

'THE BEST THRILLER WRITER IN THE WORLD' *DAILY TELEGRAPH*

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A DAMNED SERIOUS BUSINESS

HIS MISSION: TAKE ON RUSSIAN HACKERS. WITH A BOMB.

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HODDER &
STOUGHTON

For Gillian

PROLOGUE

He waited for his target to emerge.

Not a problem for Boot. He was blessed, the few who knew him well told him, with near limitless patience. He had no tic movements, did not lick his lips to moisten them, scratch at an imagined mole on his cheek, ruffle his hair. He was sitting in the back of a saloon car that had comfortable upholstery, and he shared the seat with an officer of the Swedish sister service. They, and the escort provided for them, had been enjoying coffee on a street leading into the square, Kornhamnstorg. Boot had been listening to the officer telling him of a son who had graduated to the ceremonial guard at the Royal Palace on the far side of the Old City, and he had been showing polite interest, when the message had come through. They'd bolted, the story unfinished.

Parking spaces for their car, and the escort vehicle, had been blocked off with plastic bollards. The driver had slid them into place. Boot had no complaint about the preparations, and they had an adequate view of the front entrance to the bank. A derelict was sitting on the pavement beside the entrance, cross-legged and clutching a plastic cup. He was well wrapped against a sharp wind coming off the water and gusting across the square wall. He wore two grubby anoraks and a pair of thick gloves and had a blanket over his knees. A few minutes earlier he had eased his wrist across his mouth, whispering into the microphone concealed in his watch to alert them to the target's arrival.

Boot showed no sign of tension or stress, nor of excitement or anticipation. But the blood coursed in his veins and his breathing was marginally quicker. He had studied the surveillance photographs provided by the Swedes, so had a picture in his head of his

target. But there was always a frisson of emotion when the picture came to life.

The bank was situated on an attractive square. The autumn wind had scoured the pavements, and the central statue gleamed. The Swedish officer told him that the life-size bronze of a man crouching with a crossbow was Engelbrekt Engelbrektsson who had led a peasants' uprising six centuries before. Boot's lip curled. He had no time or sympathy for political agitators.

Sipping from a water bottle, Boot reflected that the unexpected always provided the tastiest dishes. He had learned that in a lifetime in espionage. Had he spoken, he might have said, 'The best are those you don't plan for, they just come lolloping round the corner and drop into your lap.' This one, codenamed *Hatpin*, had materialised without warning. Boot could not have said, sitting in the car and holding his peace, where he would be led, and how much advantage could be extracted from the Russian boy. The Swede beside him chewed on his unlit pipe. The driver, small and *gamine*, lit a Gauloise and coughed smoke from between coral-coloured lips, enough of it to obscure the No Smoking sign on the dash. The man beside her and in front of Boot, clinked the manacles he had extracted from his pocket. Boot had been told that on the two previous occasions *Hatpin* had gone to the bank he had emerged within twenty minutes. The engine idled.

The tramp raised his head, alert to the need to attract more donors, have more *krona* coins dropped into his beaker. They were ready. A woman with a loaded buggy entered the bank. The Swedish officer nudged Boot's elbow. They were satisfied that there was no tail on *Hatpin*. The lift would be fast and without drama. The driver's smoke played around Boot's nose, and a bead of sweat might have gathered at the top of his spine, below his collar. Boot had flown to Stockholm the previous evening, had booked into an Old City hotel, with a tariff above the normal Service allowance, but the Maid, who ran his affairs at VBX, had stated – 'cross my heart and hope to die' – that nothing cheaper had available rooms: a good woman, the Maid, and part of a loyal team that supported Boot. But until he had the target beside him,

and had put forward the proposition, he would not know whether the optimism was justified.

It was a debt repaid. The Swedish service had owed a favour to Vauxhall Bridge Cross, and might also have wanted their British colleagues to take ownership of a matter that could hurt their Russian neighbour. The list of complaints had multiplied – military threats through incursions by submarines into territorial waters; fighter bombers encroaching on air space, increased spy activities; a plethora of state-sponsored hacking into Swedish utility sites; and money laundering of organised crime gangs, based in St Petersburg, via Swedish banks. As the officer had said when meeting Boot at the airport, ‘We think we’re giving you the chance to hurt them. God willing, it will be a well-directed kick in the testicles.’ The washing and rinsing of money had been the trigger for their action. *Hatpin* had an account recently opened at this branch of a prominent Stockholm bank. Monies were transferred electronically but he seemed drawn there to talk with an investment consultant each month. He had been picked up, the signal had been sent to London. The auguries were good. Had to be good, or Boot – with the seniority he carried as a Cold War officer, and relevant again as relations had chilled and he had assumed new, weightier, responsibilities – wouldn’t have been allocated this chance.

The Swede grinned, said quietly into Boot’s ear, ‘Friend, I want to ask you something very personal. You excuse me. I hope it is not impertinence. What is “Boot”, what name is that? We look it up, we cannot find anything of such a name. Even, I went to one of our star interpreters, the response was a shrug but no answer. Why are you called after what is a heavy shoe? Forgive me. Is it Mister Boot, or is it Boot and something, and . . .’

Boot did not have to explain. The tramp had reacted, a torn and dirty sleeve passed close to his stubbled face, his wrist close to his mouth. Boot saw the target.

Two steps out. A pause. A scan that took in the pavement from the Italian *trattoria* to his left, across the statue of the agitator, and up to the alleyway to his right, over the parked cars and across the

bridge. Wide eyes displaying all the guilt of a cat that had been at the cooking, nervous, and seeing nothing.

Boot did not travel on a whim, or an off-chance. That the matter of *Hatpin* had landed on his desk, filtered by the Maid, indicated the prospect of a return for the investment of his time. He had behind him a career that was decent rather than exceptional. There had not been a moment when others on his floor of VBX would have said, 'No doubt about it, this was Boot's finest hour.' But *Hatpin* might be, just might be, the catch of his lifetime.

The target seemed satisfied, turned left, stepped over the tramp's trailing blanket and started to walk away. The car was on the move, the fag was stubbed out, the manacles clanked, and the Swede's breath hissed on the pipe stem. Boot sat tall, the space between them was empty and ready.

Boot would not be involved in violence, might sanction it, but would not soil his own hands. But the fact remained – loud, clear – he had access to big resources and the danger confronting him was also 'loud, clear'. Results were expected, and he was the man in whom the Big Boss placed his confidence.

The target was identified in the Swedish reports as Nikki.

Insignificant, hardly cutting the impressive figure on which Boot's reputation as an agent handler flourished. No colour in his face, the pallor of a young man who worked behind curtains or blinds or in basements. A thin fluff of hair across his cheeks. The only brightness on his skin from the acne rash plaguing it. A concave chest and narrow, rounded shoulders on which his clothing hung loosely. The anorak was cheap, the jeans faded, and the trainers loosely laced. He headed away from the statue of the martyred freedom fighter towards the quaysides where the ferries to the islands sailed from. It was difficult to reconcile this pathetic figure with someone responsible for stealing currency valued at £412,000, give or take a few pence, from a bank in the depths of some wretched Stalinist-built outpost east of the Urals. Someone who had hacked into and leached from supposedly protected accounts, removing the loot to the imagined safe haven of an account with a prominent Swedish bank on the square of

Kornhamnstorg. A youth of that description, that clothing, that wealth, could only be a success at a chosen occupation: hacker in a criminal gang – and vulnerable. A considerable talent in Boot's armoury was the ability to exploit 'a vulnerable'.

The target walked at a brisk speed and did not look back. The back-up car overtook them, and passed the boy. Doors opened and two men and a woman seemed to block the pavement. Boot's car was almost level with him. The boy was held, too shocked to struggle or shout. The Swedish officer was out, had hold of the boy's collar. The crown of his head was shielded and he was pitched inside. For a moment the boy's head was across Boot's lap, then it jerked upright, and the officer was inside again. Manacles were fastened on the boy's thin wrists, and they accelerated away.

The boy started to talk, babbling in his own language. Would have thought the brutal suddenness of his capture to be the work of the *Federal'naya sluzhba bezopasnosti* and considered himself beyond their reach in safe, sophisticated Stockholm. As the words, cringing, came in a torrent he began to shiver. Boot slapped his face. Lightly but sufficient to silence him. From his years of experience, Boot believed that the first words were the only ones that counted. He spoke quietly, his voice barely above a whisper. The driver coughed as she lit another cigarette. The reports said that the boy spoke English when dealing in the bank, and he was fluent.

'Very good to meet you, Nikki. We think this is going to be the start of a most fruitful relationship. You've a flight to catch, back to St Petersburg, and the aircraft won't wait. Look upon us as friends. Let's be clear where we all stand, Nikki. No misunderstandings. You chose to hack and steal from a bank in your own jurisdiction. I would call that *greedy*, Nikki, and I would also call that *stupid*, and I would say that greed and stupidity add up to a considerable mistake. Nikki, the consequences of such a "mistake" should not be ignored. The consequences might be a call to FSB, right into the big block on Liteyny Square – and I would do the call myself – and you would be facing a very difficult interrogation, a very difficult few years – correction, many years – in a

hard-régime labour colony. They'd beat you to pulp, then send you to the camps. You understand all that, Nikki. Fine to hack overseas banks, credit unions, all that sort of stuff, and they're all cheering you on, but hack one of your own and people will get powerfully angry. All right, so far?'

The Swede had hold of the boy and his chest convulsed and his eyes watered and Boot wondered if he were about to wet his trousers. He smiled. He had once heard the Maid tell Daff, in the outer office, that Boot's smile was one that the hangman would have reserved for a client when asking him to behave reasonably on the walk from the cell to the gallows. A thin-lipped smile, gimlet-eyed. The amount filched from the bank had been in the Russian media, and matched the size of the account here. A pretty fair limit.

'Or we can do business together. Be friends, colleagues. You will find that we are always truly grateful to friends, to colleagues who cooperate to their best ability. We might even – as a reward for good behaviour – invite you to London. Us being friends, colleagues, Nikki, comes at a price . . . you tell us all we want to know, everything of the world in which you live. Your choice, Nikki. Or do I make the call to Liteyny Square? I have the number. You might not get as far as the camps, Nikki. They might have killed you before that. Your choice.'

And afterwards? A few ground rules laid down, dates for future meetings, details of what was required of *Hatpin*: names, addresses, where the hackers were going for new trapdoors and assaults, and relationships in the area of state-sponsored work.

A nod to the Swede, a flick of his fingers and the driver slowed, easing towards the kerb. Boot did not shake *Hatpin's* hand, did not offer any gesture of trust, and the smile this time only flickered. The car stopped. The manacles were removed. The Swede was out on to the pavement. He reached inside and caught Nikki's anorak, dragged him sideways and pitched him clear of the door. A stumble, a stagger, a regaining of balance, and a woman nearly tipped over as she carried shopping bags past him, and he was gone. A short striding run. What any feral creature would have

done if cornered, facing capture, and then knowing release. Boot watched him disappear into an alleyway that led into the Old City and away from the wide street where the ferry terminals were. He had done carrot and stick and, as was always the case, the threat of pain would achieve his aim.

The Swede had his lighter fired up and over the pipe's bowl. 'Did it go well?'

Boot shrugged. 'Time will tell, always does. I think he's quite a catch, that's my opinion, for what it's worth. We'll milk him, drain him dry. He'll take us towards "attribution". I have a good feeling. I believe we'll get value from him. If it should be towards "strike back" then I'm happy as a pig in shite . . . But we won't run before we've learned to walk . . . we'll know soon enough.'

'I felt almost sorry for him.'

Boot grimaced. 'Never wise in my experience to cough up sympathy. Treat him at arm's length, little Nikki, owe him nothing.'

I

The first wave had been a probing attack, looking for weakness. They had seen that off, pushed them back.

The early force of the sun was now behind them and full into the faces of the second wave – the serious assault. Surrounding Merc was his small army: ten boys and two girls crouched or kneeling in the shelter of the sandbagged walls, blasting through the firing slits. The repetitive thud of the machine-gun hammered in his ears.

The start line of the ‘bad boys’ was around 150 yards to the west of their hill. Some came at a sprint and were tall; some were bent low and almost crawled. Amongst the noise of the shots and the explosions from grenades and shoulder-launched missiles were the clear cries of the boys moving towards them. One dropped, and on they came; another fell and they pressed closer. There might have been fifty of them. At least three or four would be wearing vests padded with explosives. The aim of the others would be to provide enough covering fire to allow them to get up to the sandbags, then roll off them down into the main bunker or the communication trenches to detonate the dynamite sticks. If one of them achieved that and went on his way, express service, to Paradise, then Merc and his army would be stunned, wounded. If they were lucky, they’d have their throats slit then and there, and if they were not, then they’d be captured and face a fate not worth considering. They were in among the wire and twice anti-personnel mines were triggered and body parts spewed up, but they kept on and the gap closed and sometimes he could see the faces and screaming open mouths, and a few times he was able to make out dead and lustreless eyes.

He would be known to them. His reputation had put a bounty on his head of at least \$150,000. For that pay-out they would take their time in his despatch and it would make one of the better videos. But if they were overrun, none of them would survive. No Convention counted here. They would all fight and would, at the end, drag the pin from the grenade that they all carried strapped to their chests – and the women would be a big prize.

But his fate, and his value, was not uppermost in Merc's mind.

Holding the position mattered to him. He was a Gun for Hire, called Merc as an abbreviation of taking money for his chosen trade, for being a mercenary. Not much money, but it went into an account in a bank in a small town in leafy England. One of his boys had the big machine-gun and one of the girls organised the belt, kept it not too tense, not too slack, and fed it. Merc had an AK, and had only to reach a hand out behind him, like a runner receiving a relay baton, and would feel a fresh magazine slapped into his palm. The boy who did the loading had taken an incoming in his thigh in the first probe of the day, when the light was a dulled grey, and there was no possibility of evacuation. None of Merc's little army could be spared to lug a wounded man back down the hill, so the boy had stayed and he was useful, reloading ammunition into magazines.

Corpses were spreadeagled on the wire – coiled razor – near to the position, while the living flapped arms and legs and tried to break free of the entanglement, and howled or cried, and failed.

The other girl would have thought it demeaned her as a fighter merely to feed a belt. She was Cinar and had a good arm for hurling grenades. Merc watched over her and should not have treated her differently to any of the others under his command, but he did and if their eyes met she would glare at him and break the contact.

They came closer. There were small pockets of dead ground under the wire and among the mines, and when the attackers reached them they could catch breath, renew their faith, and come again. There was a big man to the right of Merc's vision and he had a strong voice and carried a rifle in one hand and had an RPG

launcher slung from a chest strap. It was not usual for Merc to miss. He always did single shots and never had the catch on automatic for a spray job. But the big man was charmed. He had a straggling dark beard and wore charcoal-coloured overalls, and the strength of his voice seemed to drag others forward. If the big man cleared the parapet and got into the trench or appeared at the sunken entrance of the bunker, then Merc and his people were lost. The ground they held was Hill 425 on the military maps that the command used in Irbil. It was the culmination of a finger of territory held with difficulty by Merc's paymasters, the Kurds, and was more of a symbol than a place of strategic importance. Merc would not give it up. Could have done. Could have called up on the radio, could have said that they were exhausted, had done their share.

The big man's voice boomed out, and in a few moments they would come again and try the last forty- or fifty-yard sprint. Some would throw themselves at the wire and others would come and leap on them, boots stamping into the small of a back or on the neck and use the bodies as stepping stones. He had fired three times at the big man and each time had missed the kill. The last time his bullet had danced away, diverted after striking a cast-iron pole to which the wire was fastened.

Could have called up on the radio, not made a request, but given a statement. 'Enough, enough, coming back.' Either the place would be abandoned or fresh militia would relieve them. Might have given the Command an opportunity to rotate, or to decide that Hill 425 was not worth the pain and the steady dribble of casualties. Had not done it. Had used the radio instead to call for air support and had been told that priorities would be assessed. Had known that 'priorities' meant the push south of the city of Mosul farther up the front line. His force, so small and insignificant, were all idiots. The biggest fool was himself. Idiots led by a fool. None of them had the stomach to turn their backs on the position and creep out under cover of darkness, abandon it. In the last month, nine had been killed defending it, and fourteen had been injured. The colonel in charge of the sector had declined to

add to their numbers, and no air strikes had been made available. A little private war. Same on the other side, and their dead, bloated from the sun of several days, stank and rotted. More had joined them that morning. They had no stomach, any of them, least of all the girls who fed the belt and chucked grenades, to ease out from the trenches and let others take their place, or permit the men from down the hill to raise their black flag over the bunker. A depraved, mad obstinacy. Merc could have done with air strikes, could have done with close artillery support, but did not register as a priority.

He waited. They all did. They heard the shouting that threatened them, that appealed to a God that would reward martyrdom. The intensity of the shooting had slackened. They might have another minute before the next surge towards their position. The sunlight was clear behind them and the ground was well lit and brightness played on the curled mess of the wire and reflected off the blades of the razors. Easier to fight than to wait.

Some called him Merc because he was paid to fight. Others gave him that name because of a great love in his life. Stowed inside the bunker, beside the radio and along with the cases of ammunition and grenades and smoke canisters, was his Bergen rucksack. Under the stinking socks and soiled underpants was a wad of well-thumbed magazines. They reflected his dream. Mercedes Benz cars. When the front line was quiet, not often, he would sit with them, would talk to his army about the qualities of the brand, and which one he would buy. When? Sometime. When was sometime? A shrug. Beautiful cars, polished and scented, with leather upholstery, and priced in American dollars, or in euros, or in pounds. A dream.

The shouting grew. He murmured that the boys and the two girls should hold steady, *wait*, not fire before they had targets, and *wait* some more. Merc had no rank that counted on Hill 425. He was not addressed with the subservience of juniors. His word was followed and his instructions carried out because each of them, the boys and the girls who fought alongside him, recognised that his word was backed by nothing more and nothing less than their welfare. They

knew that, should they decide to pull back, he would not come with them. They stayed, all of them, and waited for the next attack. The boy who had the thigh wound had worked hard as the combat slackened and had made a good pile of filled magazines, and the grenade sacks were bulging. They believed in him, and that was a burden that Merc carried. His hands shook and he clenched his fists on the stock of his AK, and the others would have seen only the whites of his knuckles and nothing of the tremors.

The voices grew in pitch. He waited, and knew that the surge would come soon – and knew it would be a long time until ‘sometime’, when he could walk into the big Mercedes showroom near his bank with a fold of high-denomination notes in his hip pocket and do a test drive and . . . He was able to keep his voice soft, just loud enough only for his boys and the two girls to hear him. Their trust brought him, many nights, to a point of near collapse: never shown. He looked around and lit on Cinar and should not have cared for her safety any more than for that of the other girl and the boys – or more than he cared for his own survival . . . would not make it easy for the bad boys hidden in the holes below the wire to claim a sack of dollars as reward.

And they came. No more thought of anything beyond rounds in the magazine and where was his bag with the grenades, and what part of his little fortress was the target of the big man; and no artillery to support them, and not a chance of an air-strike because they were not a priority. Movement and shouting, and the spatter of the incoming rounds and grenades arcing in the air, towards them and away from them, and hard fighting. They came without fear towards the trenches. He could not have said whether there would ever be ‘sometime’, and all for a small hill, a pimple on a landscape otherwise flat and featureless, only valued by those who wanted it and those who would not give it up. Maybe he would live and maybe he would not. The firing, the shouting and the explosions deafened him, and they came closer. The voice behind him stuttered with fear. Merc had reached out for a new magazine.

‘Can we hold them, Merc? Can we?’

He smiled, the smile that made people trust him. The cold magazine casing was in his hand, then his fingers were gripped by the wounded man's. He could see the movements, wriggling figures edging closer. Merc dropped his voice.

‘Well, we have to, don’t we? Can we? Yes, probably.’

Bob called it a ‘brains trust’, Harry said it was a ‘barnstorm’ session, Leanne had it as ‘clear water’ thinking time, and Dunc had put it in his diary as a ‘punch-bag’ opportunity with ‘nothing off the agenda’.

Screaming into their faces, making each of them squirm, was ‘state-sponsored’. Chasing that tail was ‘provenance’: stacking up evidence, putting it on paper, shoving it under the noses of the ‘Customers’ for whom they worked. Their mobile phones were locked in a lead-lined safe in the lobby three floors below, a blind was drawn on the room’s only window, a coffee machine bubbled. The title they worked under, once an eccentric called Boot had put them in place, was ‘S-S/RussiaFed-CyberAttack/2018’. Traffic noise from a street in London’s district of Pimlico seeped into the room. Customers, Boot had said, needed the truth, unvarnished, ungilded, and shoved up their nostrils. They had been together now for six months, meeting first once a fortnight, now more often; they were a high agenda topic and their reports went direct to the desks of the Director Generals at the security and intelligence agencies, and to Cabinet committees with the necessary clearance. They reported – each in their own way – on a new warfare, one of increased intensity. One that was not being won.

From the Security Service was Bob, early twenties and with an outstanding academic degree. He said, ‘It’s today’s combat zone. The attack forces are all around us but the great and beautiful general citizen mass, busy making money to pay my salary, put their heads into sand, cannot cope with the complexity of the invasion. No tanks on our lawns, no fighter aircraft buzzing our airspace, no commandos coming ashore anywhere between Skegness and Clacton. A government-authorised raid with sophisticated malware precludes the need for nuclear weapons

to be deployed by an enemy régime, and can do as much damage. Our problem: *they* are better in pretty much every degree at getting through our firewalls than we are of stopping them dead with our defences. As we make our “airgaps” wider so *they* ever more surely hop over the voids. The dangers are clear for us to see – but not the response we should be making, which is opaque, fogged. Someone said that the only light at the end of the tunnel was that on the train coming towards us, and fast. It is danger and we are sleep-walking towards it, and we cannot offer protection.’

Boot was dropped outside Vauxhall railway station. It was a dank November morning, and the light wind barely moved the heaps of dead leaves that had gathered in the gutters. A spit of rain was carried in the air, and the forecast was for more of it later in the morning.

He waved cheerfully to his driver and had a lively spring in his step as he set off across the wide road, ignoring the pedestrian crossing because it was too far down the pavement. His route towards the main gates took him into the heart of the traffic flow. Cars and vans and a double-decker bus wove around him. A few blared their horns and he acknowledged them with courtesy, but indifference. It was standard procedure that any officer arriving by a chauffeur-driven car at VBX used the station as a destination, not the guarded and barricaded entry into the building. Old friends were at the gate and he kept his smile fixed as he rummaged for his pass. He was amongst the mass of employees, many still in their Lycra from cycling to work, and some in athletic kit from jogging, and half of the girls looked a quarter asleep. The old friends were Arthur and Roy and they wore navy blue uniforms under bullet-proof vests and cradled Heckler and Koch machine pistols, loaded and cocked but with the safety applied, and had gas and pepper spray canisters on the webbing, and Tasers. A degree of familiarity was permissible, and his mood was good enough for him to wink at them and he was rewarded. Roy tapped a forefinger on his armament’s body in acknowledgement, and Arthur

ducked his head, but only fractionally. He showed his card and headed past them.

It had been their third meeting. He had been booked on the last flight out of Stockholm and the session was coming to an end. Nothing much seemed about to be spilled. The Swede had gone for a leak. *Hatpin* had leaned forward as if recognising that he was alone with the real power, the one who called the shots. He had a street name in an industrial park near St Petersburg airport, and the description of a two-storey warehouse and office space from which an organised crime group ran its affairs, and some identities. Good material but not earth moving. Nikki had leaned forward as if assuming the Swedes would have microphones, and had taken Boot's hand, gently but with a persistent tug, and had taken him to the window, away from the furniture and the phone and the power socket where the bugs would have been, and had whispered a gaggle of words in his ear. A meeting. A gathering of the principal hack-people that the group paid, a discussion of a target and a drawing up of individual responsibilities, and there would be an officer from FSB in attendance. The best in the field, quality people. Something big, mouth-watering. Boot had asked when the last similar meeting had been held, and been told that there had not been one in Nikki's time. When would it be, the meeting? Three days. Three nights. His mind had raced. He had thought of the think-tank meeting that morning, stuck in a routine and not going outside the bubble. He thought of the seminar he was due to attend at lunchtime, and thought of the problem of moving men and putting the kit in their hands, and doing the recruitment, sorting the logistics, and of winning authorisation, and of . . .

'That's interesting, Nikki. Quite interesting. Might be able to play around with that. I believe I'd be prepared to demonstrate some sincere gratitude if we could see this one through . . .' He had been asked what the value of that gratitude would be and for a moment his lips had pursed as if that were just one more difficulty piling high in his wheelbarrow. Boot had said quietly, 'Could manage that, Nikki. Give me a gas station, a café, supermarket

car-park where on Thursday, before the meeting starts, my people would meet with you.' And had been given the supermarket and had written the name of the street on his hand, and a time. Had he been alone he would have punched the air. Instead he had murmured, 'I am a man of my word, Nikki, and it will happen, what you ask for.'

A quick coffee and the boy had been kicked out into the night. The Swede had asked him how useful the session had been and Boot had given his slight, self-effacing grin – another trademark. 'Might be something I can play around with, and might not.' In his mind was an hourglass, the sand running through it.

As he walked across the atrium and towards the bank of elevators, he imagined what Arthur and Roy might have wisecracked to each other.

Arthur: 'What's up with old Boot? Reckon he got his leg over last night?'

Roy: 'No chance. More like he's back from Waterloo and the Duke pinned a medal on him. Loyalty and long service.'

'Wrong, Roy, because he's got his wellies with him when he's been there, and hasn't.'

'Fair one, Arthur. Then it's a show he's doing, a good one from the look of him.'

Boot always said that those two veterans of the front gate had a better idea of the principal operations that the Service launched, who was down in the world, and who was climbing the ladder, and who was bedding who, than anyone else on the payroll. He took the lift to the fourth floor, and the corridor was blocked by new office tables and chairs, wrapped in protective plastic sheeting. Appropriate because Russia Desk was an expanding world and back up, almost, to Cold War levels – not before time. He was attached to the Desk, but loosely; not subject to all its disciplines but able to call upon its resources. A major meeting was called, not an everyday affair, which meant trouble and pain, and barely time to scratch an armpit. Daff, his fixer girl, was already in, and the Maid who ran his office. They'd looked up and seemed to quiz him and, with the door closed behind him,

and his thick coat and the trilby on the hook, he said that it had been productive.

‘Before, I rated it as good. When we finished I thought it was better than good.’

The Maid had a map opened across her desk. It covered the top end of the Baltic and was divided by a frontier line. Boot was seldom short of certainty and jabbed with his finger at a place, a few kilometres south of the coastline where the territories were divided by a river, and jabbed again. He dropped his bag. Later, when work eased, the Maid would take care of the contents, clean what needed to be cleaned, press what was crumpled, and return the bag, freshly filled, to the locked cupboard that held what he needed – clothing, money, passports – for any short-notice excursion – and there would surely be one in a few days’ time if a plan could be formulated and sanctioned. So little time . . .

Boot had called in from the airport as he’d crossed the scrum of the early morning concourse, and said what he wanted, and was told where they were, what was arranged, where they chased, and at what time the Big Boss had rearranged his diary, and – a giggle – the French had been cancelled from the slot. He’d nodded and gone into his small room, with the view of the river, and rain dribbling on the darkened, strengthened glass. He slung his jacket on the back of the chair and felt – quite suddenly – a wave of exhaustion. The office was bare except for his chair and desk, and a small table on which, in a bone china ashtray, was a set of antique false teeth, dentures that had once been the height of technology. The only decoration on the wall was a framed print, the Duke’s head protruding from a boot, a popular cartoon view of the great man at the time of his triumph. Not much deflected Boot from his principal recreation: visits to the battlefield in Belgium and the chance to walk where the great man had walked. What he planned would be, as the Duke had said of the battle, ‘a damned serious business’.

The eldest of them, on the third floor of the ‘safe house’ in Pimlico, and an easy walk across the bridge from the south side of the

Thames and the VBX building, was Harry. His long hair nestled on his shoulders and layered over his collar; he wore a sweater that had been knitted by his mother. Late twenties, regarded as an authority in matters of cyber intelligence, chosen by Boot, given a cryptic brief, then sent to work. He had the floor, did not expect to tell any of them what they did not know already, but still felt the need for repetition of the obvious and heavily travelled routes.

He said, 'There is here, all around us, critical infrastructure. Start with utilities. Go to any of the major providers of electricity, gas, water. Are they being probed, phished? Yes. Can the power grid be shut down? Yes. Can airliners be disabled so they are unable to fly above communities that can't light their homes, heat them or cook in them, and can't flush their toilets unless they happen to have a rain-water butt? Yes. Does this happen? Yes, every day. An American city loses power and blacks out tens of thousands of households and storms are blamed or overloads or some hapless technician. They are never going to admit that a foreign government, unfriendly with its intentions, just wanted to test the skills and abilities of its foot soldiers, the script kiddies. A Scandinavian attack leaves thousands shivering in the dark and the authorities blame a gust of wind knocking over a tree that falls on a particular cable strung between pylons. Bullshit. *They* did it, and sent a message, loud and clear, despatched it First Class, Next Day Delivery. Why are *they* pushing against the inadequate counter-measures of our supermarket chains, infiltrating the machines that dictate what product goes where, and when? Why? *They* can screw the delivery systems, disable the software, and in three days our people go hungry. Food is as much a part of critical infrastructure as water, and the rest of what we take for granted. Most terrifying is that each year we put greater reliance on the web, hand over new functions to it. But we have not yet learned how to keep it safe from predators. *They* run us ragged, we are losing.'

Working her encrypted phone, Daff prised out names. Russian language, of course. Knowledge of the terrain, a necessity. Familiarity with the requirements and culture of matters covert,

essential. Deniability, taken for granted. On a separate sheet of paper in front of her, under a hovering pencil, were the initials G F H, but they were left to lie as she searched out the men who would be the foot soldiers. She could call in favours.

She'd tried the Lithuanian agencies, and the Latvians, and the Ukrainians in Kursk, and Bulgarian intelligence. The favours might be granted because many of those countries' officers had flirted with her over the years and might have assumed that with one more drink, one more confidence and indiscretion and joke and laughter, she would head for the elevator doors of her hotel and they might follow and be rewarded. She had admirers because she was a well-kept, curvaceous mid-thirties, had good bottle-blond hair in a fly-whisk pony-tail, bronzed skin on her cheeks and neck, and stood straight. For the last seven years Daff – Daphne inside the building but not within the walls of Boot's fiefdom – had been his fixer within matters of the 'Field'. Office administration stayed, well guarded, in the Maid's hands.

The break for her was from the Poles, and an out-station in Gdansk which had responsibility for matters, the sensitive ones, originating inside the Russian-militarised enclave of Kaliningrad. She was given names, and contact points. Putting a cart before a horse might have been an accusation levelled at her that morning. She would have countered with a blunt negative if anyone had dared put that assumption, and with the added weight of an obscenity. Boot had his pecker up, and when it was there he could drain milk from the udders of a barren she-goat, certainly from the Big Boss three floors above. Running before she could walk? In no way. Underneath those initials, G F H, she wrote a name: *Martin*. The Poles were not fulsome in his praise. If he had been from the top drawer they would not have shared his identity; he was classified as 'adequate'. They'd be shipping her, electronically, a redacted file on him and two others. The most she could hope for, but the major catch would be the man whose initials she had written down. It was good to feel the eddy and excitement of the chase in the cramped office space where Boot held court; and so rare to sense it.

He loitered at her shoulder. Her question: 'Getting there?'
His answer: 'I think so.'

Leanne had chosen clothes that were drab, poorly fitting and black. No make-up, no jewellery, no polish on her fingernails. Her hair was cut short. She was employed in the private sector, headed the cyber-threat response unit of a heavily funded accountancy firm. She earned more per year, probably, than the combined salaries of the three men with her in the Pimlico room. Her voice was North Wales, her ability legendary in a small circuit of those who needed to know, and she was twenty-four.

Leanne said, 'Let's stop fucking around the issue, give it straight to the customer. *They* are Black Hat. Maybe today it is organised crime Black Hat. Maybe tomorrow it is state-sponsored Black Hat. It is interchangeable. The same people in Russia – Moscow or St Petersburg, or any crap little city in the arse end of nowhere – do the business in both camps. Very expert, and often they know their way round our conduits better than we do. The criminal attacks are about loot, cash. *They* can strip out the assets from our bank accounts, from our credit cards. *They* have enormous resources. This is not like holding up a bank, having a couple of getaway drivers, and a tame banker for laundering. Planning, research, psychologists to help recruit the right material, are across international frontiers, are more careful and more covert than the blundering Chinese, and *they* pose a massive hazard. Imagine big housing estates in any northern city of the UK. Benefit day is coming up, except that the bank branches that supply the Social Security payments have crashed. The money is needed so the mob can get drunk, shoot up, feed themselves, but there is no money – it's gone, anywhere between Vladivostock and Irkutsk. The result would be civil disobedience. Violence on the streets, a society there that has no financial reserves, inability to get credit, pockets empty. There's no requirement for tanks and strike planes and nerve gas. Collapse is less than a week away. Russia, if the leadership gets angry enough, can close us down, make us go dark. What can we do about it? It is apocalypse time, and the

threat is being yanked up. Organised crime in the Russian state is allowed because the intelligence agencies permit it – joined at the hip, a Siamese job. Sorry and all that, not a bag of laughs. We need to inflict some drama, instead we're dull as ditches. Something has to change.'

The phone rang. He was up a ladder, painting a ceiling. He came down the steps. They shook as his weight transferred and the tin swayed enough to spill paint on to his trainers. He picked up the phone. A distant voice. A woman's. Speaking Russian. Was he Martin? Who wanted to know? A friend: he had been recommended . . . a joke. He laughed. Was he recommended as a painter, a decorator, or for . . . ? He was not required to go any further. His name had come, he was told, from Polish friends, in Gdansk. He shivered, and his hand shook, and more paint flicked from the bristles of the brush he was still holding. He said that he now lived in the Estonian coastal town of Haapsalu and that what he had done for the Poles was more than fifteen years ago, and he was a middle-aged man now. He realised quickly enough that the woman at the end of this international call was ignoring his rejection of a summons to go to work, took no notice of it – steamed ahead . . .

For him, and for the other two, it had all begun in this town, Haapsalu, where there was a big railway station – no trains running to it now – and the Czars of Imperial Russia had come from their court in St Petersburg believing that the mud of the beaches and swamps would preserve their health. They had made Haapsalu fashionable. And many years later the same town, reached by an inlet sheltered by pine forests and heavily reeded banks had become fashionable again for a more clandestine trade. Fast boats came here in the dead of night, having supposedly evaded the radar of the occupying Soviet military, had landed spies, saboteurs, those who believed the shit given them by plausible ringmasters. The craft that carried them were from Germany's wartime navy, but the British controlled the ferrying of these men – patriots or traitors? – and their mission was to fight a guerrilla war against the new communist régime, and carry out espionage

in between sniping Red Army troops. The town, famous for the spa and for the fishermen's brightly painted little wooden homes, and a collapsing mediaeval castle, had become a Cold War front line. It was where Martin's grandfather had been reared, and where he had died, shot down in the reed beds within five minutes of wading ashore. And it was where his daughter had been born. Martin was now on the wrong side of Haapsalu, the part tourists did not care to visit. He asked his caller who she represented. She said her clients were a security firm based in the Brazilian city of São Paolo.

What trust could he put in her? A clear, crisp answer – the daily rate, when it would start, what would be required of him, and the sum of 5000 euros, as an advance, would be sent within half an hour to any account he named. Life was not easy for him. The Polish money was long exhausted. He lived hand to mouth. He pulled his wallet out of his jacket. He gave his bank details, and was told he should check his account within three hours.

Martin, an Estonian citizen and fluent in Russian, a former asset of occasional Polish-funded operations, was recruited.

Fresh off the early train from the west country was Dunc. New at Cheltenham but well thought of in the doughnut building that housed the boffins, analysts, translators and interpreters – the cyber family of GCHQ – and part of a campaign to give youth its head. A week short of his twenty-third birthday and with a First Class degree from Cambridge. His first job and it was likely that the Government Communications Head Quarters would be his only employers. He took a deep breath and launched, had no particular idea what was wanted from him, so latched on to what he thought to be the central matter of Russia's hack industry, and rolled his tongue on the word.

“Attribution”. It's what we talk about at our place. To whom do we attribute an attack? Endless, repetitive and almost boring, but the only subject in town. Where are *they*? Where to find them? We are attacked night and day – every night and every day – by Russia. Attacks for theft, for reconnaissance, for espionage,

neverending. *They* are all over us, and we are running to stand still. To hit them you have to have a target. Can't find it . . . Can have a district, a suburb, a neighbourhood. Cannot say it is this block of cheap housing, this floor, this room off the lift-shaft lobby on the right-hand side and between the bathroom and the kitchen, where the kid sits with his laptop. We don't have that ability. Or maybe he is routed through his mother's desk top. He is costing us billions of sterling equivalent each year, but we don't have a face on him. Whether it is state-sponsored or Organised Crime, it is criminality. Can we go to Moscow and the Ministry of Justice and demand action? Can, but we won't get it. You know all this. And the word *krysha*, which I translate as the "roof". The "roof" is protection. The criminal is sheltered by the intelligence agency, and the agency kingpins take a cut, a generous one. They are in bed together. Assume we identify an individual hacktivist, trace a line to his computer, make a target of it. We fry it, burn it, we wipe it, maybe we even get inside and sit and watch. He can get a new one. He can go down to the shopping mall and buy one for four hundred American dollars. Cheap stuff is good enough. We have no possibility of retribution, creating a viable threat of retaliation. *They* are immune to punishment. They must wake up each day and laugh themselves stupid at us. You can't strike back if you don't know who to hit. But you know that, don't you?

'We do,' Bob said.

'A good summary,' Harry chimed.

'This man, this Boot, who tasked us originally – my impression – has no idea of the science of computers, probably challenged changing a light bulb.' Leanne's voice had the melody of a chapel choir, might have been chanting psalms. 'I said he was to imagine worms going up pipes for the spread of malware, but worms with sharp teeth for destruction, and with shopping bags for taking away goodies. That seemed to strike a chord with Boot. We've talked in generalities, the language of a kindergarten, and that's probably right for him, and for where he'll pass our paper. God alone knows the relevance of this confessional – we're neither winning nor punishing. Why would he need to know that? Or the

Directors? I reckon we fulfil no useful purpose, not unless something radical is on the table, which it isn't. Something has to change.'

Nikki was the passenger, front seat, and they crawled in early morning traffic.

His sister drove. They owned, between them, a VW Polo, Thirteen years old and 150,000 on the clock. It rattled crazily and the steering was poor, and when the snow came next month the tyre traction would be rubbish. Nikki could have bought Kat a Maserati or a Ferrari or a high-performance Porsche, but that would have drawn attention to himself, and attention carried the smell of danger. Ridiculous to think, driving from the airport where the delayed flight out of Stockholm had finally landed, heading for the factory estate in the Kupchino district, because he sat in a seat covered by a dirty towel, his feet on a crushed carpet of pizza boxes, that he avoided danger.

She knew nothing. She was Yekaterina, and in the music school where she had studied before dismissal she had been Katcha. Now the name she answered to was Kat. They had passed the Park of the Internationalists. Tower blocks were shrouded in mist to their left, fumes spewed from the traffic, and she edged towards the building where he worked. She did not know about the money he had taken from the bank accounts in the city of Krasnodar. Did not know that the story of a friend in Stockholm was a tale of convenience. Certainly did not know that the last three times he had been to the Swedish capital he had met with an officer of a foreign intelligence agency. She would have noted his restlessness, his impatience with the traffic, and that he hissed through his teeth and spittle was on his lips, but did not imagine that his freedom of action and thought was now controlled by a distant and threatening force.

He loved his sister. The only girl he loved was the sister who was a year and a half older than himself. She would drop him off and then double back to get to the block where her piano teacher lived. His work was a priority for him and for her. She would

starve without the money he was paid by the GangMaster, and the piano lessons would have been a distant dream. He loved her and she was the only family he acknowledged. He sat tensed in the seat, smoked hard and flicked ash from the window, letting in the chill air. Their father was dead, poisoned by vodka, and their mother loathed him and it was mutual. His sister, alone, mattered to him. But he had told her nothing. She would go to the woman, a greedy bitch and without sufficient talent to be a teacher, and try to enrich her talent with the piano, because she had been dismissed twenty-one months before from the Rimsky-Korsakov State Conservatory. Denied the reputation of the Conservatory she would never receive the recognition required to play in public. Perhaps that evening he would tell her, or perhaps the next day. Tell her he had sold himself, that he was in danger.

She took the car into the warren of small factories, warehouses and vehicle repair yards. At the end of an unmade road was the two-storey complex where the GangMaster did business. If they knew where he had been, whom he had met, what he had said, he would have been beaten and kicked until he was near death and then they might have chopped off limbs with a chain saw, or might have used electrodes on him, or might have fed him to a chipper, or thrown him, alive, into a furnace that supplied central heating to a public office complex. They lurched forward. She was hunched over the wheel, weaving between the potholes, flush with rain-water.

He hated them. Hated most things and most people. Hated the man he worked for, and his supposed colleagues – the other Black Hats – and hated the political police who had closed the Conservatory doors behind his sister, and hated the man who had come three times to Stockholm and who had fed him with candy and threatened him with a club. Loved only his sister. Might tell her that night, or might put it off until the morning. Might tell her about the assignation in the supermarket car-park . . . not knowing who he would meet, nor what would be asked of him, nor the consequences – knew that he had told them of a meeting of importance in the building where he worked and it was due to start within a few hours of the rendezvous.

She stopped the car. They were far from the sight of any main artery. Lanes ran inside an outer wall of apartment blocks, eight floors high, and one led them towards a cluster of two-storey buildings, some with their own perimeter fences and guarded gates, and some open. They were sandwiched between Plovdivskaya ul, and Dunayskiy pr, and it was a backwater to which nobody would have come without purpose. This building was surrounded by a chain-link fence that was topped with coiled barbed wire. A dog – might have been a mix of mastiff breeding – was on a running wire and had worn a muddied trail short of the main fence. He sometimes threw it the remnant of a sandwich but had a good enough aim to ensure that the bait fell short and the dog could not reach the food, only slaver for it. There were delivery trucks beyond the gate, and parked up on a rutted waste area were half a dozen cars but there was no sign to tell a stranger why this complex warranted the protection of the wire, the high gates, and the two men who shared a booth that sheltered them from the weather. Nikki reached across, kissed his sister's cheek, but his lips were dry and chapped. He smeared his tongue across them, then tried to kiss her again, but she turned her head away. He thought she probably despised him. She might have regarded him as a parasite; he did not have the talent to play the piano, nor the fervour she brought to her protest work and which had cost her the place in a praised music school. He believed in little, and the keys that brought light to his eyes, calm to his mind, were those on his laptop.

He climbed out. He did not look back but heard her swing the Polo in a tight circle, the frosted ground crunching under the tyres. He went to the gate. They knew him. He did not know their names, but their appearance was the same: steroid-built shoulders, shaven heads and huge ham fists. They would do the beating and the kicking, start up the chipper, or drag on the firing cord to get the chain saw going. He was supposed to produce an ID card for the men to inspect, but it was back in the apartment that he shared with Kat. He pushed on the gate. He heard the little Polo fade down the track. One of the guards held it shut. He felt a

moment of blinding obstinacy . . . no pleading about them seeing him every day and he'd left it behind that morning and . . . Nikki sat down. He sat in the mud and the slush from the frost, and others were behind him now and he stayed put. There was no room for the short queue to step over him or to get round him. He stayed silent. The gate was opened. He stood, wiped his sleeve on his wet backside and walked through.

In the past he would have thought of himself as a 'free spirit', an 'adventurer'. He travelled through trapdoors and put Trojan Horses in place, and let the viruses run free. Hacked savings accounts and penetrated the great corporations of the western world where technology blueprints were stored, and travelled inside foreign government ministries. Good times, but gone. He was no longer free. He had given the Englishman the location and timing and explanation of the meeting's importance, and had expected to see him blink, swallow hard, grin as if something special had been offered him. The reward had been the blank and seeming disinterest in the face . . . a lie. A lie because he had the rendezvous in the supermarket car-park. He entered the building, nodded to the girl at the desk, was recognised and given a small wave.

He might, that day, fillet accounts in a Credit Union in Brussels, or he might go back to a target of the afternoon before he had flown to Sweden and go inside a Ministry of Defence contracts unit in Santiago, but was not certain where that city was, or even which continent. But he was no longer free. He pressed the elevator button, felt the power in the machine, wondered who they would send, but felt no guilt, never had done – hated them all.

He would go to Chile . . . icons lit his screen . . . it was a state-authorized hack and the aim was to learn the terms the Americans offered to the local army for the purchase of armoured cars. Russia's government was in competition for the contract and would undercut on a sales pitch. He settled in his chair and neither of the boys across the room acknowledged him, nor did he greet them. An office in that ministry on the far side of the world was the work place for the men and women responsible for defining

the purchase order; he had their names and the hours they were at their desk. This vulnerability was exploited, and their firewalls were no more capable of stopping his progress than a condom blocked transmitted disease. Very soon it would be the nominated 'zero day' when the necessary and identified e-mail train was exfiltrated, and it would go to the men from FSB who hovered close to the building, and who came on Thursdays to collect the required material. The keyboard on the laptop he used was worn, the symbols barely visible, and his fingers moved across them and his eyes were fixed on the screen. Nikki's world.

The wriggling snake he controlled went deeper, explored, sifted and rejected and twisted in a different direction. The memory of a meeting in a hotel room, and the treachery of what he had done, slipped from his mind.

They left the building in Pimlico, separately. In the preparation of their document, three pages of supposed wisdom, between nit-picking over language each had queried what their work might be used for. Bob, Harry, Leanne and Dunc had all failed to put together a decent reason for their effort. But Leanne had further confused them as, the last of the biscuits scoffed, she had taken a call from their employer, Boot. 'See you all again tomorrow . . . He didn't seem to me to be the sort of man who'd gratuitously fritter our time. There'll be a reason, decent or not, but we won't be told it.' She'd laughed, the first time in the day any of them had.

A grenade came diagonally over Merc's head. He could not see the man who had thrown it. It went high, dark against the pale blue sky. The mist had cleared but the smoke clouds from the explosions still lay on the wire. It flew, like a clumsy pigeon, and reached the top of its arc, hesitated, and then its momentum slackened; it rolled, wavered, came down lazily. It might have a six-second fuse, from the time a finger had ripped out the pin, an arm had extended, then the suck of breath and the swing, and the thing was launched.

He shouted. Merc saw that the trajectory would take it down

the trench from him to land close to the machine-gun and near the boy with the wound who filled magazines. They would expect the grenade to explode and hope that the defenders around Merc were, for a few moments, stunned, incapable; that they would charge and try to break through the wire and would hurl themselves into the trench line . . . and if they were there then it was curtains. It hit the top of the parapet, where the line of sandbags was hammered down to give proof against the power of a high-velocity round, and it wobbled, seemed to roll, and Merc could not know whether it would fall into the trench, before coming to rest. He watched it.

Nobody owned Merc. He was not subject to company discipline and was not moved around a chequer board at their convenience. Could have been said that he barely owned himself. He was a junkie for it, an addict. The syringe was the whine of the bullets and the crack of the firing and the thunder blast of the missile launcher, and with them came the screams and the shrieks and the cries – of fear and courage and pain – and there was the camaraderie of the kids he was with, and it was about the adrenaline that pulsed in him, and trust given him . . . Those with only a transitory view of Merc might have reckoned that he carried responsibilities easily. The boys and girls with him had a duty to have rifles at their shoulders and use them well because it was their land, their countryside, that was at risk.

Merc had been reared by his grandparents in a narrow, shabby street off the Oxford Road in the Thames Valley town of Reading, and those elderly people were not threatened by this distant enemy. He was there because it was beyond his powers to walk away. The money was interesting, but not important, and the dream in his life was that he would go ‘sometime’ but he did not know when. What he did know was that the grenade had trickled to a stop, wobbled and then moved, swinging its weight towards the trench, before loitering for a last time. Then it dropped.

Time seemed to freeze. He wanted to shout the warning again, but for once his voice was stifled, in lock-down deep in his throat. The grenade bounced, might have travelled six inches, then

nestled on the dirt. There had been no rain, not for days, so there was no mud for it to slide into, to minimise its blast. It was close to the feet of the machine-gunner, beside those of the girl who fed the belt. Ten paces from Merc, five paces from Cinar, and within an arm stretch of the wounded boy. Merc twisted his head away and closed his eyes, and heaved his body against the wall of sandbags. The hot air blasted against his body, and the shock wave, and the wet.

He heard nothing. The cloud enveloping him was dust, stone particles and thick, but clearing, and the wet dribbled on his face and when his arm brushed it, blood stained dark on his tunic and fresh red appeared on the back of his hand and it tickled as it wriggled down his vest and on to his stomach, but he had no wounds, felt no pain, and the strength was not draining from him. The girl who fed the belt was crouched and her body heaved as if she was trying to scream, but Merc did not hear her, and there was blood across the shoulder of the boy with the machine-gun. Merc understood.

The magazines, filled and empty, were littered near the dismembered body. Merc felt shame. He had not witnessed it. At the moment when the wounded boy had crawled the few paces required, looked down at the thing then, consciously, had dropped on to it, hidden it, one breath or two – not more – Merc had been bent low and had protected himself and had expected to feel the lacerations of the shrapnel. *Greater love hath no man . . .* What many of the private military contractors obsessed with. To give a life for another – would they do that? For whom? For their best mate, or for a kid from a village up a mountain who had only flip-flops on his feet? Much of the boy's stomach had left his body and a leg was severed, and the head was unrecognisable.

Merc steeled himself. Unless he took control, they would be gone in two or three minutes. He started to aim, shoot. He bawled at the machine-gunner to keep firing, and aiming, and at the girl to hold the belt at the necessary angle and feed – and yelled for Cinar to get among the magazines and to keep filling them, and keep passing them – and saw the savagery in her face as if loading

bullets into AK magazines was not her work, but she did. Merc knew the name of the boy who had given his life, but little more, and he had been with them only four days and was their most recent reinforcement and should have been at the rear and receiving treatment except that they had no spare hands to carry him back. The black-clothed bodies were rising among the wire.

Had to do it. Had to turn his eyes from the wire and the movement and the targets, and look down at his feet and past the gouts of blood and the pieces of salmon-pink flesh and drag the radio/phone from the ledge in the sandbagged recess, and hammer it on and shout his codename, and get into a command post, and call for air support, and give it to them straight, no varnish, yell it at them.

‘Almost gone. Almost overrun. Must have air. Got to. Or four two five will be lost. Get the air here.’ Merc’s request would be evaluated. The communication was cut.

More grenades came, but none fell into the trench, and shrapnel whined over them and there was the song of ricocheting shots, but loudest were the shouts of the enemy. Sometimes the sun flickered on the knives that they carried. Eyes peered anxiously at him. If Merc failed them, then they were dead, and the Hill was lost, and it had all been for nothing. He fired, and fired again, and slung an empty magazine behind him and loaded another, and spat at Cinar that he needed replacements and she should be faster, and her anger was molten. He looked for the ‘air’, and did not see the fast jets or the Apaches. Sounds were seeping back into his head, but he did not hear the engines. And they came at him again, and seemed to have identified him as their principal target, because he was the Gun for Hire, the rock on which they foundered.

It was about survival, who wanted it most – him or them. Merc aimed and fired, aimed again and fired again, and had hits, but more came, and the big man was half naked and his black clothing was ripped and his skin was laced with bloody cuts, but still he came.