throat. “What exactly do you mean by close?”

“Physically and emotionally close, Susan. Get under his skin. Get into his bed. Get into his heart. I don’t care how you do it.”

I didn’t bother to hide my surprise. “Victor, I’m not a prude, but that does seem to be above and beyond the call of duty.”

He waved away my comment as if it were an annoying gnat.

I tried again.

“My lessons must be coming to an end soon. It’s been nearly a year. What would I use as an excuse to see him?” As if I needed one, I thought, and wondered if my face had reddened again.

“We’ll find some pretense to continue the lessons. Perhaps we’ll add another language.”

“I’m still confused. What exactly am I looking for?”

Victor tilted his head, a gesture more Gaelic than Russian.

“I think the professor is something more than a talented teacher who charges his international clientele an arm and a leg. He’s hiding something. Maybe it’s personal; maybe it’s professional. I want to find out what our friend is keeping from us.”

He grinned, revealing those frightening teeth.

“I should say, I want you to find out. Perhaps he’s a corporate spy. Perhaps he’s something more. It should be easy for you to discover. So. You will get to know him, and you will tell me what he tells you. I will decide what is valuable and how I wish to proceed.”

What did Victor know? What wasn’t he telling me? I started to object. Victor’s grin disappeared.

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“You will do this, Susan. Is that clear?”
I knew I was in no position to refuse.

Chapter Four

I move; I can't help it. The gunman is almost relieved. He's got another excuse to scold or yell or take some sort of action. Anything to relieve the tedium.

We're both brought up by an insistent roar. The sound of a boat has reached us, shattering the calm like a fist through a window. Its engine is enhanced for speed and power. The boat moves aggressively, bow thrust out of the water. There's nothing restrained about the vehicle. Whoever chose it wants to make his presence known.

My companion grins and points.

"There's Mr. Kemp now. He's eager to do this in person."

I don't need to ask what "this" is. Discovery is not Kemp's endgame, only death.

Minutes pass. I'm not sure how many. Three? Five? The henchman tracks the speedboat, shading his eyes even though he's wearing those stupid mirrored sunglasses favored by muscled hitmen everywhere. He might be dreaming of a rich payday or an end to this nonsense that requires him to hold a gun to the head of a harmless-looking older woman. Maybe he's a sadist (Kemp has no shortage of those in his employ), and he's looking forward to a grisly show, one in which he might even get to participate.

I can make out five separate figures on the boat, including one who is both shorter and broader than the others. His improbably brown hair barely moves in the breeze. Kemp must be seventy by now, but he appears unchanged even at this distance.

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Unchanged, unrepentant, and always one step ahead. He knew how ill-advised my choice of lover would prove to be long before I ever learned the truth.



Bad enough I was expected to spy on Brian. My employer's veiled suggestions now caused me to doubt my lover. Was he keeping something from me? How would I know? Could I learn his truth without his ever learning mine?

Several weeks into my newly complicated life, I was sent to Bombay. Brian arranged to work with a corporate client at the same time, a situation I might at one time have considered lucky but now found to be suspicious. The stifling July heat couldn't mask the jittery unease that enveloped the city. Not a month earlier, Air India Flight 192 had exploded on a transatlantic journey from Delhi to Montreal via London. Intelligence pointed to Sikh militants. Three hundred of the dead passengers were Canadian, prompting official protests from that country. While we were in India, a bomb intended for another Air India flight went off at Tokyo's Narita International Airport. The Indian government was in an uproar, the country on edge.

As usual, I had two tasks to perform. My scheduled meeting was a cover for my real business. Kemp's people had been using the services of a lower-level district administrator in order to get inside information on board members Kemp intended to blackmail. They discovered the man had also accepted money from a local criminal organization for the same purpose. His dossier hinted at other perversions. None of those warranted action. No, the singular sin in my employer's mind was disloyalty. While

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Kemp had no intention of taking on the crooks that caused the conflict of interest, he wanted to send a message. My target was the greedy man playing both sides against the middle.

Brian and I booked adjoining rooms at the Taj Mahal Palace, a grand old establishment with a world-class collection of artifacts amassed over more than half a century. They were connected by a door he arranged to leave open. The space was obscenely luxurious. Its magic was lost on me. I was struggling under the weight of too many secrets.

I'd been given one of those close-up assignments I both feared and detested. It seemed the sheer number of people filling the streets of Bombay made a long-distance kill too difficult. I'd have to do a hit and run. I think Kemp gave me these jobs just to see how I'd do. No, that's not it; he knew I'd succeed. He assigned them to me because he knew they made me unhappy. He wanted to remind me he ran every aspect of my life. I wasn't simply an assassin; I was his assassin.

I argued forcefully against using a knife. I was given a syringe. I didn't ask what it contained. On the appointed day, I walked head down in front of a government building at lunchtime. I'd dressed in a traditional sari and veil and held the hypodermic hidden in one hand. I'd practiced the routine in my head for hours. Brush past the target as he reaches the sidewalk. Pretend to stumble into him. Push the needle straight into his heart. Empty the syringe before pulling it out. Get away quickly.

It didn't quite work as planned. Instead of clutching his chest, the victim surprised me by grabbing my wrist. Before I had a chance to yank my arm back, he fell to his knees and then backwards, nearly pulling me on top of him. The scrum

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of office workers should have provided adequate cover, assuming I wouldn't end up straddling a dying man.

I spoke in Hindi. "Please help this gentleman!" The bureaucrats, businessmen, and passersby moved back. Not the reaction I wanted. I tried again in English. "He needs assistance!"

A young man in business attire stepped in and others followed suit, creating a tight circle. I pulled myself free of the man's death grip and scurried away, back hunched and knees bent. I didn't dare stand up straight until I'd put some distance between us. I looked back once to see a well-dressed middle-aged man with a black bag rush over. He issued commands in three languages.

"Excuse me. Step aside. I'm a doctor. Let me through."

Eyes lowered, I continued to walk as slowly as I dared to the hotel. I'd had close calls before. None had affected me quite like this one. I splashed water on my face, checked myself for blood (there was none), and hurriedly changed. Back on the street again, I disposed of my disguise and went to the meeting I'd arranged with an executive management team. How I got through the afternoon without fainting I can't imagine. I remember clasping my hands together so no one would notice they were shaking.

As far as the home office was concerned, the trip had been productive. The message waiting for me at the Taj's front desk read, "Well done. Victor."

At the hotel bar, I knocked back two Scotches, neat. Then I sat with a glass of tonic water in one of the lounge chairs with a view to the entrance. Brian arrived a little later without seeing me. I waited until he picked up the keys and headed upstairs, allowed several minutes to pass, and followed.

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I heard the shower running when I came in. Kicking off my shoes, I threw myself on the bed with an arm flung across my face. Though I'd tried to slip in unnoticed, nothing got past Brian. The water stopped. He called through the door to inquire about my day. We swapped our short stories about horrific clients. Apparently satisfied, he went back to his business while I questioned my ability to neatly pack away this latest incident.

A couple of minutes later, he walked out of the bathroom, a towel at his waist. He regarded me with sympathy.

“You had a particularly rough time, didn't you?”

I sat up and pasted on a smile. “You know how it goes in my world . . .” I let the words float away. Maybe Brian would take the hint.

“It must be hard to work for Victor Kemp.”

It wasn't what he said. He knew I worked for Kemp; he'd been hired by the man, for heaven's sake. It was how he said it that set off the flashing red lights and the whooping alarm sounds in my head. Warning: get out now! I pretended a nonchalance I didn't feel.

“It's not always easy.”

“Maybe it's time we talked about a few things. Let me dry off and get into some clothes. Stay right where you are.”

Brian turned back into the bathroom without closing the door. Steam filled the bedroom. I fell back, pinned to the bed like the heroine in a horror movie. Something was coming, something very bad, and I couldn't do anything to stop it.

When my lover emerged with his pants on, his blue chambray shirt half buttoned, I hadn't shifted so much as a muscle. After a couple of seconds of awkward silence, he walked over, took me by the arms, and pulled me to a sitting

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position. Then he stepped all the way across the room and began talking.

As my employer suspected, Brian had indeed been hiding something—the fact that he worked for MI6, Britain’s Secret Intelligence Service. He’d been on loan for years to an Interpol task force assigned specifically to bring down one of the largest global criminal enterprises the agency had ever encountered, the one run by none other than Victor Kemp. My employer’s activities made him a high-value target. His connections with so many well-placed people made him a difficult one on which to hang any charges. Brian became a roving inside man. He contracted with Kemp’s partners, allies, and subsidiaries, collecting what insight and information he could before moving on. This latest assignment had put him directly into Kemp’s headquarters and into my life.

Somewhere in the middle of his revealing speech, it occurred to me that I was safe. No one at SIS, including Brian, apparently suspected me of anything. I was simply another well-placed lead, someone who might be persuaded to help identify suspicious activities behind the legitimate-looking ventures. Brian was supposed to add extra incentive by being his charmingly persuasive self.

“I couldn’t tell you before now. I didn’t want to frighten you.” Brian walked back to the bed and looked down at me. “I didn’t want to fall in love with you, either. Ah, well. No turning back now, is there?”

I stood up too quickly and felt lightheaded. Brian reached for me. I folded my arms across my chest and looked down. My mind went into overdrive trying to sort out the truths from the lies. I thought I might sink into the floor or explode like one of those inflatable dolls. He watched me silently, waiting for me to look up. I did. In his eyes, I saw

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compassion and yes, love. Then, to his surprise and mine, I burst into tears.

I can't remember ever crying. Not as a baby or a young girl, not when I was hurt, not when my father was in the midst of a drug-fueled rant or when I learned he died, not when I was molested and then kicked out of the house. Not even when Victor Kemp took control of my life. Now I wept as if to make up for a decades-old drought. I gulped, gasped, bawled, and yelped like a wounded animal.

To Brian's great credit, he said nothing. He took me in his arms and rocked me.

When the worst of my outburst had passed, I took a deep breath and said, "My turn."

Brian had already heard quite a bit about my lonely childhood. He knew I was the daughter of self-involved parents stranded between the Beat and Flower Power generations. I'd told him my birth name was Suzanne Brooks and that my parents, Mo and Lisette, had never married. I'd even shared a few of the more horrifying examples of their monumental neglect, which I tried to spin as amusing life lessons.

Now I filled him in on the rest of it. He learned how and when I went from university student to security manager and Victor Kemp's handpicked on-call killer. That last bit of information was harder for me to put on the table than all the fictions I'd invented up to that point.

"So," Brian said when I'd finished. "Victor Kemp's assassin."

As emotionally drained as I was, I couldn't protest or come up with a phrase that would turn my profession into a kinder, gentler version of itself.

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He pulled back and looked me in the face, his green eyes full. “Suzanne,” he said, “this may be hard to believe, but what you’ve told me doesn’t change how I feel about you.”

In that moment, I became his, always and forever.

We left Bombay a half-day early. We made a stop in Brussels and traveled to Bruges. There we were married in a tiny chapel in front of his mother, his sister, her husband, and their two small boys. We spent much of our twelve-hour honeymoon trying to figure out how we would beat Victor Kemp.

I still had one more surprise to share with Brian: I was three-and-a-half months pregnant.

Chapter Five

If there was no possible way to hide my pregnancy, neither could I take the chance Kemp might discover the identity of the father. I told him the baby was the parting gift of someone who broke up with me because I wouldn't abort. Though he seemed surprised, he didn't argue with my decision to keep the child.

"Odd. I never thought of you as a mother. Oh, well. I imagine we'll have to keep you more or less out of harm's way until you deliver." Initially, his concern surprised me, until I realized he was simply being practical. Between physical and emotional changes, he didn't want to take any chances.

He didn't refer to my condition again.

Brian took the opportunity to bow out as my instructor. He explained to Kemp he had other clients and prior commitments. He even noted I seemed too occupied to focus on my studies, a ploy I found breathtaking in its audaciousness. I'm glad I didn't hear their exchange. I would have been seized by a fit of hysterical laughing.

During my pregnancy, I continued to work for both sides of the business. I developed security plans. I traveled as required to meet clients. Sometimes I served as a courier, carrying papers or other small items on behalf of Kemp's underworld interests. I didn't have to refuse any elimination work; I wasn't given any.

I still hoped to be on the road as close to my due date as possible, have the baby abroad, report it stillborn, and send the child to live with Brian's mother for a year. The separation would be hard on all of us, but I'd be occupied.

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I'd have my work and my new assignment on behalf of Brian's Interpol team.

Brian, my husband! The thought sent shivers up and down my spine.

All that preparation ended up wasted. I nearly had the baby in the back of a taxicab on Christmas Eve after a particularly grueling trip. It was a false labor, but I stayed home after that. The holidays provided a convenient excuse. Brian, who had arranged for me to deliver at a private hospital, got in just after Christmas. On December 31, 1985, a healthy baby boy we named Michael arrived just about on time. The doctor joked about our little tax deduction. Would that our lives had been that simple.

In the absence of GPS, Kemp couldn't easily track me. He wouldn't know whether I was suffering through a pregnancy gone wrong or delivering my firstborn son not fifteen blocks from the office. He had spies, of course. So did we, which is how we knew he was in London at the time. He likely relied on local underlings who weren't expending much effort monitoring the activities of a pregnant security manager, even if they suspected I worked in another capacity.

We left the hospital after three days and moved to my apartment. There we lived as a family for another week and a half. Brian took care of everything. Someone brought food. Someone else kept a lookout and collected my mail, mostly sympathy cards from coworkers who couldn't have known how happy I was. My husband occasionally slipped out. I stayed where I was with the new man in my life.

My employer called once and left a message on my answering machine absolving me of any need to phone him back. At the end of the ten-day period, Brian took little Michael out of my arms and across the Atlantic to his

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grandmother while I went back to work and tried to push motherhood into its own hidden compartment. The feeling was nothing short of awful. My body ached. My heart ached.

A year passed, an entire year, in which I lived my multiple lives as corporate consultant on security issues, paid assassin, spy for Interpol, and secret wife and mother. Brian had already decided he would tell only one person at M16 what I really did for Victor Kemp. Even that presented a risk.

Brian's decision brought up another problem I faced, exacerbated no doubt by fluctuating hormones and my new role as a mother. I was panicked at the thought of resuming my work as Kemp's killer.

"What if one of my targets turns out to be a double agent or someone working undercover for Interpol?"

I'd never allowed myself to think in those terms, never considered that the mark wasn't in some way responsible for being in my sightlines. It was a way of maintaining my equilibrium; blame the victim. Moral deficiency or survival technique, it didn't used to matter. Now it did.

"It's very unlikely that would happen, darling. Besides, you're only going to be at this another year or so. Then we'll pull you out and go somewhere as far away from Victor Kemp as possible."

My employer inquired solicitously about my health immediately upon my return, then went back to being his usual brusque self. If he suspected something was different about me, he never let on. Perhaps he assumed any changes were temporary, owing to typical female challenges. Not that he possessed anything remotely resembling empathy. I was simply a prized asset, and he wanted me working at capacity.

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He gave me another three weeks of deskwork and sent me to a meeting in Zurich. My sorrow trailed me everywhere like a shadow.

“She lost her child,” I heard colleagues whispering. Indeed, I had.

Everything returned to normal, meaning I went back to playing the leading role in a production whose ending I couldn’t foresee. I worked diligently and kept social interactions to a minimum. Brian and Michael commanded my emotional reserves, even in absentia. At that, I had to keep thoughts about them in their own inviolate space if we hoped to survive.

In early March of 1987, I made my way from London, where I’d gone on business, to Brussels for a belated birthday celebration for Michael. Under the watchful eyes of a few family friends, a group of one-year-olds frolicked in late-winter sun, along with Michael’s two older cousins. I couldn’t take my eyes off my petit chou or sweetheart, as his grandmère called him. He looked just like his father, except his hair was more umber than red. He had my mother’s blue eyes. Like Brian, he laughed easily and displayed endless curiosity about the world around him. He appeared fearless. I wanted him to stay that way.

Brian took me aside during the birthday party. “I need to move *Mamà* and Michael. They’re not safe here.”

It was as if a hand—five blunt fingers topped by beautifully manicured nails—had reached inside my chest to squeeze my heart.

“Victor knows.” I stated this as fact. Brian’s curt nod made me catch my breath.

“I don’t care what it takes to keep them safe—to keep you safe. Do it.”

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He promised to call me in exactly two weeks. When the date came and went and I didn't hear from him, I willed myself to remain calm. I could do calm, I reasoned. Two more days passed. I called Brian. A recorded message politely informed me the number was no longer in service.

Five more days went by. Nothing.

One week after the call that didn't take place, Kemp invited me out to lunch. It was a lovely New York day, just a hint of spring in the air. Over yet another expensive meal I could neither smell nor taste, he chatted about inconsequential nothings. His wife had decided to redecorate the flat; his daughter adored her school in Switzerland.

"Family is so important, isn't it?" he continued. "Speaking of which, did you hear about your former teacher, Brian?" Kemp flicked his brittle glance in my direction before returning to his steak Diane.

I grasped my knife so hard my knuckles turned white. I didn't think I could answer, so I shook my head and moved my hand under the table.

"He became a family man, married with an infant son. Imagine that! They lived somewhere in Belgium. Which was his birthplace, as I recall." Kemp's attention was on his food, yet I felt myself being watched.

"Imagine that." I wouldn't meet his eyes.

"Well, we just received news of a horrifying event." He paused, studying the carved platinum ring he wore on his right hand. I'd always wondered about it. Wedding band? Friendship ring? Visual reminder of a blood oath taken by a band of fellow evildoers?

"It seems there was an accident. I believe he was with his young son and the boy's grandmother when their vehicle crashed near the Belgian/French border. The car went off

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the side of the road, down an embankment, and burst into flames. Just like that. No one survived.” He shook his large head. “Such a tragedy. I don’t know how they made any identification at all. Apparently, the wife wasn’t with them. I can’t guess how it must feel to have one’s entire family suddenly wiped out like that.”

He cut a tiny piece of meat and inserted it surgically into his mouth.

“To love so deeply is to risk so much heartache. Don’t you agree?”

He’d been looking at his plate. Now he brought his icy eyes up to mine to see if I would react. I struggled to keep my face a blank. I didn’t even blink. Beneath the tablecloth, my hand held the knife as if it were a sword.

“I wouldn’t know,” I managed to say.

We locked onto each other, his wintry gaze challenging the flame he must have seen in mine. Time passed: a thousand years or a few seconds. Then he smiled, all teeth and no warmth.

“My goodness, death and grief are not really appropriate topics for lunch, are they? I sometimes forget myself. Hazards of the profession, I’m afraid. You should eat your food before it gets cold.”

My searing fury disappeared, replaced by a cold resolve as powerful as anything I’d ever experienced. I threw my anger into one of my many compartments, hidden but not forgotten, and I allowed myself to become as hard as my antagonist. If I ever had a soul, it shriveled in that moment. My heart closed. I assessed my odds of success should I jump across the table and thrust the knife into his chest. Not good. Kemp undoubtedly had guards posted at the restaurant perimeters. I couldn’t turn my cutlery against

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myself, either. Too dramatic. I'd never give him the satisfaction.

I think I muttered something about how sad the world could be, and we moved on.

For the rest of the interminably long luncheon, I pretended to eat. I listened, I responded; I behaved as if I was with a decent human being, not the beast who'd ordered the death of my loved ones.

When we got back to the office, I ducked into the ladies' room and threw up. I went back to my desk, finished the workday, and went home. In my apartment that night, the explosion or collapse I expected didn't take place. No howling like a banshee, no punching the walls until my fists bled. I didn't pick up a rifle and head for a high place so I could randomly shoot people. I slept without dreaming for a few hours. The next day I went to work. And the next and the next, for nearly two more decades.

I should have gone insane. I almost did on several occasions. I wanted to leave him. Actually, I wanted to kill him or hurt him as terribly as he had hurt me.

I did none of those things. I contended with my pain and my rage. I had no choice. He watched me like a hawk, at once secure in his power yet wary I might turn on him. My strength came from not doing what he expected. If I'd really thought about how long it might take to get free of him, I might not have made it. I didn't think about it. I focused on the tasks in front of me. Tunnel vision.

Chapter Six

I quit Victor Kemp five years ago. When I ultimately made the decision, I did everything right. I finished my assignments, gave notice, and handed in my paperwork. Admittedly, I failed to give him two weeks. It didn't seem prudent. I packed up, cleared my desk and walked into Kemp's office with a resignation letter I placed on his desk on his desk.

“I'm leaving.”

His reaction was typical of him. A chuckle, as if he found me amusing. A sigh, as if I were a disappointing child. And not far below the surface, a simmering fury.

“What is this?” Victor pretended to read the letter, then pushed it aside. His small pale eyes bored into me. “Early retirement? It hardly seems your style. I expected you to continue to work until you were an old woman.”

Old woman. I fought not to flinch.

“I've been doing this a long time, Victor. I'm tired. I've earned my rest, and I'm taking it.”

I turned away and opened the door to his office to leave. My soon-to-be former employer stopped me, his voice like ice. “You're still an asset, Ms. Smith. Improbably or not, you still retain skills I find valuable. I shouldn't need to remind you that my assets don't leave until I've fully realized my investment.”

“As of now, you have.” I walked out and closed the door without looking back.

He didn't try to stop me. I didn't expect him to, not then. After all, he'd hired me as his personal killer, exacted his punishment when I strayed, eliminated all possibility for happiness, and held onto me for decades. How much more

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was he going to get out of a woman he'd wounded so grievously? All I wanted to do was disappear. He should have been glad to be rid of me.

No one walks away from Victor Kemp, though. Especially not someone who sets in motion an act of defiance too big for him to ignore. Deep in my heart, I knew that. I knew that if and when he discovered what I'd done, he'd come for me. Which was why, when he finally did, I was ready.



My gunman is on the phone. He's muttering in Russian. I can follow the bare outlines of his conversation: "yes . . . no, no trouble . . . easy . . . old woman."

Old woman? I grit my teeth.

He doesn't notice the presence of a second speck on the horizon, so faint as to be mistaken for an indolent insect. I see it, though. I know both its purpose and its target. I run some calculations in my head. How long? How fast? How far? Timing is everything.

The boat my companion has yet to register as such is moving rapidly toward the first vessel. I gauge its distance as too great to factor into my strategy. My companion speaks, his voice heavy with pleasure

"Not long now."

I'll show you an old woman, I imagine telling him. Instead, I gasp and clutch at my chest.

"My heart."

If the situation weren't so grim, his expression would be laughable. Irritation and panic fight for primacy on his face. He's plainly torn. On one hand, I may be sick or even dying. His job is to deliver me alive. It's not just the money: this is Victor Kemp we're talking about. On the other hand, he

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doesn't want to deal with this new development. He doesn't know what kind of help I might need, or what might be required of him.

How will he justify his inaction? It's nothing. She'll be okay. Anyway, I've done what I was asked to do. Or maybe: she's not worth worrying about. I can see it in his body language as he begins to relax.

The gunman has made a mistake common to many who deal with older people (that is, anyone over fifty). He's decided I'm exactly as inconsequential as he wants me to be. He's not surprised I'm ill or weak; it's not his problem. He looks away.

The second he does, I fall onto my left shoulder and reach under the bench where my 9mm is taped. The move is awkward because I'm right-handed, but I've practiced. Roll over, reach under, roll back, and shoot while sitting up. Years of working out guarantee I have reliably strong abdominal muscles.

The side of his head erupts in a spray of bright red and dull beige. We stare at each other in disbelief, both with the same question: what just happened? I'm also wondering who fired the shot. It wasn't me; I'm close enough that my bullet would have produced a small hole in the man's forehead. As his lifeless body drops, I jump off the bench, searching frantically in front and behind. A rangy young man with reddish-brown hair lopes towards me. In one hand, he holds a smoking shotgun. Before I have a chance to do or say anything, he points to the water. "Look," he yells.

Not thirty seconds later, the boat that surely carried my death explodes. A giant fireball extends straight up with a roar that echoes off the cliffs. I watch with my mouth open, as if at a fireworks display. The second boat I spotted earlier approaches the burning wreckage tentatively and circles

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before reversing course and coming around from the other direction. The driver repeats the maneuver. After a time, I stop counting the sweeps. It will take as long as it takes. The occupants of the other craft are being cautious, as they should be.

The young man is by my side, out of breath. I turn to deliver a fierce hug, then stand back, holding him at arms' length. My slightly stern expression dims his triumphant look.

"I had a clear shot, Michael."

"So did I." He's gone serious. "I didn't want you to be the one to kill him. Former assassin, right?"

"But—"

"It's done. Besides," he can't resist a small smile, "it was a bloody good shot."

My son looks so much like Brian, I'm afraid my heart will burst. I thank whatever gods I fitfully acknowledge that Victor Kemp was never able to take from me what I most love. "You're my hero," I tell him.

"Hope your mother doesn't mind spreading the hero worship around a bit. Unless she thinks that boat blew itself up."

The voice is a more mature version of Michael's and as comfortably familiar as the shawl I've wrapped around myself to ward off the chill. The speaker stands at the bow of the boat like a heroic Celtic figure. Copper and silver strands of hair catch the sunlight above a pair of emerald eyes. The man jumps like a boy into the water.

"You did a fine job, son. Couldn't have managed without your help. As for you—" He plows out of the shallows, reaches for me with both arms and envelops me in a bear hug. "I'm just glad you're all right."

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I sink into the warmth of my husband's chest, suddenly shaky. I ignore the sea, the sky, the fire, my son, and the body of the hapless lackey who chose to work for Victor Kemp and ended up dead on a beach in Wales.

"Are they gone, Brian? All of them? Even Kemp?"

"Every one of them, Suzie. I saw five people board a chartered boat in Bristol, Kemp included. No one else got on or off in the interim. The gunman Michael neatly dispatched was hired strictly for this job. Only a few confederates even knew about this operation. Kemp kept his interest in your whereabouts hidden from many of his most trusted advisors, you know. He was afraid to appear foolish or impaired by poor judgment. Nothing brings out the jackals like a leader weakened by a personal vendetta."

A personal vendetta. To end me. I shudder.

Two more men jump out and wade to shore. One of them is Charlie Campbell, MI6's favorite chameleon. To call him a colleague of Brian's does their relationship a disservice. Charlie has known Brian for thirty-five years. He's been savior and protector of my family for decades, even as the two of them tried to push through the investigations into Victor Kemp's various criminal endeavors. Kemp's band of lawyers successfully derailed every effort to bring him to justice.

I'm still galled that his attempts to kill an agent of Her Majesty's Government didn't prod the authorities to issue an arrest warrant. Supposedly, there was never enough evidence to act. Even in the world of spies and secrets, bureaucracy moves slowly, if at all.

I give Charlie a hug that nearly crushes him. He leans back, his ruddy face wreathed in smiles.

"You're strong for such a small thing." Charlie's brogue is thick as a Scottish mist at dawn. "Nice work, by the way. You too, Michael."

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He claps Brian on the shoulder and they embrace, two old friends who have always had each other's backs. Michael comes over and hugs the master spy whom he loves like an uncle. The man who's accompanied Charlie hangs back until he is waved over. More backslapping.

I stand back to observe the timeless ritual of male bonding. I also marvel at the loyalty on display, loyalty that has saved us all once again.

"Okay," Charlie says. "If you'll excuse us, we've got a bit of work to do here. Let's at it, Fred."

He and the other man pick up the body on the beach and roll it in a tarp before depositing it in the boat. He promises to return at dusk. I invite them for supper. All very civilized, considering recent events.

The three of us climb the ancient steps to an old stone cottage, past a small gravestone. We laid Brian's mother to rest there last year. When we reach the back patio, he goes inside to make a few calls. My son pulls out a cell phone and telephones someone, probably his girlfriend, Kate.

I take a moment to study his face and glance back at the fire that sends black plumes skyward. The flames are smaller, more contained. The authorities will have received reports. I expect to hear a helicopter before long.

For now, all is silent, save for the soft sighing of the waves that lap the shore.

I turn back to the cottage just as Brian exits. He looks tired. What a toll this ordeal has taken on my little family. How utterly resilient they all are. We all are, I tell myself.

Michael disconnects and we embrace, a group hug that lasts nearly a minute.

It's over, I think. I note the uncertainty in that thought and will it away. Brian feels it and pulls me to him.

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I glance over his shoulder at the waters as they push the blackened shell of the boat this way and that. Bits of the mast have broken off; a portion of the hull collapses into the water as if exhausted. A tiny piece of what appears to be debris breaks off from the wreckage. The movement seems almost deliberate, as if the fragment is self-propelled. I shake my head to free it from its nightmare. "It's over," I say aloud. Then the three of us walk arm in arm back to our home.