

## ONE

Joshua felt a rush of adrenaline as he looked down into the square. He was 200 feet up, on the edge of the spire of a Regency-era church. From here he could see every crowded inch below. It caused the familiar sensation of controlled adrenaline to rise in his gut. This was the stress point of any assignment. The moment he could no longer walk away. It was what he lived for.

Every detail was visible through his rifle's telescopic sight. Joshua drank in the information, taking just moments to spot the obstacles that could still stand in his way. A less skilled professional would have taken longer to weigh up the evidence. Joshua was nothing if not efficient.

He moved away from the scope. It had told him all it could for now. Instead he viewed the crowd below with his naked eye. The numbers were immense. He wondered – not for the first time – at how unsuitable the location was. Joshua could see the political thinking. Where else for a ceremony to honour the British heroes of the recent Middle Eastern wars than Trafalgar Square, London's monument to military glory? But historical resonance made it no less of a security nightmare.

A grim smile threatened the corner of Joshua's mouth, brought on by the chaos below. The area might be policed by the world's finest security agencies, but any problems they faced were to Joshua's advantage. Right now those problems were legion.

Joshua's hands returned to his rifle.

With the slightest movement, the barrel swept upwards, his eye back behind the scope. He scanned the surrounding rooftops and spotted nineteen sharpshooters in less than a minute. It was rare that he was able to do this so quickly. It might even be unique, but then this was a

## TONY KENT

unique contract. Every other assignment of Joshua's long career shared a common feature: the need to stay hidden in order to achieve the shot. Not today. Today Joshua *had* to remain in sight. If he did not, every one of those nineteen marksmen would wonder where their twentieth man had gone.

## TWO

Joe Dempsey stood at a window, less than four hundred yards away. His view from here was every bit as good as Joshua's. His mood was not.

For half his life Dempsey had been employed to identify and neutralise threats. To expect the unexpected. The unthinkable. Eighteen years of that would affect any man and Dempsey was no exception. He saw danger everywhere. Dempsey sometimes wondered if this was thanks to his training, or if it was just paranoia. But such doubts did not worry him today. Today the threat was very real.

'It's not looking any better down there, I take it?'

A soft voice with a distinct Edinburgh lilt interrupted Dempsey's thoughts. He turned towards the speaker.

Callum McGregor sat at the only table in the room. The director of the Department of Domestic Security was a colossus of a man. Six foot six and 270 lb. He over-crowded his empty desk.

Dempsey walked towards the director without a word. Dempsey was a big man himself, but he moved lightly. He pulled a chair to the other side of the desk and sat without waiting for permission.

He looked McGregor in the eye.

'It won't get better, Callum. We can't control a space this big and this public.'

Dempsey's voice was harsher than McGregor's. It was less refined, more intense. This was to be expected. McGregor's was the voice of a diplomat. Dempsey was the diplomat's threat.

'You know you're preaching to the choir, Joe. But it changes nothing. We'll do the best we can with what we have.'

‘What we have isn’t enough.’

Dempsey’s reply was blunt but not insubordinate. McGregor was the senior of the two, but mutual respect cut through rank. He continued.

‘It’s not just numbers. There are seven different agencies out there, Callum. All working independently from one another. Christ knows why we need that many. If we’d kept it to a single agency this thing could be properly coordinated.’

‘The Americans were never going to pass President Knowles’ protection to us, Joe. That one was a given even *before* the threat against Thompson.’

McGregor was telling Dempsey nothing new.

‘And *we* weren’t letting *them* do it alone. No way we risk losing either of the ultra VIPs – president *or* ex-president – on British soil. Which means too many chefs in the kitchen already, even before *our* individual agencies start squabbling to be here. All things considered, this isn’t the mess it could be.’

Dempsey leaned back in his chair. It irritated him when McGregor was right. Which the director usually was. But knowing the ‘why’ did not make the facts any easier to swallow. An event this public, with US presidents past and present in attendance? Even without the British politicians on hand – and they *would* be on hand, thanks to the publicity it would bring – it was nothing short of a nightmare.

*If there is a terrorist attack today, Dempsey thought, it’ll take a miracle to stop it.*

The thought was banished as his earpiece flickered into life.

‘POTUS has left the Music Room. Bamboo to move in nine minutes. On my mark. Three, two, one, mark.’

The United States Secret Service had been protecting its presidents for over a century. And its former ones, too. In that time they had honed their techniques to perfection. Four short sentences were all it took to put every agent on notice.

The countdown had begun.

Dempsey synchronised his watch as the voice in his ear declared ‘mark’. McGregor did the same. Between them the two men had seen

## KILLER INTENT

more action than the average infantry platoon. They had run covert missions from one side of the world to the other. Today's assignment was a walk in the park in comparison. But still Dempsey's instincts were screaming.

Dempsey got to his feet. His ramrod-straight military bearing took full advantage of his six feet two inches. That height, combined with a powerful physique discernible even under his suit, made him an intimidating presence. His dark, piercing eyes, set deep in a face that carried the damage of a life lived dangerously, completed the picture. He was not an unattractive man. Far from it. But when it suited him, Joe Dempsey could be terrifying.

Those dark eyes now met McGregor's, and no words were needed. The concern on the director's face said enough.

Perhaps Dempsey was not the only one with a bad feeling after all.

## THREE

‘POTUS has left the Music Room. Bamboo to move in nine minutes. On my mark. Three, two, one, mark.’

Joshua could not place the American accent in his ear. It was East Coast, but where? The failure irritated him more than it should. Joshua’s obsession with detail – with control, with ritual – was shared by millions across the globe. To most it was debilitating. Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, capable of ruining lives. For Joshua it was something else. His was a career where attention to detail could be the difference between life and death. In that world, Joshua’s condition had helped create the perfect killer.

Joshua synchronised his watch on the speaker’s ‘mark’. He felt his synapses fire as he did so, fuelled by another surge of addictive adrenaline. The transmission had come from the Presidential Protective Division, bringing complete focus to Joshua’s mind. In exactly nine minutes the presidential motorcade would leave Buckingham Palace. It would then make its way along The Mall before arriving in Trafalgar Square in just under thirteen minutes’ time. As always, the Secret Service was running like clockwork.

And so was Joshua. The effects of adrenaline differ from person to person. In most it leads to fight-or-flight. In others – fewer – it leads to paralysing terror. And in fewer still it leads to a cold clarity of thought. Where time seems to slow. Where every action is considered. Calculated. Lethal. Most would call it sociopathic – or worse. Joshua called it professionalism.

It was that professionalism which now took hold. With one sweeping movement he scanned the rooftops for the seventh and final time. A

## KILLER INTENT

number that had long given Joshua comfort. Seven reviews of his surroundings. Seven confirmations that the team was in place, that every one of the sharpshooters was where he or she should be. Between them the team covered Trafalgar Square from every angle. But none of *their* angles mattered. One single line of sight would count today.

It was already Joshua's.

It was another perfectly planned detail from his employer. By now Joshua expected nothing less. The twenty-man team of marksmen and women had been cobbled together from a political tug of war. Half had come from the US Secret Services' Counter Sniper Support Unit, which left a ten-man British contingent. Five from Protection Command. Five from Counter Terrorism Command. Or at least that had been the plan.

Joshua had replaced the senior CTC operative at the eleventh hour. He had not allowed himself to ask how this had been achieved. Sure, he was curious to know. And someday he might even find out. But for today it was enough that – somehow – he was a part of the very team assigned to stop him. In a decades-long career Joshua had found many ways to get close to his targets. None had been so steeped in irony.

He turned his scope back to the square. It had been thirty minutes since he had first looked down. The crowd inside the hoardings – the temporary barrier between invited guests and the massing public – had tripled in that time, to full capacity. Two thousand men, women and children. All patiently baking in the unseasonable October sun.

As far as Joshua was concerned there could have been ten thousand. Or just ten. He was interested in only one.

A small, wiry man, dressed in ageing tweed and sitting in an aisle seat twenty-three rows back from the stage. Exactly as Joshua's instructions had predicted. The motorcade was still minutes away but Joshua's target was in place. From this moment that target would not leave his line of fire.

## FOUR

‘You’re sure we’ll get a clear view from here?’

Sarah Truman asked the same question for maybe the tenth time in as many minutes.

‘As good as anyone inside the hoardings,’ replied Jack Maguire. ‘You want better, you have to go higher. That means going outside the square.’

Maguire nodded towards the nearby rooftops. Sarah followed his indication. For a moment she seemed to consider their options. A marksman was visible on a nearby church spire. It was a reminder that all raised buildings were off-limits.

Sarah turned back to Maguire.

‘It just seems a bit side-on. Wouldn’t we get a clearer shot if we were directly in front of the stage?’

‘I’m sure we would. Of the back of everyone’s heads, mainly.’

Maguire’s brisk words were said with a smile. He could understand her worries. For Sarah – much more than for him – today was a big deal. The first major story the network had given her. Maguire would have been concerned if Sarah had *not* been a little neurotic.

‘You almost ready for a run-through?’ Maguire asked, focusing his lens.

‘As I’ll ever be.’

Maguire could tell that Sarah’s grin was forced. That she was hiding her apprehension. *Her stomach must be churning*, he thought. *But she can handle it.*

Sarah quickly proved him right. She pulled her long brown hair free of the band that had secured it in a neat ponytail and scrunched her fingers through its thickness. It was something Sarah did before every



take. A transformation from ‘behind the scenes’ to ‘front of house’. A superstition that was almost as pointless as a rabbit’s foot or a four-leaf clover.

Sarah placed herself in the centre of Maguire’s shot.

‘Let’s do it.’

Maguire’s smile widened. He had worked with TV reporters and actors for years. He was used to their narcissism and had lost count of the shots wasted while ‘the talent’s’ make-up was re-touched. But the last two years had been different. Not because Sarah was nothing to look at. In her own way the tall, slim American was as attractive as anyone Maguire had ever partnered. Sarah was not a classic beauty, sure, but she was somehow better for that. And, unlike the others, she was utterly lacking in vanity. At least as far as Maguire had noticed.

With her ritual complete, Sarah seemed reinvigorated, her pre-shot jitters now hidden by her honest smile and sparkling green eyes. Maguire beamed with pride.

‘What are you grinning at?’

‘Nothing. Come on, get started.’

Maguire refocused his lens one last time before giving Sarah a thumbs-up. The signal for her to begin:

‘We’re here in London’s Trafalgar Square, where the great and the good will soon arrive to commemorate the thousands of British men and women who have taken part in over a decade of conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. As the armed forces of Great Britain and her allies are preparing to rethink their priorities and their deployment, we are here today to say thank you to those who are already home. And to those who have made the ultimate sacrifice in defence of our way of life.

‘With the War on Terror shifting its focus in the Middle East, the time has come to take stock of what has so far been achieved in the years of brutal conflict. And to pay our dues to those brave soldiers who have fought so hard and for so long. And now, as we wait for . . .’

Sarah’s words trailed off, interrupted by the sound of cheers from the south-eastern end of Trafalgar Square. It could mean only one thing. The presidential motorcade had arrived.