

CHAPTER 1

The assassin moved slowly through the undergrowth. Flat on his stomach and with so little moon, it was unlikely that anyone would see him even if they came within a few feet. He reached the edge of the woods and stopped. He slowed his breathing and listened. He could hear nothing other than the nocturnal sounds of woodland animals. He inched forwards, slowly parting the long grass that grew on the edge of the track. He thought of all the times he had done this before. Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan, he had served everywhere the British Army had been deployed over the last twenty years. A paratrooper by profession and master sniper by trade, he had ended lives on behalf of the British Government for over two decades. And he was very good indeed at his trade. So good that it had been easy to find a job when he left the Army. But this job was particularly important. It was, he hoped, one of his last. If it went well he would soon be able to retire to his native Scotland with enough money in various bank accounts to ensure that he never had to work again.

The villa had been built in the early twenties. White, sprawling and very private, it sat in nearly half an acre of prime real estate on the southern slopes of Montgo, the mountain that dominates the small fishing town of Javea on Spain's east coast. Its owner, Diego Velasquez, had chosen it deliberately. He had been a drug dealer on the Costa del Sol for many years and whilst this had made him rich, it had also made him a fair number of enemies. He believed that the low profile seclusion his villa provided kept him safe and, so far, it had. As the assassin watched, the perimeter gates slid quietly closed behind a big, black Mercedes saloon. The car sat low on its suspension; it was clearly armoured. It came to a standstill in front of the floodlit villa and Velasquez started to get out unsteadily.

‘Open the door,’ he shouted as he lurched towards the front step. ‘Come on, open it, I need another drink.’

The assassin recognised Velasquez immediately. He’d been following him for over a week, discretely watching his every move, probing for a weakness that he could exploit. He’d found it a few days ago. He’d particularly enjoyed the build up to this kill. He’d seen enough of Velasquez over the last seven days to know that the world would be a better place without him. But there was still an element of risk. Velasquez’s men were highly professional. They took few chances and, if the assassin made a mistake, he knew he would most likely pay for it. The trick with any kill was to minimise the risk by hitting the target when he least expected it. The element of surprise was crucial. But achieving surprise was difficult, not least because the people providing the protection had usually done the same training as the people trying to kill the target. They knew how to spot vulnerable points and they knew the importance of avoiding routine. But sooner or later, everyone makes a mistake. It’s just a question of being patient. The assassin knew that every Friday evening Velasquez had supper with his brother in a neighbouring town. The time he arrived home varied from week to week and his driver always selected the route at random. But sooner or later, Velasquez always came home and the villa was always well illuminated when he did. The bright lights and cameras would deter the gangs of armed burglars that worked the Costas in the summer months and they would also make it difficult for anyone to place an explosive charge near the villa. But they were a godsend for a night-time shoot.

Conscious that his boss was at his most exposed as he left the car, Velasquez’s long time driver and bodyguard came round to the rear passenger door. ‘Boss, wait, get back in the car until I’ve got the door open and then I’ll get you a drink.’

Ramon turned away from his boss and ran up the steps to unlock the front door of the villa as quickly as he could. Velasquez started to follow him up the steps, lurching slightly from side to side.

The assassin watched Velasquez leave the safety of the car and move towards his bodyguard. He shifted the rifle slightly until Velasquez's head filled the optical sight. He slowed his breathing, expelling the last of his air as the cross hairs lined up just to the right of Velasquez's right temple. He pulled the trigger. The rifle kicked back in his shoulder but he held his position.

Ramon heard a sharp crack and then his boss fell at his feet. He reached down 'Come on boss, get up, we're nearly in,' but as he looked at his boss he could see that Velasquez wasn't going anywhere. Half of his head had disappeared. The left side of his face was a bloody pulp. Ramon, who had handled his fair share of silenced weapons in his time, noticed the entry wound just below the right temple and realised what had happened. He pulled out his pistol, dived behind one of the pillars flanking the door and started to scan the darkness beyond the villa's garden in the hope of seeing someone to shoot at.

In the wood line, the assassin slid slowly back on his stomach. When he was a good twenty metres inside the woods, he sat up and started to check that his equipment was all there. He didn't want to leave anything behind that could lead anyone to him, although he doubted that his fire position would ever be found. He was nearly a kilometre from the villa. It had been a superb shot. The ground fell away and there was a slight wind, adding to the difficulty. He felt no regret at having killed Velasquez, just a quiet satisfaction at a job well done. He finished checking his equipment, confirmed that he had put the expended case in his pocket and did a final sweep of the area. He then leant against a large tree stump, opened his mouth and turned his head on its side to give his ears and eyes the best chance of detecting any human sounds in the woods around him. He stood perfectly still, slowing his breathing and straining to hear anything unusual. After five minutes, he stooped into a crouch and jogged the two hundred metres to the kitbag he had hidden behind a fallen tree. Quickly, he changed out of his black combats and into jeans, check shirt and loafers. He stuffed his combat kit into an old rucksack, put

on his baseball hat and started to walk towards the rental car that he had parked at the side of the main road. His rifle was hidden inside a long bag with fishing rods sticking out at the end. Should he be questioned, he intended to claim that he was looking for the Cap de Verde lighthouse as he had fancied a bit of night fishing. An hour later, he was sat at the bar of the Club Nautico in Denia drinking San Miguel beer, flirting drunkenly with the barmaid – just another middle-aged foreigner enjoying his holiday.

Things had livened up at the villa. Alerted by Ramon's frantic shouting, Velasquez's men had come running out of the house and, having eventually doused the floodlights, were frantically scanning the hillside around the villa. Ramon was on his mobile talking to Velasquez's brother. 'I don't know who the fuck killed him. One minute he was telling me to get him a drink, the next he was dead. Must have been a silenced rifle. I didn't hear a thing. Yes I am sure he's dead. No I didn't give him mouth to mouth. Why? Because he doesn't have a fucking mouth left.'

The brother told Ramon to stay put, he was on his way. Ramon wasn't worried. He'd known Tony since they were both kids. But he was sad. Whilst he wouldn't say that he and Velasquez had become friends, he'd been with him for nearly ten years and he had enjoyed the job. The money was good and, whatever Velasquez's faults, he treated those loyal to him with respect. He was also a bit worried about the future; the demand for bodyguards who let their bosses get killed wasn't strong.

CHAPTER 2

Charles Highworth looked what he was: a formidably successful merchant banker. At forty-six years old, he was now at the height of his power. Tall and immaculately groomed, his slight paunch was well disguised by the cut of his beautifully tailored suit. His thick, lightly greying hair was swept back from his tanned face, revealing a slight scar on his forehead and clear green eyes. He was still ruggedly handsome but years of corporate lunches and a love of fine wine were slowly beginning to take their toll. His jaw was becoming less well defined and his once heavily muscled shoulders were now less impressive than they had been when he'd played rugby for Oxford. But he was still a big man and what he'd lost in physical size, he'd gained in the presence that comes from being hugely wealthy and successful. Utterly ruthless, he'd made millions over the last twenty years, accumulating vast amounts of money for the select clients that invested in his hedge fund, International Valiant. This last year had been particularly profitable. At a time when most were urging caution, he had invested heavily in the emerging markets of China and India, achieving an average increase of thirty-five percent in the value of his very significant investments.

As he sat in his office on the top floor of his company's Canary Warf office building, he started to smile. The headlines on the wide screen TV opposite him announced the best possible news: 'Tokifora's new processor set to end Intel dominance.' He knew this news would cause Tokifora's shares to skyrocket in value, and this was particularly gratifying as it would push his annual return way beyond thirty-five percent. Over the last eight months, his fund had gradually become the single biggest owner of Tokifora shares to the extent that he now had a forty-eight percent stake in the company. He had taken a risk

investing such significant amounts in a single company but it had been a calculated risk. He had used his wide network of contacts and a fair amount of money to help Tokifora assemble a winning team of experts over the last two years. Not everyone he approached had been keen to join the team and there were occasions when he'd had to resort to what he called 'robust measures' to achieve his desired outcome. These measures involved coercion, bribery, blackmail and, on two particular occasions, murder. The illegality of these actions didn't bother him in the least – the end always justified the means, particularly if the end in question was him getting richer.

His PA, an attractive and highly efficient woman in her early thirties, came into the office and carefully put a cup of black coffee on his desk. 'Get Richards for me,' he snapped at her.

'Yes Sir,' she replied, leaving the room as quietly as she'd entered it.

His phone rang. 'Mr Richards is on the line,' she told him before connecting the call.

'Richards, I need to see you this evening. I'll meet you at the usual place, at the same time as last time.'

Highworth was a cautious man. He worked on the assumption that his phone was bugged and that his e-mail would probably be read by other people. He wasn't worried about any of the Government's covert agencies trying to keep tabs on him – why would they? – but he knew that other banks and newspapers would try. His success was so striking that he knew people wanted to find out how he managed to achieve such startling results given the current state of the global economy. And he had no doubt that despite the *News of the World's* demise, newspapers would still resort to illegal means to obtain information if they felt the benefits outweighed the risks.

He thought about Richards. He didn't really like him but he had a healthy respect for his talents. An ex-Special Forces soldier who'd been forced to resign for reasons which he kept to himself, he had demonstrated his ability to fix even the most delicate of problems

over the years. He was discrete, effective, absolutely reliable and comfortable operating on the wrong side of the law. Highworth was confident that he'd be able to resolve the issue that had been worrying him for the last week or so.

Having spoken to Richards, Highworth phoned his wife, Caroline. She was at home, a magnificent Queen Anne house on the edge of a small and very smart Surrey town called Farnham. She had married her husband ten years ago at the age of thirty-five when, recognising that she wasn't getting any younger, she set out to find and then seduce the most eligible of her brother's acquaintances. Eligible in her book meant rich, handsome and respected – love was of secondary importance. She knew her husband for what he was when she married him but she was equally tough. In many ways they were a perfect match and the marriage soon settled into a comfortable routine based on mutual respect and a shared desire to enjoy the lifestyle that significant wealth brings. With no children and with plenty of time and money to enjoy herself, she had a wide circle of friends and an active social life, both with and without her husband. Her own father, now long dead, had also been an accomplished banker, knighted for his services to charity towards the end of his life, and she now delighted in organising the same kind of charity balls and dinners that she had so enjoyed as she grew up.

'Darling it's me, I'm afraid I'm going to be late this evening,' said Highworth when his wife answered the phone. 'I need to meet someone to sort something out but I should be back before midnight.'

'Don't worry,' his wife replied easily, 'I promised mother I'd go round and help her plan the changes she's making to her garden. I'll stay a bit longer and persuade her to let me stay for supper.'

Highworth put the phone down and smiled. His wife was his chief ally and he recognised what a good team they made. Although she was now in her mid forties, she was still striking. Slim, elegant and always beautifully dressed, she never failed to turn heads. Although she looked like the typically well bred trophy wife of a rich banker,

she was bright, perceptive and extremely well connected. She could read people with remarkable accuracy, something her husband had found extremely useful when considering whether to invest in particular companies. She was also good fun, completely loyal to her husband and, for someone of her background and position, wickedly mischievous in bed. She didn't know all of the underhand methods her husband employed to maintain his edge but, even if she did, he suspected she wouldn't mind, squaring any moral misgivings she might have by considering how many charities benefited from the wealth his activities created.

CHAPTER 3

Lucy Masters walked out of the main entrance of the International Relations Department and headed into town. Now coming to the end of her postgraduate studies, she'd just submitted the final draft of her PhD dissertation. She realised that she needed to think seriously about what she was going to do next. She hoped that her hard work would pay off and she'd get the doctorate without the need to revisit much of the work she'd already done. A bit of re-drafting would be fine but if those assessing her work felt that there was nothing original in what she was saying, then she might have to spend most of next year doing the further research necessary to strengthen her arguments. But she hoped this wouldn't be the case; her supervisors had been very positive about her performance and even her tutor, a notoriously grumpy man called Dr John Walker, had been upbeat when she'd seen him earlier in the week. Three weeks until the results were formally published on the Palace Green notice board and then she'd know for sure. A PhD from Durham University would open a lot of doors, not just in the City but also in the Foreign Office or DFID, the Department for International Development. She liked what she'd seen of the people in DFID having spent a fair amount of time with them whilst doing research for her thesis. There were one or two whose motives she sometimes doubted, but the majority had come across as hard working, professional and committed to trying to make the world a better place. She felt that she could do a lot worse than work with people whose values she shared.

At 5ft 10in Lucy was taller than most of her friends. She was also striking to look at with piercing blue eyes, long strawberry blonde hair and a body toned from years of hard physical exercise. She ran almost every day and whilst she enjoyed rowing – one of the

reasons she'd chosen Durham in the first place – her real passion was climbing. She spent most of her holidays in the mountains somewhere, mainly on expeditions. During term time, she spent her weekends either in the Lake District or up in Scotland tackling some of the more challenging routes that Skye's Cuillin Ridge has to offer. Easily the best female climber at Durham, she was also better than all but two of the men. Her expedition work was earning her a widening reputation as a hard working team member who could lead the most difficult of routes with confidence. Some men found this difficult, particularly as she had a habit of telling them to 'man up and get on with it' whenever their nerves started to get the better of them. But she worked hard to maintain her edge. After her morning run of four to six miles through the Durham countryside, she would always end up in the gym, pushing herself through a rigorous routine of press ups, sit-ups, dips and heaves that even the fittest of the University rugby team would have struggled to complete.

As she headed into town, she thought of what to do next. Her father had sent her a text asking whether she had decided what she was going to do after she'd got the PhD. She hadn't replied. She knew that she really needed to get on with finding a job and starting a career but, until she knew whether she would have to re-do parts of her thesis, she didn't see much point in making any firm plans. For the moment, she'd saved enough money to spend the next few months climbing in Nepal and this was her immediate focus. A mini-expedition, the plan was to spend a few days in Kathmandu sorting out their equipment before travelling west to Pokhara and then trekking up into the Annapurna basin to climb the two highest peaks. Thereafter, she intended to spend another week in Kathmandu in order to enjoy the Dashain celebrations. Her best friend and fellow PhD student, Isobel Johnson, was going with her.

Lucy saw Isobel as she entered the cafe. 'Hey loser,' she called out as she approached Isobel's table.

'Hi, where've you been? I've been waiting for hours,' Isobel replied.

'No you haven't, I saw you just come in ahead of me.' The two girls laughed. Whenever they met they spent the first few minutes giving each other a hard time, normally about the other's latest male admirer. They had been best friends since the age of twelve when they had found themselves in the same dormitory on their first day at boarding school in York. At the time, both of their fathers had been serving abroad in the Army and they soon discovered that they had a lot in common. Both were only children, with the absence of siblings strengthening their friendship. They were athletic, bright and keen on outdoor sports, though Isobel preferred skiing to climbing. Slightly shorter than Lucy, Isobel nevertheless turned heads wherever she went. Her thick blonde hair was cut into a fashionable bob and her full lips and wide brown eyes always seemed to be smiling. She was attractive, intelligent and fun, with a mischievous streak that frequently got her into trouble.

'I've been thinking about Nepal,' Isobel said as her friend sat down and ordered a cappuccino. 'I think we should spend longer in the West after we've cracked the Annapurna peaks rather than head back to Kathmandu. Either that or we should trek out East as far as Everest Base Camp and spend a week or so there chilling with the climbing "fraternity".' She said the last word with heavy irony, using her hands to sign the parenthesis. She was always disparaging about groups of climbers, considering them to be amongst the least hygienic and the scruffiest of people. This was one reason she preferred skiing: the people were so much more fashionable and they generally had more money with which to enjoy themselves! 'What do you think of my plan?' Isobel asked.

It would be fun thought Lucy. As she hadn't yet decided what she was going to do next and as there were no pressing deadlines to meet, she agreed.

CHAPTER 9

Lucy and Isobel sat on their beds, wrapped in towels in the twin room they'd rented at the Sagarmatha Hotel. Clean, relatively cheap and with lots of hot water – a rare thing during the day in Kathmandu – it was better than its three stars suggested. It was ideally located for visiting the main tourist attractions but also close to the secondhand mountaineering shops they needed to visit to complete their kit before they set off for Pokhara and the Annapurna Basin.

'Shall we go out for dinner tonight?' asked Isobel, glad that her friend had eventually arrived. 'I've been living like a monk on my own, trying to save money for when we go west. But now that you're here, I need to go out!' Isobel smiled as she said this. She was looking forward to a few beers at one of the climbers' bars near the hotel followed by a curry at a local restaurant she'd found called the Rato Hatti. Literally translated this meant the 'Red Elephant' but it was known locally as the Pink Dumbo on account of a faded mural on one of its inside walls. Hidden down a back street, the food was excellent and the clientele was a mix of local Nepalis and ex-patriots, with very few tourists.

Lucy was also looking forward to a night out. The hot shower had reinvigorated her after the flight and her excitement at seeing Isobel was matched by her keen desire to immerse herself in the vibrant night life of Kathmandu. She stood up, pulled her jeans on and slipped a t-shirt over her head. 'Let's go,' she said to a still half dressed Isobel.

They left the hotel and walked towards Kathmandu's Durbar Square, passing the Kumari Ghar, the palace inhabited by a young girl said to be a living goddess. The bar they were heading to was called 'Rum Doodles' and was a particular favourite amongst mountaineers and trekkers. Although still early, it was reasonably busy and they

had to force their way through to the bar. Lucy looked around her. It was just as she remembered it from her last visit and she felt comfortable to be back amongst people who shared her passion for the mountains.

'I'll get the beers, you go find a table,' ordered Isobel, squeezing between two huge Americans to catch the barman's eye. Lucy found a table in the furthest and darkest corner of the room. She wasn't being anti-social, she just wanted to sit back and take it all in for a while without being chatted up by unshaven twenty somethings who'd already had a few beers.

Isobel appeared a few minutes later with two ice cold Kingfishers. 'Cheers,' she said, flopping down into the old leather chair next to Lucy and taking a huge swig from her beer. 'I've missed you Luce. I've been busy but travel is so much more fun when you've got your best friend there to share it with you.'

Lucy felt the same. She smiled and squeezed her friend's hand. 'Well I'm here now so let's have some fun.' They fell into animated conversation, catching up on each other's news and planning their expedition.

A few hours and several beers later, the two big Americans she'd seen earlier came over to their table and sat down. 'Hi girls, my name's Pete and this is Andy,' said the blonder of the two. 'Mind if we join you?' He had clearly drunk too much. Lucy detected a note of menace in his slurred voice and decided it was time to leave.

'We're just going actually,' said Lucy, 'weren't we Isobel?' Isobel nodded and started to get up.

Pete pushed her down into her chair. 'Not so fast,' he said. 'We're just starting to get acquainted.' Lucy stood and tried to push past Andy but he stuck his leg out and, looking up at her with a drunken grin, ordered her to sit down.

Lucy was used to dealing with drunken men at university and she stared hard at him before speaking slowly and deliberately. 'Move your foot and let me past or I'm going to scream.'

Andy smiled again, infuriating Lucy even more, but as she opened her mouth to scream, Pete stood up behind her and put his hand over her mouth, clamping it shut. This was getting out of hand, thought Isobel, rising from her seat to grab at Pete's arm. Lucy reacted quickly, raising her heel and driving it down on Pete's foot. He let out a loud shout and released his hold. 'You bitch,' he snarled, pushing her away from him. Lucy fell onto the table, knocking their beer glasses flying. As she stood up, Pete balled his fist and started to throw a punch at her face. She ducked instinctively but the punch never landed. Someone grabbed Pete's arm and, with remarkable speed, twisted it away from Lucy and up behind his back. 'Calm down big guy,' said the man who had hold of Pete's arm. 'My girlfriend doesn't want to talk to you. Why don't you guys go and have another beer and we'll just leave.'

The arm lock hurt like hell and Pete turned to look at the man, boiling with rage. Equally as tall as Pete himself, the man returned Pete's stare evenly. Though Pete was angry and drunk, he wasn't stupid. He recognised the man's formidable strength from the arm lock that was lifting him onto his toes and the calm look in the man's eyes started to unnerve him. There was something dangerous about him. Pete couldn't put his finger on it but he reminded him of a coiled snake, tense and ready to strike if provoked further. 'Yeah, OK, didn't know she was your girlfriend, sorry,' said Pete. The man released Pete's arm. Pete nodded to Andy and the two sauntered off towards the bar, muttering under their breath.

Lucy smiled at the man. 'Thank you,' she said, recognising him as the blond man she'd seen on the plane. 'I had it under control but I appreciate your help.'

'Sure you did but it gave me an excuse to introduce myself,' he said, smiling in an infectious and friendly way.

'Let me buy you a beer,' said Isobel, 'you've definitely earned it.' She went off towards the bar, avoiding the two Americans who were now heading towards the exit.

'My name's Harry Parker,' said the man, holding out his hand.

Lucy shook it and introduced herself, smiling at him and inviting him to sit down.

‘I saw you on the plane,’ she said, ‘you arrived today.’

‘I did,’ he replied. ‘And I also saw you on the plane, you were sitting a few rows back from me.’

Lucy watched him closely as he spoke. He was in his early thirties and ruggedly handsome, the long scar on his cheek and his straggly blond hair adding to his appeal. ‘What brings you to Kathmandu Harry?’ asked Lucy.

‘I’ve got a flat here and I’m between jobs at the moment,’ replied Harry, ‘so I thought I’d come back for a month or so over Dashera and catch up with friends.’

Lucy was intrigued. Harry’s accent was English and whilst he sounded very much like he had been educated at a good public school, he looked more like a Californian surfer. Just as she was about to ask him what he did, Isobel arrived with three more Kingfishers. She put the beers on the table and sat down between Harry and Lucy, introducing herself to Harry. ‘Thank you for coming to our rescue,’ said Isobel. ‘You arrived just in the nick of time. If you hadn’t come, we’d have had to hurt them!’ She laughed as she said this.

Harry wasn’t sure whether she was joking. Isobel looked perfectly capable of dealing with most things, including a few drunken and lecherous Americans. Without trying to appear too obvious, he looked closely at her hands as she held her beer glass. He could see calluses on her knuckles and also along the edge of the hand closest to him. ‘Martial arts,’ he thought to himself, ‘I wonder what sort?’ He was about to ask her when she started to tell him what they were doing in Nepal. They talked for about an hour, explaining their plans before Harry stood up and announced that he was starving. The girls looked at each other and then invited him to join them at the Pink Dumbo. He agreed.

The three of them left Rum Doodles and walked down the street towards the restaurant. As they passed a side street, the two

Americans stepped out from the shadows. Harry noticed that Pete, the smaller of the two, was armed with a wicked looking knife while Andy had what appeared to be a club.

'We owe you,' said Pete. 'Nobody fucks with us and gets away with it,' snarled Andy as he walked towards them, raising his arm ready to strike. As Harry was thinking what to say to try and calm the situation down, Isobel stepped forward and spun round backwards, raising and extending her right leg as she gathered speed so that her heel struck Pete's head. Pete fell to the ground instantly, dazed by the force of the blow. Isobel landed next to him with the agility of a cat and punched him twice in the face with real force.

Andy, shocked at the speed of Isobel's reactions, froze and Harry, seizing his opportunity, kicked the knife out of his hand and then landed a crushing punch to his stomach. Andy doubled over and Harry hit him with an uppercut on his chin, lifting him off his feet and leaving him in a crumpled heap next to his friend.

Isobel laughed. 'Well done tough guy. You beat me to him.' Harry was amazed at her reaction. He'd met a lot of tough women in his time but Isobel was something else.

'She likes fights,' said Lucy simply, kicking the knife away from the groaning Americans.

'Where did you learn to fight like that?' asked Harry, struggling to keep the awe out of his voice.

'Here and there,' said Isobel, smiling shyly. 'Buy me a beer sometime and I'll tell you all about it.'

Harry was about to ask her another question when he heard footsteps approaching at speed. He looked round to see two policemen running down the alley towards them, clearly attracted by the noise of the fight. Harry turned to them and spoke quickly in fluent Nepali. They nodded, asked a few questions, took his details and then handcuffed the two Americans as they were starting to rise to their feet. 'Dinner,' said Isobel, leading the way towards the Pink Dumbo.

CHAPTER 45

Ellie had volunteered for the night shift at the hospital. It was getting close to midnight and Harry and Sarah were sat around the kitchen table, chatting about the day's events when they heard a car pull up outside the house. Boot started to bark.

'It's OK boy,' said Harry, reaching over to ruffle his head. 'It's just some friends.' Harry went over to the door and opened it. It was pitch dark outside and he could just make out the shape of a four wheel drive parked next to his Range Rover. He went out, closing the door behind him. As his eyes adjusted to the dark, he could see two figures getting bags out of the back of the car. He walked over towards them.

'Thanks for coming boys,' he said as he approached them. 'I really appreciate it.'

'No problem,' said one of the men. 'Always glad to help out.'

Harry shook both their hands and grabbed one of the bags. It was heavy. 'Follow me inside,' he said, 'and I'll give you a beer.' Harry led the way towards the front door. The men followed him.

When they were inside, Harry introduced them to Sarah. 'This is Hemraj and this is Ganesh,' he said, 'two of my oldest and most trusted friends.' Sarah came over to them and shook their hands.

'Can I offer you two a beer?' she asked. They nodded, smiling at her. Sarah wasn't quite sure what to make of them. They were both short but one of them, Hemraj, had the shoulders of a professional wrestler. As he took his jacket off, she couldn't help notice the size of his arms. They were huge. Ganesh was slimmer and seemed to smile more.

'Do sit down,' said Sarah as she handed them each a beer, slightly nervously.

‘Thank you,’ replied Ganesh. Hemraj smiled and nodded his thanks.

‘The boys were with me in the Army,’ said Harry. ‘They’re Gurkhas. They left a few years ago.’

‘What do you do now?’ asked Sarah.

‘We work in security,’ answered Ganesh. ‘We’ve just come back from the Middle East.’

‘What sort of security do you specialise in?’ asked Sarah, fascinated despite herself. She’d never met anyone quite like the two men who now sat in front of her.

‘At the moment, we’re doing anti-piracy on ships going through the Straits of Hormuz,’ answered Ganesh.

‘Is it dangerous?’ asked Sarah.

‘For the pirates it is,’ said Ganesh, ‘but not really for us. We’re very well armed and the ships we’re on are very big. Plus the area is now patrolled by the Navy so we don’t see too many pirates anymore. It’s very different to what it was like a few years ago.’

Sarah had never met a Gurkha before and she wanted to ask more questions. But she held her tongue. ‘There would be plenty of time,’ she thought. She busied herself tidying up the kitchen whilst Harry talked with them. She could see them out of the corner of her eye. There was an easy familiarity amongst the three of them. They clearly knew each other very well. Harry had switched to what she took to be their native language. He was obviously fluent. She noticed the two men looked very different. Their skin was the same light brown but whereas Ganesh was fine featured and slim, Hemraj was heavily built with high cheek bones and a broad forehead. Harry later explained to her that Ganesh came from the western plains near Nepal’s border with India. Hemraj, on the other hand, came from the mountains near Everest. ‘He’s from the same stock as the Monguls,’ explained Harry. ‘His family have been sherpas for generations but he left the hills to join the Army. He’s immensely strong, rather quiet and probably the hardest man I’ve ever met,’ said Harry. ‘He was

blown up in Afghanistan a few times so he's also a bit deaf,' added Harry. 'Ganesh, on the other hand, is probably the best tracker the Army's ever had and certainly one of its best snipers. I suspect this won't mean much to you but he can hit a matchbox size target from over a kilometre away. The reason he isn't unduly worried about pirates is that they rarely get close enough to whatever ship he's on to pose a threat. Once they've been positively identified, Ganesh makes sure they get the message that it really isn't worth their while to try and take the ship. He's very good at his job by all accounts.'

Sarah thought about what Harry had told her. She'd never met anyone who made their living working with guns and she wasn't quite sure how she felt about it. She also didn't really know whether Harry was telling her that Ganesh made his living shooting people, albeit bad people who were intent on doing evil things, or whether he merely fired warning shots at boats used by the pirates to dissuade them from attacking. Looking at them, she could believe that the two Gurkhas were dangerous people. Despite their smiles and impeccable manners, there was something deep within them that she felt she could see in their eyes. It made her shiver. She was extremely glad they were on her side.

Sarah left the boys to it and went to bed. Harry sat with them and they talked through what they would do when Camilla came home. 'The key thing,' Harry said, 'is that you stay out of sight. Somebody obviously thinks she knows something that makes her a threat and the sooner she's out of the way, the happier they'll be. So from the moment she gets home, I am assuming that person will be watching us, looking for an opportunity to kill her. What I hope gives us an edge is that they will be expecting three girls and me. On the assumption that they didn't see you arrive, we should have a slight advantage.'

The Gurkhas asked a few questions and made further suggestions. Harry listened to their advice. They had a natural eye for the ground and were seeing the problem from a fresh perspective. They agreed

that they should move into the cellar in order to avoid anyone seeing them. Harry said that he would go and hide their car in one of the old stables whilst they took their bags down into the cellar and started to get their equipment ready. Harry showed them the cellar door and then went out with Boot to park their car.

When Harry came back in, he went down to the cellar and found that the Gurkhas had set up two camp beds. They had unpacked their bags and laid out their equipment on two large waterproof sheets which were on the floor between the beds. Harry was surprised at how much stuff they had brought. 'God knows where you got all this,' said Harry, 'but I am impressed!'

'Like old times,' said Hemraj, passing Harry a pair of the latest night vision goggles. 'These NVGs are amazing,' said Hemraj. 'It's as clear as daylight with these on. And the range is a real improvement on the old things that you'll remember. We use them on the ships. There's a lot less light pollution at sea so the stuff that we were using in the Army just wouldn't cut it. Not enough ambient light.'

Harry handed them back to Hemraj. 'New rifle Ganesh?' asked Harry.

'Yes, very new,' said Ganesh, picking up a beautifully made sniper rifle. 'It's an Accuracy International AX338. I got it a few months ago. It fires the same ammunition as the old army sniper rifle but it's more accurate. Still bolt action and still quite heavy but it's an improvement on the old model, or at least I think it is!' Ganesh knew a great deal about sniper rifles. He had been a member of the British Army's Shooting Team for several seasons and had won the coveted Queen's Medal at Bisley on three separate occasions. The medal is given to the highest scoring shot at the Army's annual shooting competition. One of the benefits of winning is that the rest of the team carry you on a chair to the clubhouse where you join the great and the good for lunch. The lunch can be a bit of an ordeal but winning the medal is the ultimate prize for a professional shot. For Ganesh to have won it three times was a remarkable achievement.

Harry looked at the rest of the equipment. He recognised trip flares, three Glock pistols, a couple of shotguns, another set of NVGs and three powerful looking torches. 'One of the pistols is for you,' said Hemraj. He reached down and picked up one of the Glocks, checking that it was empty before handing it to Harry. 'They're nice,' said Hemraj. 'Again, another improvement on the old Brownings that we used to have.'

Harry held the pistol in a firing position with his arms outstretched. It felt very comfortable. 'How many rounds does it hold?' he asked.

'Seventeen,' replied Hemraj. 'But they are 9mm so, provided you hit the target, you shouldn't need too many. There are some holsters in the black bag under the bed if you want to get one out.'

Harry did as he was told, opening the bag and retrieving one of the holsters. They were designed to conceal the weapon but also allow easy access. Worn under a jacket, nobody would notice the pistol tucked under the arm. Hemraj passed Harry a small box of ammunition. 'There's more if you need it but this should suffice for now,' said Hemraj. The three of them spent the next hour checking the equipment, loading the weapons, replacing the batteries in the torches and NVGs.

Ganesh started to change out of his jeans and fleece and into black combats.

'Going somewhere?' asked Harry.

'I want to have a look round before we call it a day,' Ganesh replied. 'I need to get a feel for the ground before anyone starts trying to get to the girl. If you're happy, I'll take a bit of a walk for an hour or so.'

'Fine,' said Harry. 'I'll draw you a quick sketch of the ground around the house if you like.'

'That'd be helpful but I also got these off Google Earth before we came down here.' Ganesh reached into a slim briefcase and pulled out a handful of images that he'd printed off that afternoon. They were extremely clear and showed the house and its immediate

surroundings. Harry noticed that Ganesh had marked particular areas with a pen. They made an approximate circle around the house.

‘The ringed bits are where I would watch the house from if I wanted to take a shot at someone staying here. I need to check them because, as you know, what looks like a great place in a photograph can be a really bad place on the ground. I’ll go and check them out. I’ve also got a few of these that I want to put in position.’

Ganesh held up what looked like a small web-cam. ‘These are really good,’ he said. ‘I’ll try and cover the main approaches to the house. That way, if someone tries to get close, we should see them.’

‘Are they cameras?’ asked Harry.

‘Yes, watch,’ said Ganesh. He walked over to the far end of the cellar and placed one of the cameras on the weights bench. He fiddled with it for a few minutes then came back to where Harry and Hemraj were sitting. Hemraj had a laptop open on the bed. He turned it to face Harry. The screen showed the three of them crowded over the laptop. Harry waved and the image on the screen waved back. It was very clear.

‘They’ve got a range of about 200 metres and the batteries will last for a few days,’ said Ganesh. ‘They’re not very good in low light conditions but we should be able to get around that by keeping the lights on outside the house. I’ve also brought some trip flares but I’m not sure they’ll add anything.’

Ganesh finished getting changed and then took a small black rucksack out of one of the bags. He packed the cameras in it, took the aerial photographs off the bed and checked that his torch worked. ‘Don’t wait up,’ he said. ‘I shouldn’t be more than a few hours. If I see anything interesting, I’ll call you,’ he said to Hemraj, holding up one of the small Motorola walkie-talkies that they used on the ships. Hemraj nodded.

Harry went upstairs with Ganesh. He turned the outside lights off and opened the front door. Ganesh smiled at Harry before disappearing into the night. ‘He certainly looked the part,’ thought

Harry. Dressed from head to toe in black and with a balaclava pulled down over his face, Harry doubted very much that he would be seen.

Harry went back down to the cellar to find Hemraj.

‘Bhiralo goyo?’ asked Hemraj.

‘Yes,’ replied Harry laughing. ‘Bhiralo’ had been Ganesh’s nickname when he had been the lead scout in the Battalion’s Reconnaissance Platoon. Nepali for ‘cat’, it was an apt sobriquet given the feline and sinuous way that Ganesh seemed to move when stalking somebody. He’d spent years refining his technique as the chief instructor of the British Army’s Jungle Warfare School in Brunei. Working with the local Eban tribesmen that the Army employed to teach jungle craft, he’d established a reputation for being able to track anyone over any terrain, a skill he’d transferred to Afghanistan with remarkable success.

Hemraj had noticed the weights at the far end of the room and wandered over to look at them. ‘Do you think the girls would mind if I used the weights for an hour or so?’ he asked Harry. ‘I need to stay awake until Ganesh gets back so I might as well use the time productively.’

‘I’m sure they wouldn’t mind,’ replied Harry. ‘I’ve got to leave for the airport to collect Lucy in a few hours so, if you’re happy, I’m going to go and get a few hours sleep.’

‘Crack on,’ replied Hemraj, removing his shirt and putting on a pair of fingerless weightlifting gloves. Harry watched him for a few minutes as he went over to the gym area and started adding additional weights to the bars. He looked incredibly strong. ‘If anything,’ thought Harry, ‘he’s got even bigger since he left the Army.’ An accomplished martial artist, Hemraj had black belts in both Judo and Tae Kwon Do. He was built for the former but preferred the latter having spent several years as the Army’s heavyweight Tae Kwon Do champion. Watching him now, Harry understood why the Commanding Officer had always selected Hemraj as his personal bodyguard whenever they were deployed on operations. Not only

was he impressively built, but his dark and impassive eyes sent a very clear 'don't fuck with me' message to anyone who looked into them. Hemraj reminded Harry of a young Mike Tyson. But whereas Tyson had seemed to struggle to control the rage burning inside him, Hemraj had absolute control of his emotions.

Harry left Hemraj in the cellar and went up to his bedroom. He sent another quick text to Lucy wishing her a safe journey, undressed and collapsed into bed. He was asleep within minutes.