

**"Action packed madness."**

**- P. A. Douglas, author of Hitchers**



**MY HEART  
BELONGS  
TO YOU**

**MICHAEL A WALTON**

**MY HEART BELONGS TO YOU**

Michael A Walton

## Chapter One

**13 February - 09:45  
(Life remaining 33 hrs 15 mins)**

**‘Tom will die at precisely 7 p.m. tomorrow night.’**

John Hanson pulled the chirping mobile from his pocket and studied the screen.

A momentary frown took control of his rugged but handsome features. The light blue screen told him that the caller ID had been withheld. Carrying two mobile phones might seem confusing to some, and to others, it might label him as a drug dealer, but to Hanson it was clarity itself. He had a business line for clients, and a second line for private calls or key people, separate and neat.

On this occasion, it was his second mobile, hence his hesitation, because only four other people had that number and he was confident that none of them would ever pass it on to another party. Each of those four was listed only as an initial. “S” was Stephanie, his savant sister and the most important person in his life. A life he would lay down for his sister. It’s what big brothers did, or at least, it was what John Hanson would do.

“T” was Tom Wilson, his back-up man through countless scrapes during his time in the regiment. More recently, since he set up Hanson Securities, he was his right hand man and more importantly, his closest friend.

”J” was for Jane, his secretary at the office of Hanson Securities, who manned the office and did everything from answering the phone to ensuring that every time you opened the biscuit tin, it contained more than crumbs.

Finally, there was “D” for Donald Myers, the current head of MI5, whose office was housed in Thames House. The iconic building sat on the banks of the River Thames at Vauxhall Cross, a building that John Hanson’s work brought him to on many occasions.

John punched the green symbol and backed into a shop doorway. Whenever he took a call in a busy street, he moved instinctively, so he had

his back to something solid. It also served as a spot, which allowed a good field of vision around him. Taking a call generally sucked a person's attention away from his immediate environment. John Hanson was the opposite; with Hanson, it heightened his awareness. Rigorous training, tested in some of the most deadly parts of the world, had added this second nature reaction to his survival toolbox. If someone wanted to distract, or get the drop on another person, they could simply call that person on their mobile. Suddenly, they would become deaf and blind.

'Is this John Hanson?' came a male voice in his ear. Hanson's quick mind did a flash search of his memory. No face sprang forward, and no memory file opened to offer a name.

'Who am I speaking to?' asked Hanson.

'My name is Richard Turner, Detective Inspector Richard Turner. Donald Myers from MI5 gave me this number. Are you John Hanson?'

The hairs on Hanson's neck stood up. If Donald Myers had passed on this number to another person, it wasn't in connection with an invitation to a birthday party.

'Yes, this is Hanson.'

'I have been given your name as contact in the event of Tom Wilson's death.'

For just a split second, John Hanson's eyes stopped sweeping the busy street in front of him. His brain stopped filtering the endless passers-by, looking for threats, or for any signs that the tides of shoppers washing by were anything other than that. Hanson took a quick steadying breath before he spoke. 'When did he die?' The answer that came back was not what he expected.

'Tom will die at precisely 7 p.m. tomorrow night.'

## Chapter Two

13 February - 09:46  
(Life remaining 33 hrs 14 mins)

**‘Karen we’ve been kidnapped.’**

Tom Wilson waited, and waited. He knew that at any minute, he would wake up and this bizarre dream, no, this nightmare, would vanish as the early morning light banished it back into the dark recesses of his imagination from where it had clearly originated. Visions of being carried and laid onto a large slab-like table, and of being stripped and bound, would soon evaporate, melting away as day wrestled control from the night. The strange thing was that it still felt so real that he could almost feel the straps cutting into his wrists and biting into his ankles. He could feel the wide restraint band across his abdomen and some kind of collar around his neck. He frowned as he tried to follow the sound of his breathing, it was... well, it was odd, because it had an echo. It was as if there was someone else breathing close by.

*‘T... Tom, Tom is that you?’*

Tom’s eyes snapped open at the anguished voice of his fiancée’s question. *‘Karen, wha...what’s happening? Where are you?’* He swallowed deeply, his mouth feeling sticky and so dry that it distorted his speech. Trying to turn his head, he realised that the straps he thought he had imagined were real, and that, as he struggled, they did cut into him. There was another band pulled tightly across his forehead, preventing him from turning, and another was across his throat. It was impossible to look to his left where he sensed Karen was. Not that he could see her, even if he could turn, because they were cocooned in a place of inky black that was so dark, so disorientating, it made perception of space and scale difficult. However, the hollow echo suggested a structure of large proportions, even cavernous.

Karen was sobbing now, a pitiful sound in the darkness that cut into Tom like a hot razor. Each whimper was watered down as it scampered away to the far recesses of what he was now convinced was a large structure.

*‘Tom wha...what’s happened to us?’*

Tom flexed against the bindings that held him. His sinewy muscles

bunching as they strained, the anguished sound of his fiancée's voice sending neat adrenalin into his blood stream, but he quickly realised there was no chance of breaking them. He took one deep breath as the shock started to wear off and the professional side of his character slid into place.

'Karen, listen to me.'

The quiet sobbing to his left was the only response; a sound that he had to contain, to box up so it did not distort his mind, blindsiding judgment and preventing him from making a clear evaluation. 'Karen!' his voice was sharp. He needed to get her attention. 'Listen to my voice, speak to me, and tell me what you remember.' He waited, and from his left came a few more stuttering sobs before his fiancée eventually took six deep steadying breaths and then spoke.

'We...we were at that Italian restaurant on George Street and I... I... Oh *my God, Tom, what's happening to us?*' she suddenly screamed.

'Karen, we...' Tom swallowed, hesitating and trying to pick the words that would cause the least panic. However, when it came to kidnapping, there really wasn't a lot of choice; no dressy combinations or clever word-craft would take the edge off their situation. 'Karen, we've been kidnapped.'

Karen stopped sobbing. She became very quiet, as her mind absorbed Tom's words, and began to mix them with others. Kidnap, ransom, freedom, survival, life. Her breathing started to settle, '*Who... would do this, Tom?*'

'I don't know.' Tom tried to shift his weight, as he became aware of the hard surface he was laying on, digging into parts of his body, his bare buttocks, his shoulders and various points up and down his legs. It was clear that he was naked so he had to suspect Karen was too. 'Karen are... are you dressed?'

There was a slight hesitation, as if she needed to keep her voice low. When it came, it was vulnerable. 'Tom I... I'm naked.'

'It's okay, Karen, so am I.' As soon as the words left his mouth, he realised how ridiculous they were. Of course, it wasn't alright. They had been kidnapped, almost certainly drugged and were now strapped naked to a table in the pitch black at who knows where. As his mind did a mental search of his own body, he suddenly became aware of his left hand, and he squeezed it gently.

'*Tom!*' shrieked Karen 'is... is that your hand?'

Despite their situation, Tom tried to lighten things, 'I certainly hope so.'

‘We’re holding hands, Tom.’

‘Yes, but... there...there’s something wrong.’ Tom frowned, as he tried something, and then he gasped as realisation set in, ‘Oh, my God.’

*‘What is it, what’s wrong, Tom?’*

‘It... it’s our hands.’

‘What about them?’

‘They... they’ve been glued together.’

## Chapter Three

13 February - 09:48  
(Life remaining 33 hrs 12 mins)

**‘Where do you want me to start?’**

‘To be honest, I think we need to meet in person, Mr. Hanson.’

‘Honesty would be good, Mr. Turner, lies tend to upset me.’ Hanson’s voice was quiet, and edged with ice. It carried a warning that was almost a threat.

Donald Myers had given Turner a brief but concise background on John Hanson. If only half of what he had told him was true, upsetting this man would not be the best thought out plan. ‘When do you want to meet?’ Enquired Turner.

‘Now,’ responded Hanson, ‘Are you at your office?’

‘Yes, yes, I am. I’ll give you the address and...’

Hanson’s voice cut him off in mid-sentence. While Hanson had been talking with Richard Turner, he had been working his G3 with his free hand. A simple text to Donald Myers brought an almost instant reply. Hanson had written, *Richard Turner, where?* The reply was almost instant. *New Scotland Yard, Westminster.*

‘I know where you are, Mr. Turner. Fifteen minutes,’ snapped Hanson, closing the line and cutting off Turner’s reply, as he strode forward quickly and hailed a taxi.

Turner placed the receiver slowly back onto its cradle and gave a silent prayer that John Hanson was batting for the good guys. He hadn’t even met him yet, but he had already formed an impression that left him in no doubt whatsoever, that in fifteen minutes John Hanson would be at the front desk. Striding briskly to his office door, he pulled it open and spoke to his secretary. ‘Linda, arrange for all the files on Cupid to be brought to my office immediately.’

Five minutes later, a lone box was placed onto the detective inspector’s desk. Normally, a six-year-old serial murder investigation generated enough



paper to send Sting and Bob Geldof into an apoplectic fit, but this sad indictment sat on his desk mocking him. It said he had failed in his duty. That he was not up to the challenge laid down by Cupid to find him. Six years had not produced one solid fact that might lead them to the identity of the serial killer. Not one lead of substance had come to his aid. Books had been written during Cupid's six-year reign with paragraphs embedded for all time, criticizing police efforts and particularly his own part. Countless newspaper articles had used razor sharp words to cut through the thick skin, which Turner had to develop over his handling of the Cupid investigation. Skin that was now covered in the scar tissue of their accusations.

Ten minutes later, as he flicked through the files, a sharp knock at the door, precluded by the entry of his secretary, pulled his attention back from the badlands of his conscience. 'Are you expecting a Mr...'

'Send him in,' interrupted Turner, cutting her off. Turner tried to control his facial features, making a conscious effort to stop his eyes growing wide and his jaw to drop open. It was a wasted effort, the tall blond man who strode confidently into his office stood a shade over six feet four and weighed in at a little over two hundred and fifty pounds, so Turner's reaction was something Hanson was used to.

'Turner?' asked John Hanson, offering his hand.

The detective inspector took the offered hand, regretting it almost immediately, as the power contained within the frame of the man in front of him pulsed through the grip. It was a pointer, almost a warning, backed by intensity in narrowed, diamond blue eyes, which seemed to burn into his very soul. 'No need to ask who you are,' smiled Turner, weakly rubbing his hand, as Hanson relinquished his grip and allowed the blood flow back into his fingers.

'I spoke with Donald Myers on the way over,' informed Hanson, taking the seat in front of Turner's desk on which a lone cardboard box sat. Hanson's eyes floated across it for a mere second. 'He said that you are ninety- nine percent confident that Tom Wilson and his fiancée have been abducted by this serial killer, so I need details. Tell me what you have on Cupid.'

This was going to be a short conversation, thought Turner, as he reached into the box and pulled out six files. One for each year of Cupid's reign of

terror. Six files that held around 100 sheets of typed A4 paper each, along with a group of photos that could never hope to capture the horror that each set of couples must have gone through at the hands of a monster. Turner opened the first file, marked February 2006, the first year that Cupid had struck. The first year that two people in love had fallen prey to the twisted mind of a maniac. The graphic photos never failed to make him gasp, and never failed to allow the guilt, which he carried every day like a disease running with spiked shoes through his soul. If he had done his job, five more couples would still be alive today, still breathing, still loving and enjoying life.

‘Mr. Turner,’ prompted Hanson tersely, dragging the detective back from dark inner thoughts.

‘*Sor... sorry,*’ stammered Turner, ‘Where do you want me to start?’

‘Let’s try the beginning,’ responded Hanson.

The beginning was good, thought Turner. The beginning involved other couples not connected to John Hanson. The end was what Turner was not looking forward to, because that would be where he had to relay his belief that, his friend was, in truth, already dead. He was still breathing, because Cupid didn’t kill ’til the fourteenth, but that was irrelevant. This would go the same way as the last six years and a new file would be added to the box in front of him. It would contain more sheets of typed A4 paper and a group of graphic photos that would steal his breath, each time he looked at them, which would not be often.

Suddenly very tired, Richard Turner sighed deeply. He wanted John Hanson to know that this was a lost cause. A trail that could only lead to misery, misery and heartache. ‘Look...Mr. Hanson, I need to be straight with you. We have been chasing this maniac for six years. Six years without a shred of evidence, six years without a single eye witness, and six years without any lead of any substance.’ Turner shrugged his shoulders in resignation, ‘Your friend is already dead, he... he just doesn’t know it yet.’

## **Chapter Four**

**13 February - 09:50  
(Life remaining 33 hrs 10 mins)**

**‘Oh how his couples screamed.’**

Cupid placed the camcorder carefully into his brief case. He had made sure the battery was charged and the chip clean. He only used chips once for each couple, and then he destroyed them. It was a link, a lead, and he didn't leave links, and he never left leads. It was how he was able to evade detection and that was important, because it allowed him to continue his work; that was all that mattered. He was angry that most of the press hounds still hadn't recognised why he did this. They hadn't accepted that the bonding of two people in love for eternity was the most sacred. The most poignant act of true love that could ever be achieved, and he, Cupid, gave that gift each year to one couple. This year it was Tom and Karen, who would be bound to each other for all time, their love sealed within the ageless time capsule of death.

Cupid flipped open his mobile and hit speed dial one. His breathing was slightly quicker than normal. The anticipation of giving immortality to the love of Tom and Karen excited him, creating a glow from within.

‘Adam, it's me. Is everything ready?’

Anyone hearing Adam Black's voice for the first time would think him drunk, but that wasn't the case. He was just a little slow. A car accident ten years earlier had caused a head injury that left the left hand side of his face looking as if he had suffered a stroke. His voice was corrupted, as if he had consumed a bottle of whisky. Cupid had been driving the other car and whilst he was in no way to blame for the collision, he took on a responsibility for Adam's recovery, placing him in a private hospital and covering all of his expenses throughout his period of healing. Cupid was a wealthy man, so money was not a problem, and helping this man produced an employee. No, he was more like a disciple, who would walk through fire, if he asked him. He would even lay down his life to protect him and that was exactly what

Adam had become, his bodyguard, his protector. Not that Cupid needed much protection at six feet three inches, and weighing in at a muscular fourteen stones. He was more than a match for most men.

Much of Adams physical recovery had been spent in the gym pumping iron, his savior having introduced him to the discipline of training with weights. The head injury Black had received made him frighteningly single-minded, almost obsessed, as he gulped steroids and pushed weights. The result was a man standing a little over six feet six inches tall, weighing in at a staggering three hundred and eight pounds with less than ten percent body fat.

‘Everything is ready Sir,’ drawled Adam, ‘just as you like it.’

‘You have my things?’

‘Yes, I will be taking them over in about half an hour.’

‘And is our couple... prepared?’

‘Yes Sir, they were prepared last evening.’

‘Good, call me when my things are all in place.’ Cupid flipped the mobile closed. Striding over to his office door, he gently turned the lock, so as not to alert his secretary. Returning to his bookcase, he removed a large volume entitled Surgical Procedures and placed it onto the desktop. Reaching through the gap created, he pushed a hidden button. There was a soft, barely audible click as an entire section of the shelving unit moved forward just an inch on hidden hinges. Pulling it gently towards him, so as not to disturb the books resting on the shelves, a section of the bookcase swung open approximately eighty centimetres wide, like a door revealing a space behind at around a metre deep. This was his private sanctum; this was the epicentre of his world.

Flipping a switch illuminated a void approximately three metres wide. Individual spotlights picked out a number of items sitting on a narrow shelf. Each spot threw a circular pool of light onto the shelf, giving it the feel of a museum as they illuminated three items, items that sat waiting for Cupid to visit and to enjoy, which he did each and every day.

One was an open laptop computer, containing a DVD that had recordings on it that were only viewed on this laptop and only by Cupid. They were a testament to his mission, to his calling to unite couples. They showed in graphic sound and colour his previous six couplings. The second item on the shelf was a rolled up cloth, tied at its center with a thin cord attached to the

roll. It contained some of his prized possessions. The final item sat in the middle of the other two and as always, he avoided looking at this until last of all, deliberately building the tension, increasing the anticipation, as he denied himself its poetry.

Turning on the laptop, he waited, his mouth becoming dry. After it had loaded, he quickly found the file he wanted marked Valentine's Day 2006. As the screen burst into life, he caught his breath, as he watched the film he had shot back on that glorious day, the day of the coupling of the couple he had selected, selected to reach immortality. He always kept the sound low so his secretary did not hear the screaming, screaming that she would misinterpret as agony. She would fail to understand, as most people would, the significance of the agonised sounds; fail to understand the true meaning as he did. His breathing became shallow as he watched the images, catching the magnificence, the relevance of what he had created, and they surged through him like a drug. He had achieved this; he had given this gift to this couple and to the world. Five more short films were watched, five more couples were immortalised for eternity. Shutting down the laptop, he laid his hand onto the keyboard. Soon there would be a seventh film; soon another celebration of eternal love would join the others. Closing his eyes, he breathed deeply, imagining how Tom and Karen would look as they stared up with thanks from this screen, how they would endorse the strength of their love through their screams reflecting their appreciation for the opportunity he would give them. Clearing his mind, he turned to the next item, avoiding looking at the centre object, wanting to drink that in last, to savour it. He stroked the cloth roll with reverence as his heart rate steadily rose, thinking of six previous Valentine's evenings, six previous couples bonded by love for all time, thanks to him, thanks to what he was prepared to do for them. Easing open the knot, he unrolled the cloth exposing a set of six surgical number seven scalpels. Scalpels came in two types in general, disposable and reusable. Cupid preferred reusable, the blade being exchangeable. The type Cupid liked to use was made from diamonds. Each of his couples had a new set of blades and after each joining, the handles were scrubbed and steamed to remove all traces of the previous couple that they had helped to reach immortality. Each cut, each incision that raised screams that most would think were of pain, left no lasting trace on the wonderful implements. Cupid knew the screams were a reflection of the depth of love the couple felt for

each other, the louder the screams, the deeper the love. Oh, how his couples screamed and wailed. Yes, he had picked well, picked couples so in love.

Rolling the wrap of scalpels back up, he neatly tied the knot and left the room, averting his eyes from the last object sitting in the central pool of light.

He placed the razor sharp instruments into his brief case next to his camera, his back turned to the inner sanctum deliberately building his own anticipation.

Closing the lid of his case, he snapped the catches closed and drew in a deep steadying breath as he turned. Re-entering the tiny room, he was now ready, now he would allow himself to have his reward. Lifting his eyes, he locked onto the object, audibly gasping at its magnificence, its sheer beauty and it was his, all his. Filled with a colourless liquid, the plastic cylinder was about thirty centimetres high and seventeen centimetres wide. The single object it contained appeared to float in the centre, but was in fact, supported by a stainless steel rod fixed to the interior base of the Perspex tube. With shaking hands, he lifted the vessel and embraced it to his chest, closed his eyes and focused on the beat of his heart against the tube. His heart that was racing as it always did, always would, when he was close to the tube.

He allowed himself two or three minutes, then left the room, clicking the section of bookcase closed and replacing the heavy volume. It was now time to leave, time to meet Tom and Karen, and soon, very soon, it would be time for his scalpels to do their work, time to couple them, to capture for eternity their pledge, their love.

## Chapter Five

13 February - 10:03  
(Life remaining 32 hrs 57 mins)

**‘When he met Hanson he would wish it were the Devil instead.’**

Hanson studied the man in front of him for just a second or two before answering. The study was made through narrowed eyes, and to the uninitiated, it was almost imperceptible. However, to the people who knew Hanson well, it was significant, more than significant; it was a warning. The permanent deep furrows that ploughed through the grey pallor covering Turner’s brow, could easily attach fifty years to the detective inspector, but Hanson suspected at least ten of those years were false, merely a reflection, a penalty for the life he had chosen. Days spent dealing with the dregs and the flotsam of humanity were not a fair trade for sleepless nights dogged with doubts, for endless recriminations for under achieving, and for falling short of his own yardstick of results and convictions.

‘Mr. Turner, I am not going to waste too much time on this, because from what Donald Myers has briefed me on, every second wasted is a second shaved from Tom Wilson’s new life.’

Turner frowned, ‘New life?’

Hanson pulled back the left cuff on his coat to expose the Chase Durer 1000XL watch he had worn for many years. The watch was popular with special services operatives around the world, thanks to its multiple features and durability. Hanson set the feature on the watch for nineteen hundred hours on the 14 of February, and showed it to Turner. It was counting down from just under thirty- three hours, steadily slicing seconds from Tom’s life.

‘This is Tom Wilson’s new life here on my wrist. We have thirty-three hours, Mr. Turner, thirty three hours for me to find him.’ Hanson watched the detective’s features twist around a number of reactions. Doubt was in there, along with pity, pity for the man in front of him who couldn’t believe for a single second that he could come even close to doing what he himself had failed to do in six years with an entire team of detectives behind him.

However, the overriding feature Hanson recognised was a weariness leaning towards fear. He could smell it on Turner, see it on the small beads forming on his brow, and detect it in the slight tick at the corner of his right eye.

Turner swallowed as he studied the watch. In a dark corner of his mind, he was afraid that this imposing man might actually be able to succeed where he had failed. He was afraid that he could actually find Cupid, and hammer home a final nail in the coffin of accusation and incompetence waiting to welcome the detective. There was also the small matter that, he felt the man in front of him was mad, quite mad. That supposition was an accurate one, because John Hanson was mad, and Turner would come to find out what that meant to anyone who encountered him.

Hanson leaned forward and placed both forearms onto Turner's desk, the palms of his large hands flat on its surface, with his rock steady gaze holding Turner's attention. 'Mr. Turner, I possess a certain set of skills, skills that I have honed in some of the most God forsaken parts of the world, places where even in your wildest dreams, you could not imagine the horror of the conditions, or of the things that I have done to survive. It is my intention to use those skills to find my friend, along with a desire and a determination beyond anything you have ever seen.' Hanson waited for a beat; he wanted Turner to digest, and to understand clearly. 'Now, during the next thirty-three hours, only two types of people will exist in my life, those who want to help me, and those who don't,' Hanson waited again. He wanted his words to sink in. 'People who want to help me will be treated as my friend; people who do not want to help me will be treated as my enemy. For the next thirty-three hours, my world will become very black or white, simplified, and where normal procedures will be stripped away. Do we understand each other?'

Turner could not pull his eyes away from Hanson's penetrating gaze, a gaze where the eyelids had not passed over the diamond blue eyes once, unlike his own that refused to remain still. Not trusting his voice, he simply nodded.

Hanson's second mobile chirped into life. He slipped it from his pocket, placed it to his ear and after less than ten seconds, simply said, 'affirmative.' Standing suddenly, he picked up the cardboard box. 'Let's go.'

'Go, go where?' sputtered Turner.

'To my office, we will set up a command post there.'

'Bu... but I can't just walk out, I have commitments, appointments.'



Hanson didn't break stride as he opened the office door. 'Not any longer. That was Donald Myers. He's made certain arrangements, let's move,'

Turner continued to hesitate.

'Friend or enemy inspector, make your choice?' snapped Hanson, fixing him with a steady gaze.

Turner, not doubting for a second that being his enemy would be a painful choice, grabbed his coat quickly from the hook on his office wall. He then jogged after Hanson, who was already half way across the outer, open plan office, where a sea of desks overflowed with multi-coloured files, keeping around fifteen detectives occupied.

'You have a car?' Hanson called out over his shoulder.

'Yes it's um... it's at the front.'

Hanson simply nodded. Five minutes later, the pair was heading away from Scotland Yard in Turner's eight year old Ford Focus.

As they drove, Hanson shut down his business mobile, then placed a Bluetooth earpiece into his left ear and linked it to his second mobile. Hitting speed dial 3, the letter "J" popped up. He got Jane at Hanson Security's office after just two rings. 'Jane, I need you to call Stephanie and tell her I'm on my way to collect her. I would call her myself, but I have other calls I need to make.'

'Have you arranged this with her John?' asked Jane, surprise clear in her voice. John's visits to his sister were always very structured. Trips out were generally planned weeks in advance and logged into his diary at the office, which Jane controlled. She blushed, as she flipped the diary open, thinking she had missed it.

In return, Hanson's voice was clipped, veering to sharp, lifting the hairs on the nape of her neck. *'Make the call Jane.'*

Jane had been with John for a little over two years and in that time, she had come to know her boss, John Hanson, extremely well. She knew how he liked his office organised. She knew his moods, what biscuits he liked, but most of all, she knew that tone of voice. It said many things, things like, *react don't question, do it now, not later*, but what it told her more importantly, was that they were possibly about to be involved in an operation. Hanson's next words confirmed her thoughts and sent her adrenal glands into override.

'After the call, get the ops room ready.'

'I'm on it, John,' came the instant reply. 'Anything else?'

‘Not at the moment. My ETA to you is 11.10 hours.’

‘Roger that,’ she slipped into the jargon simply at the thought of a new operation.

Turner kept quiet as he followed the Sat Nav instructions logged in by Hanson at the start of their journey. Clearly, this man was starting to put together some kind of plan of action.

Hanson hit speed dial 2, and the Letter “T” popped up. He had already tried it three times on the taxi ride to Turner’s office, but he was hoping beyond hope to hear Tom’s voice - nothing. He hit speed button 4, and “D” popped up. Three rings brought a voice he knew well. ‘John, what’s the latest?’ No preamble, no chewing the cud or jokes.

‘I’m en route to collect my sister and then to my office. I’ll set up my command post there.’

‘Listen, John, I’m due time off, could you use my help?’

‘Leaving your office would be a rare occasion, Donald.’

‘This is a rare situation. Can you use an extra head?’

‘Affirmative.’

‘Okay, I’ll leave now, and should be with you within the hour.’ The line closed.

John took out a small black box from an inside pocket with a cable attached. On the end of the cable was a small plug that clicked into his mobile. It would scramble the call and make it impossible for anyone scanning the airways to eavesdrop on his conversation. As he punched in a number, he knew by heart, he felt Turner’s eye on him. He spoke without turning to face him, ‘you need to go deaf for the next minute or two.’

‘Deaf as a post, me,’ responded the Detective Inspector, ‘always have been, come from a long line of deaf as a post, hear no evil, and see no evil detectives.’

Under normal circumstances, Hanson would only make this call in front of a small handful of people, but as he checked his watch, he could see that Tom’s life had just been reduced by a little over ten minutes. Not a lot in normal circumstances, but when your life was only thirty-three hours long, the perspective changed. Each hour was the equivalent of nearly two and a half years in an average life, each minute equal to just over two weeks and every twenty seconds, five days of Tom’s new life would have slipped away.

Just clipping in the scrambler and punching in the number sliced away another two and a half days off of his friend's life. Hanson closed his eyes and waited for the connection, making a silent vow that he would restore a full life to his friend Tom and Karen, his fiancée. He would not let this maniac take them. When Cupid stepped into Hanson's world, he had without knowing it, stepped into hell. He didn't know it yet, but he would soon. When he met Hanson, he would wish he had met the Devil instead. With the Devil, he would have a chance of a deal, but with Hanson, he had none.

## Chapter Six

**13 February - 10:15**  
**(Life remaining 32 hrs 45 mins)**

**‘Who’s there? Help us please.’**

*‘Tom, I... I’m so scared, please tell me we are going to get out of this, please Tom.’* Karen was close to hysteria, her breathing becoming ragged and snatched.

‘Karen, I know you’re frightened, but you need to focus on my voice. You need to try to stay strong.’ Tom strained to turn his head to the left to get a glimpse of his terrified fiancée, but the straps across his forehead was pulled taut, allowing no head movement. Only his eyes could move.

*‘Who... who could have done this, Tom, who would do su... such an evil thing?’*

He needed Karen to feel his presence, so Tom squeezed his glued hand. In the last few seconds, he had come to a decision, and that decision was that he would not share with her the horrifying thought that had invaded his mind. In the last few moments, he realised who it was that had abducted them. Today had to be 13 February, the day before Valentine’s Day, one day before they would be murdered and served up for public display, butchered at the hands of the infamous serial killer known as Cupid. He closed his eyes and tried desperately to evict it. Maybe he was mistaken, or maybe it was just coincidence.

*‘Tom, I’m cold.’*

‘I know, sweetheart,’ soothed Tom, trying to keep the panic he felt out of his voice. ‘Try not to think about...’

Tom’s words were cut short as the screech of complaining hinges cut through the silence like a dentist’s drill. A soft click followed and suddenly the blackness turned into a soft milky wash, as a single bulb came on behind them. It was not very bright, but it was enough to make Tom and Karen squint as there enlarged pupils sucked in the light.

*‘Who’s there? Help us please,’* screamed Tom, twisting against the straps

until they cut deeply into his ankles and wrists, the band around his throat causing him to gag.

Frightened by Tom shouting and the footsteps coming up behind her, Karen screamed.

It took a monumental effort on Tom's part to calm himself. He knew that his ranting was fuelling Karen's hysteria. '*Please,*' he begged, quieter this time, '*Tell us what's happening. Who are you?*' Tom wanted to hear that this was a straight kidnapping, and that the person behind them was not Cupid.

No answer, just shuffling footsteps behind them and a grotesquely enlarged shadow gliding across the wall directly in front of them like some phantom, that and... Tom couldn't believe he was hearing it, but... it was whistling, the person behind them was whistling.

*'Please let us go,'* whimpered Karen, *'Please don't hurt us.'*

More silence, just the sound of footsteps, and whistling. Tom closed his eyes and tried to engage his professional skills. The footsteps were heavy, probably a man; a big man. He was no more than six feet behind them. He could hear the man breathing, low shallow breaths snatched between bars of a song that he couldn't quite place. He was wheeling something. It could be a trolley.

Adam Black brought the trolley to a stop just six feet away from the large table on which the couple was securely strapped. He knew they were secure, because he had secured them last evening before pumping them full of Diprivan, a drug used to induce anesthesia. As he always did with the couples, he had stripped their clothes from them. He didn't mind this part, since the woman was slim and beautiful with clear flawless skin. Some six weeks before, his employer had selected them for coupling, as he called it, and told Adam to begin the preparations for their taking. He was good at this, he would follow them for weeks, walking in their shadows to get a feel for the kind of people they were, their habits, if they had regular routines, the places they liked to go to eat, where they worked. Adam was never quite sure how the selection was made and he knew that asking would not be wise. His employer was not only a large, powerfully built man, but he had a temper that could flare in a nanosecond. Add to that, what Adam had witnessed firsthand after the scalpels had done their work, and it gave weight to his decision not to ask questions.

*'Tell us what's happening,'* tried Tom again, struggling to keep the fear that was gnawing at his stomach from turning his voice into a screech.

Adam ignored the man and placed the large black bag on the floor at the side of the trolley. He knew how to place the items in order and ready for the ceremony of the coupling. He didn't care for it himself, but he knew how important it was to his employer. This was all that mattered, for he had given him life, when death had wanted to take it from him; given him direction through training and dignity, by employing him as his minder, his companion.

The first item Adam placed on the trolley top was a stainless steel chest retractor, used to spread the walls of the chest when cut open for open-heart surgery. It operated on a crank system, where each crank spread the two arms of the retractor wider, forcing the thoracic muscles to open, allowing access to the internal organs. This one had proven its value ten times over.

The next item, also stainless steel, was around forty centimetres long, looking for all intents and purposes like garden pruners, except these were surgical shears used for cutting through bone. The viscous looking parrot beak jaws had never seen a branch, but they had crunched through many ribs over the last six years.

The final item was a small black box containing surgical sutures with number 5 steel needles. It was important to Cupid that his couples looked their best for his filming, so stitching them neatly after his work was important to him.

Tom decided to try a different tactic. *'You'd better let us go, you creep. People will be looking for us.'*

The whistling stopped suddenly.

Tom knew that he had made a mistake.

Three quick steps took Adam to the wide table on which Tom and Karen were strapped. Even though he was standing less than a foot away, they still couldn't see him, but they could hear his breathing, forced and angry.

Karen let out a scream that chased away to the high roof as Adam suddenly leaned over her, his face inches from hers, his breath warm on her skin. His eyes narrowed as he looked up and down her body. To her, he was upside down. The deep scars on the left side of his face and his drooping eye gave him a grotesque gargoyle expression.

Tom sensed the man behind them and he knew he was standing close to

Karen, who was laying helpless and naked to his left. Her scream caused his heart to leap as adrenaline shot into his system. *'Keep away from her,'* he screamed, thrashing wildly against the straps holding him down, *'I'll kill you, so help me.'*

Adam watched him from the corner of his eye thrashing around like a wild animal, screaming threats as the woman continued to cry and whimper while he psychologically caressed her. Her screaming collapsed into a strangled whimper, as his tongue slipped out between thick lips, flicking as he leaned over, as if he were about to run it over her neck and down over her breasts. In fact, he did neither. No contact was made, at least not physical, but the mental torment inflicted on Tom was his reward. Tired of the game, he stepped back whistling, and completed laying out the surgical instruments.

Karen was reduced to sobbing, while Tom's efforts had drained him, leaving him panting desperately, trying to glimpse Karen to his left. However, he was unable to get any movement out of the straps across his neck and forehead. Two minutes later, the screeching door heralded the man's exit. The light was switched off, and the pair was plunged once more into the inky black world of despair and fear. Tom had inched through the foothills of Afghanistan and carried out covert operations in the deadly streets of Iraq, but never in his entire life had he experienced fear as he felt now. Nevertheless, he could not let that fear bleed through to Karen. He had to bolster her, and he had to give her hope.

*'Karen,'* he whispered.

Only a child-like whimpering answered him.

*'Karen, listen to me, we are going to get out of this, believe me.'*

*'T...T...Tom, we're going to die. He was horrible, he... he's insane.'*

*'Karen, we are not going to die. Listen to me, we... are... not... going... to die.'* He pronounced each word succinctly, needing to snap her out of the hysteria that he could hear she was slipping into. *'Somebody will come, sweetheart, trust me,'* he implored.

*'No one's coming, Tom. No one's going to find us,'* she whimpered.

*'You're wrong my darling, so wrong. Someone is coming and they're coming right now. You have to believe me.'*

*'But... how do you know, Tom. How could you possibly know?'*

Tom squeezed her hand, *'As sure as night follows day, Karen, John is coming for us.'*

*'Will he find us, Tom, before... before...?'* Karen's voice broke and trailed away.

*'Karen, he will find us. You must hold on, he will find us.'* Tom couldn't stop his mind chasing down frightening passageways where he didn't want to go. He knew John would be looking for them. He knew that his friend would move heaven and earth and then some, but as much as he had faith in him, he wasn't sure there was time. He knew in his heart that Cupid had taken them. He knew as most of the nation knew from the news coverage, that this maniac had murdered his victims on the 14<sup>th</sup> February each year for the past six years. His body clock told him that this was the 13<sup>th</sup>. Whether it was day or night, he could not be sure. However, what he was sure of was that if John didn't find them, then tomorrow night, they were going to die. He gave up a silent prayer, a prayer to his friend. *'Come and get us, John, holy Mother of God, John, come and get us.'*



## Chapter Seven

13 February - 10:20  
(Life remaining 32 hrs 40 mins)

**‘Don’t judge what you don’t know about.’**

The number Hanson had rung was never written down, and never logged into a mobile. It would take him through to a command centre known only to a chosen few, buried deep in an underground bunker in Hereford. Its existence was on a strictly need to know basis. As a courtesy to Turner, he switched on the loudspeaker. He wanted him to be fully in the loop with anything relating to the task in front of them. Four rings brought a voice that never failed to trigger many memories.

‘This is Blue Eagle, identify yourself and give your password.’

‘John Hanson, Starbird 70895.’

‘John, I was expecting your call. I spoke with Donald Myers about thirty minutes ago. What’s the latest intel?’

‘I’m en-route to my office to set up a command centre, Myers is on his way. I’m with Detective Inspector Richard Turner from Scotland Yard. He’s the lead detective in the Cupid case. We have all the files that are available with us. I’m also intending to pick up my sister Stephanie en route. I’m hoping she may be able to help us. Also, we are on speaker phone, Sir, just to advise you.’

‘Roger that, John, so what do you need?’

‘At the moment, nothing, Sir. I just wanted to open a line of communication in case we need any help later.’

‘Well... I was going fishing, John, been looking forward to it. Not sure I want to change my plans for that runt Tom.’

John smiled as he heard the gasp of surprise from Turner at his side. How could he know that, “the I couldn’t care less attitude,” was the accepted form of bonding between members of the elite SAS core? The more scathing, the more it showed how much the concern.

‘*Are you fully aware of the severity of the situation?*’ snapped Turner, unable to believe what he had just heard.

‘I am indeed,’ responded Blue Eagle. ‘I booked that fishing trip weeks ago and I doubt I’ll get my money back.’

Hanson waved a stalling hand at Turner, who was about to respond, his colour a healthy red glow. ‘Well, providing you decide not to go fishing, Sir, I’ll be in touch.’

‘Can’t promise, John, but I’ll see what I can do.’

John closed the line and pulled out the cable tucking the small black box back into his inside pocket.

‘*Some friend!*’ snapped Turner, as the Sat Nav advised them that they were eleven minutes from their first destination.

‘Don’t judge what you don’t know about,’ warned Hanson. ‘That man would walk over hot coals to save a man from the regiment.’

‘*But... I heard him,*’ complained Turner, his voice going up an octave.

‘The, “I couldn’t care less attitude,” is a reverse safety valve. As I said, don’t judge what you know nothing about. I hope I’ve made that clear,’ responded Hanson curtly.

Turner simply nodded acceptance, clarity manifesting as Hanson’s voice took on a slight edge.

Over the next ten minutes, as they neared the centre where John’s sister was waiting, Turner gave details to John about Cupid and the twelve murders, details that were never released to the public. There were a number of reasons behind that, one being that the mutilation of the bodies was too harrowing, too distressing to give out to the general public. John simply listened in silence; Turner’s words were creating horrific images that enforced his determination to bring his friend and Karen home.

Pulling up at the front of a large double-fronted Victorian property, Hanson exited the Ford Focus, and strode briskly up to the front door, behind which a private retreat for people suffering autism and savantism was in operation.

Pushing the bell, he reflected as he had done countless times, on his sister, as to why her, and not him, should be locked into that world of savant autism, where order and routine dominated Stephanie’s life. Her daily routine became her religion to keep her calm and content. While their parents were alive, she lived with them, becoming the centre of their universe, their reason for getting up in the morning, and their reason for drawing breath. John

knew they had some guilt that, in some way they might be to blame for her condition, questioning if something they had done during their mother's pregnancy could have triggered the condition. He sat with them so many times that he had lost count assuring them that was not the case. Their death nine years ago had thrown his and Stephanie's lives into a storm of restructuring. Initially, John had tried to fill their shoes, Stephanie came to stay with him full time, helping him to try and create an environment that would support her within her inner world. It failed miserably. With initial reluctance, he eventually placed her in this retreat, which catered to people with Stephanie's condition. It turned out to be the best thing he could have done. She was happy and she flourished under its care. The staff was superb, giving its residents every opportunity to live their lives to the full potential within the varying levels of their affliction. Stephanie had a separate studio within the building where she was able to follow her carefully structured routines, keeping her calm and content. A caregiver called in on her several times during the day to make sure she was okay, and within that setup, a kind of structured harmony developed and ruled.

Her savantism had manifested itself in incredible displays of memory that, even after all these years, still astounded John. He tried to visit her at least three times a week, but he called her every day at 3.45 p.m., because that was the time Stephanie told him he needed to call. He could never get her to explain why it had to be that time, but he guessed within her mind, there was locked a logical reason. On the occasions that he had to miss the designated time, she would tell him that was not good and he needed to stick to the correct time. It was easier just to tell her he would try next time, rather than explain that when you were involved on a mission, it wasn't always convenient.

Despite her condition, John and Stephanie had grown extremely close. She was a beautiful woman who at first sight looked completely normal and the image of John's mother. At five eleven with a slim figure and auburn hair that shone like burnished copper, she might well have pursued a career as a model under different circumstances. When she looked at John with her striking green eyes, it was with such depth that he often felt as if she were looking deep into his soul, looking for answers to questions yet unasked. The bond between them had built up during the early years just as other sibling relationships did, but John did not realise as a young child, that his sister was

any different from other sisters. Eventually, around the age of eight, other children unkindly helped him discover this with calls of moron, dopey and Stephanie the psycho. John had ended up in so many fights over Stephanie that, for a time, he did resent having her as his sister, but that was short-lived. Now he couldn't visualise life without her.

John returned to the Ford Focus with Stephanie beaming broadly and holding tightly onto his arm. Initially, she had been agitated when Jane had called from John's office to say John was coming to pick her up. She liked to know in advance when she was going out, liked to be prepared, but now she was out and she was happy. She loved her brother, treasured her time whenever she was with him and since a visit with John to The Dragon Mountains in South Africa with his friend Shaka Mambuza, she found going out of the facility easier to deal with, less stressful. John's friend Shaka, a pure Zulu and the ruler of his people, arranged for two of his medicine men called Sangomas, to take Stephanie into the Dragon Mountains for a week during her stay. Initially against it, John was persuaded to allow her to go. It was the right decision; she came back so much more relaxed, a more confident woman. Not cured, for she would never be cured, but a much happier person.

Stephanie stopped as they reached the car; Richard Turner climbed out of the driver's side, but he did not approach her. John had warned him that Stephanie was an autistic savant and asked him not to crowd in on her or try and shake her hand. He explained that she would seem strange to him. He had warned him that when she was agitated or anxious, he would see her rock gently back and forth, but he asked him to try and ignore it. He also told him that when she spoke, she would probably avoid eye contact, and that she would speak in a flat monotone voice.

'Who is that man, John?' asked his sister, snatching quick sideways glances at the detective. Stephanie never liked to look at people directly. She tended to keep her head down, snatching quick glances. However, after just one glance, she could tell you everything about that person, every detail in their face in the most incredible detail, and every single detail of the clothes, their shoes. In fact, anything that her eyes passed over was stored in her memory forever.

'He's a friend, Steph.'

That was all that his sister needed to hear. If John said he was a friend,

nothing else needed saying. John sat in the back with Stephanie on the way to the office of Hanson Securities, chatting quietly with her. He explained about Tom and Karen, how a man had taken them, and that he needed her help to find them; that he wanted her to read all of the police files and look for any clues that might help them.

‘What am I looking for, John?’

John sighed, ‘This man has taken other people, Steph, but we can’t find any common link between them so... perhaps something that joins them all together, and something that joins all of the dots.’

‘I can do that. I like Tom, he’s nice and so is Karen.’

A shadow passed over John’s face as they pulled into the front parking bay of Hanson Securities, ‘Yes he is, Sis, he is.’

‘What will this man do to Tom, John?’ asked Stephanie, keeping her chin close to her chest as they exited the car.

John hesitated, coming to a halt outside the main doors to the reception area. How could he tell her about the man whom they believed had taken them, and what he was capable of?

Stephanie turned towards him. Even with John, she never looked directly at him other than with quick upward glances from her lowered head. The difference was that with John, the glances were slightly longer, sometimes up to two or three seconds of eye contact, but to him they were priceless, magical moments where his heart would swell with the love he felt for her. ‘Will he kill them, John?’

John waved Turner past with his cardboard box, pointing through the doors. He hesitated before answering his sister, not sure how much to tell her, but... he was about to expose her to all of the police files on the case, newspaper articles, and every scrap of information they could lay their hands on about this maniac. How much could she take, and how much was it fair to expose her to while trying to save Tom?

Then Stephanie did what she often did with her brother and caught him completely off guard. ‘It’s Cupid, John. Cupid’s got Tom and Karen.’ She treated him to a quick glance and smiled at his stunned expression. ‘I read and I have a TV. Let’s find Tom and Karen, John.’ With that, she turned and went in through the main doors.

John shook his head in disbelief, as he followed her in knowing that he had made the right choice. Ever since they had made the trip to South Africa,

she was becoming more independent, so much stronger. Now, she was doing something she had never done before. She was taking the lead, but John was in complete agreement with her. *Let's find Tom and Karen.*

## **Chapter Eight**

**13 February - 11:03  
(Life remaining 31 hrs 57 mins)**

**‘My name is Cupid.’**

The drive from his office had taken Cupid less than forty minutes. The rented warehouse sat in perfect isolation in the middle of a deserted airfield where a three-metre chain link fence and matching gates secured his absolute privacy. Cupid had rented them six months prior, linking through a series of companies he owned, companies formed in countries of the world that would make tracing the source of the rental impossible. Bank accounts had been opened and eventually bank accounts would be closed to protect his identity, so that he could continue his work, his mission in life.

Thanks to the heroine of anticipation, Cupid’s head was buzzing with excitement. As he closed the sturdy gate behind him, his perception of his own body so acute, so in tune with its functioning that he could literally feel the blood coursing through his veins, and sense each breath sliding into his lungs to fill the tiny air sacks within. He was on a high so sublime it could never be matched by any drug or any other experience that life could conjure up.

He had not seen the couple since he first selected them and sending Adam to track and eventually collect them. Adam, his loyal follower, had called him as he left the warehouse earlier to advise him that all was ready for his arrival, ready for the commitment as Cupid had named it. He liked Adam to be in sync with him, so he had made sure he understood the process. It was important; it was how he wanted it. First, came the selection. Solely, Cupid did this, because only he knew the parameters that were vital. Next came the gathering, this was done by Adam, but only after he had studied the couple, recorded their likes, their habits, and stepped into their lives. This was important to Cupid. He needed that information so that he felt part of them at the commitment ceremony. That would happen today. It was such a vital ceremony, for it was at the commitment that he would explain to the couple

his mission, explain why he had selected them, revealing to them the enormity of the journey they were about to undertake into immortality. It was vital that they glimpsed and embraced his vision, understood the gift that he was about to bestow upon them.

Inserting the key that Adam had delivered to his office, he turned it in the lock and then pushed open the heavy steel door that creaked loudly, the echo chasing away into the dark hidden places within the vast shadowy space. Reaching to his left, he found the switch, just as Adam had advised him. The darkness was chased away, as a milky cloud of light, blossomed ten metres in front of him, exposing two naked people strapped to a large steel table sitting in the centre of the cavernous hanger.

As Cupid paced towards them, the pleading, screams and the shouts started, because at the moment, his couple was not aware of the journey that they were about to embark upon, completely ignorant of the joyous gift he was about to lay before them. Once he had taken them through the commitment ceremony and explained the final coupling, then they would understand the magnitude of his mission. The simplicity would astound them. The prospect of spending eternity wrapped within love's warm folds and joined as one, one would cast away the shadows of fear and chase away doubt. The prospect of leaving the mortal world with all its lies, deceit, and suffering would empower and seduce them as they embraced the immortality of love.

*'Please... please, whoever you are, just let us go, we won't say anything. I promise, just let us go.'* Tom was trying every tactic he could think of as the unseen person paced up behind them. He could tell it wasn't the first man, because the steps were lighter, balanced, and unhurried.

Despite his best efforts to maintain her spirit, Karen hadn't spoken to Tom for over twenty minutes. She just sobbed quietly in the dark, seeming to have gone completely into herself. He had seen it first hand in combat conditions many times before, he knew the signs, knew his fiancée was slipping away into a world of mental paralysis, where the mind shuts down into protection mode when the real world becomes too horrific to deal with, and too much to bare.

*'We have money,'* Tom tried again, *'We have rich friends, powerful friends,'* he was freewheeling now, trying any tack, any angle.

Cupid remained silent as he lifted the stool that he knew Adam would



have left near the trolley. He now eyed the trolley, set with his beautifully crafted tools, tools that would work their magic for this loving couple tomorrow night. Picking up the stool, he carried it around to the front of the couple so that he was now at their feet.

Tom struggled against the head straps, trying to see the man who he was aware was moving around them. *'Who are you, why are you doing this?'*

Cupid placed the stool close to the table, and then moved six metres away to stand next to one of the sheer walls of the building. He had spotted a small shelf where the small camcorder would sit at a good height and angle to record the commitment and then the coupling tomorrow night. It was time for the ceremony. That thought alone was causing his skin to tingle with anticipation of the magical moment he was about to create. Taking a deep breath, he clicked the tiny remote control, setting the camcorder silently into record mode. Then he sat on the stool, still hidden from the couple's line of sight. Tom was strong and he struggled against the head and neck restraints, but was not able to lift his head from the table to see Cupid sitting near their feet. Reaching to his right, Cupid took a firm grip on the thick black cord hanging from the black sacking that was draped over the large mirror suspended over the couple. They were completely unaware of its existence, hidden from the couple, lost in the depths of the endless sky of black above them. Adam had prepared the cord so that one quick yank would strip the cloth away to fall to the ground at Cupid's side. He had never failed in his preparation. In fact, he had become more proficient each year and as Cupid yanked sharply down, Adam would have another successful year to add to his tally, as the black sacking fell away and Tom and Karen screamed in unison as their reflections stared down at them. The sight of their naked bodies strapped side by side to the table intensified the terror that was running through their veins, opening doors within their imaginations they dared not peek into.

Cupid waited; they would settle in a moment. Reaching forward, he found the hidden switch that he knew would be there. He pressed it and held it down. The small electric motor installed carried out its task easily, as the end of the table supporting their heads began to lift.

*'Tom!'* screamed Karen, *'What's happening?'*

*'It's alright, Karen, it's alright,'* soothed Tom, but it wasn't alright. It was far from alright.

As their field of vision increased, the top of a man's head came into view, extracting a small gasp from Karen. Then his face came into view and eventually his torso. The motor whispered to a stop. The man smiled at them with the pleasant smile, of a man who could be your bank manager or your neighbour.

'Hello, Tom, Karen. I can't tell you how pleased I am to be able to be with you both today.' His voice was soft, his diction clear and educated.

Both Tom and Karen had fallen into a kind of shocked silence, the disarming look and approach of this handsome man was in complete contrast to what was happening to them.

'*Who... who are you?*' Asked Tom, not really wanting to hear the answer, his mouth desert dry.

The man's smile widened as he looked at them, locking eyes with each of them in turn for several seconds. 'My apologies for not introducing myself,' he indicated, patting a palm to his chest, 'but my name...' Tom watched the man's face. The sick mother was savouring this moment, drinking deeply at some morbid pool of pleasure. 'My name is Cupid and I want to share with you this moment that I call '*The Commitment Ceremony*'. For the next five minutes, Cupid spoke with passion, with the light of absolute belief shining brightly in wide eyes.

Tom closed his eyes, wishing it could have been his ears, since then he would not have been forced to listen to Karen, as she shrieked in terror, over and over and over again. All hope of this being a kidnapping evaporated as the tiny flicker of a possible release was extinguished by the man's revelations as to his identity, which pointed to his intent. The moment Cupid had confirmed his name, hell's doors swung open and the fires within consumed all hope.

## **Chapter Nine**

**13 February - 11:10  
(Life remaining 31 hrs 50 min)**

**‘I’m coming for you Cupid, I will find you.’**

The already electrified atmosphere within the room that was being used as a command centre at the office of Hanson Securities went up a notch as Hanson entered behind Stephanie. Richard Turner had already made himself known and was unpacking his cardboard box.

The room they were using was about ten metres square and it contained no windows. At times, some of the missions taken on by Hanson Security needed the utmost secrecy and windows were a weak spot. At the centre of the room was a large flat Formica surface with a ring of high stools placed randomly around its outer edge. This was used primarily to spread out maps, documents and photos. Although during long operations, it became a place to eat, a dumping ground for endless coffee cups and on one occasion, for John as a bed. One wall was a giant white wall, used as a combination notice board to tape up papers, a place for using coloured markers to make notations and create time lines, and a place for displaying photos. Three desks against another wall had laptops, which were already powered up. Each was linked to sophisticated encryption software that would keep all information moving in or out securely. At the side of the three computer stations was a long table on which sat coffee and tea making facilities, a number of already opened packets of biscuits, sealed sandwiches and around twenty bottles of mineral water. A small fridge at one end contained milk, cokes and water for those who wanted it chilled. In the corner was a heavy steel door that led through to the staging area where John kept items of equipment that could arm a small militia. One corner of the large room was set out with a low coffee table and six comfy chairs. Here people could chill, if time allowed. A large flat screen TV on a third wall would be used to show CCTV from around the city, thanks to Blue Eagle, and allowed video calls to be made and to monitor news reports, should the need arise. John noticed it was already on.

‘You made good time, Donald,’ remarked Hanson, walking over to the fifty-something man, filling a disposable cup from a steaming coffee pot at the refreshment table. At first sight, Donald Myers looked like your favourite uncle or granddad. Closely cut silver hair gave away military roots, but the slight paunch told that the association was not recent. At a little over six feet, he was slightly shorter than John, but a firm grip warned that even at his age, he might not be a man you would want to tangle with. Lively attentive steel grey eyes told of a sharp analytical mind that would be needed over the next thirty-one hours.

‘Traffic was kind, John. We gonna get this ball rolling?’

‘Absolutely.’ Hanson was glad to have him with them. Donald Myers was a no nonsense, cut the bullshit kind of man, who could be relied on to keep a cool head when the going got tough. Hanson himself had worked with him on a number of operations where he had come under immense pressure, yet at no time did he see any signs of cracking, any signs that he was anything other than a rock solid consummate professional.

‘Okay, people, gather around,’ snapped Hanson, clapping his hands and moving to the large centre table. Stephanie moved to his side, keeping her chin onto her chest, but flicking glances to the other people in the room. Donald moved to the far side of the table where Jane joined him. Richard Turner placed the now empty cardboard box at one end and nodded to the others. ‘Okay, Donald, you know Jane my secretary, alias Girl Friday.’ Both nodded at each other. ‘And of course, you both know my sister Steph.’

‘Hi Stephanie,’ smiled Jane.

‘Good to see you again, Stephanie,’ spoke Donald softly.

John gave her an extra squeeze of reassurance as she flicked a wave at the two people she had met often. ‘This is Donald Turner,’ continued Hanson, briskly pointing a finger at the Detective Inspector. Donald has been the lead detective in the case of the serial killer Cupid for the last six years. We believe Cupid has abducted Tom and Karen. Richard will be working with us for an unspecified time as we try to track down this manic.’

‘Stephanie, I need you to read through all of these files to see if you can find any kind of link between the people mentioned in them, any common factor, any association that might help us, but...’ Hanson hesitated, his face reflecting an inner struggle, ‘there are photos in these files, facts that are not nice, you see... the man who is doing these things is sick and...’ Hanson

struggled to find the words that would prepare her for the horrors that he knew would be contained within those pages, sealed within photos that had captured the terror inflicted on six innocent couples.

‘I understand, John,’ whispered Stephanie, giving John a quick three seconds of eye contact. ‘If it’s going to help Tom, then I... I don’t mind.’

John picked up the first of the files marked 2007, led her over to the rest area, and sat her down. Despite what his sister had said, he was concerned. She was fragile and he hated putting her into this position, but he was convinced she could bring a dimension to their hunt that could be invaluable. Hanson patted her knee and moved back to the large centre worktable.

‘Alright people, this is how it is going to go. We are not going to find this creep by knocking on doors or searching down dark alleys. We are going to bring this man out from under his stone by the work done here in this office.’ Hanson slapped his hand onto the surface of the table to emphasise the point. ‘I will be on point on the streets following any leads you can uncover, plus any of my own, so you need to dig deep and feed me Intel, people.’

‘John’s right,’ backed up Donald, ‘We have to sift every clue, every scrap of information we have on this maniac.’

‘Yeah well, they’re pretty thin on the ground,’ added Turner, ‘I’ve been chasing this shadow for six years.’

‘Just takes one break,’ snapped Hanson.

Turner blushed, not sure, if that was a swipe at his own efforts at producing none. Hanson read the reaction, ‘No one is pointing fingers, Richard,’ he paused allowing the statement to sink in, ‘We need to start from ground zero, right here, right now is day one, hour one of our investigation.’ Hanson strode briskly over to where a large rectangular double-faced digital clock hung on the wall. One half was the actual time, the other half was for counting down from a set number of hours. It had been used many times during missions that were tight on time. He pulled back his sleeve to check his watch with the numbers also counting down. Quickly setting the timer in sync to his watch, he set it on its downward count. ‘In less than thirty two hours, this hunt will be over, in one way or another. But I shit you not, when I say that I will do anything in my power, anything,’ he repeated and catching each set of eyes as he hesitated, ‘to extend Tom and Karen’s lives beyond thirty two hours.’

The room fell silent. ‘Now hustle, Jane. Get Blue Eagle on video link,

please.'

'On it, John,' snapped Jane, moving to a keyboard below the big screen TV where Blue Eagle would appear.

'When you've done that, get on the net and pull up every newspaper article, and every book, ever written on Cupid.'

'You got it,' she replied, without taking her eyes from the keyboard she was working, as she attempted to contact Blue Eagle.

'Richard, I want you to get together with Donald and start working through the police files, check, check and re-check.'

Stephanie walked to the table and placed down the file marked Cupid 2006, picked up the one marked 2007, and then walked back to the coffee table.

Richard Turner frowned as he followed her travel. 'Thought she was going to read these files,' he questioned picking up the 2006 file.

'She is,' replied John, 'She's read that one.'

Turner's lop sided grin and snort questioned that, 'No... no way, I mean...'

Donald removed his jacket and slipped it around a stool, 'Come on, Richard, give me a real quick précis of whatever you do have on this head case.'

Turner walked to Donald's side of the large centre table, but not before he had picked up the 2006 file, and looked between it and Stephanie several times, his features a mix of disbelief and awe.

'*Hey people, give me the heads up,*' came a booming voice from the surround sound system linked to the flat screen TV. All heads turned to see a black silhouette on the screen. Only John Hanson knew the identity of Blue Eagle. 'Good of you to join the party, Sir,' responded John.

'*Would have been earlier, but I had to go to Tesco's, lads were out of tea bags.*'

Turner was about to say something, but a fleeting glance from Hanson killed the comment.

Blue Eagle moved swiftly on, '*Time scale, John?*' He used a minimum of words in recognition of the situation.

Hanson checked digital display next to the wall clock, 'Thirty one hours, thirty minutes, Sir.'

'*Affirmative, John. Send through relevant Intel that you presently have*

*and anything you think I need to be aware of. Short of a national emergency, I'm available for your input at any time. Keep me in the loop, guys.'* The screen went blank.

Donald and Richard put their heads back together. Jane began gathering newspaper reports and available books. Stephanie walked with her head down and placed the 2007 file on the centre table for the two men. Turner's jaw dropped open as he watched her walk away with the 2008 file.

John smiled as he watched her settle back down with the file. God, how he loved her. Turning to the heavy steel door, the smile faded, as he punched in a number on the keypad that only he and Tom knew. Stepping into the void beyond, an automatic sensor put on the lights on the high-reinforced roof above. It needed to be strong, as did the walls and the floor, since the items contained within could service a small war. As always, the smell of steel and gun oil set his heart racing. Moving quickly to a metal locker, he opened the door and pulled out a set of clothes that he used when in the field. He quickly stripped to boxers and began putting on the items from the locker. A lightweight strap harness with a soft leather sheaf that sat snugly between his shoulder blades followed a black well-fitting sweatshirt. The sheaf contained a Venom Testudo Knife, with a forprene handle and an 18 centimetre serrated double-edged blade. The knife and the bespoke sheaf weighed in at around 350 grams and sat snugly between his shoulder blades. A lightweight black over shirt followed this. A second light strap harness provided an under arm holster for a handgun. Next came, slim fitting black trousers that had a slightly elasticated quality and no flapping materials to catch anywhere, which was useful when using high kicks in combat situations. On the right leg, at thigh height was a slim pocket, inside which he slipped a telescopic baton, held in place by a Velcro flap. Once removed, it took one flick and it extended to twenty-one inches of hardened steel. Black socks and rubber-soled Magnum shoes followed, with the final item being a bomber type jacket that had multiple pockets with elasticated cuffs. Each item was checked, to assure they were secure. Laces were done up tight, and zips and flaps on pockets closed. Amongst those pockets, John carried various other items that remained in place at all times, ready for use, waiting for the opportunity to perform their function. In one, there were nylon wrist ties, in another, an emergency stitch kit for stitching wounds, and in another, a set of nylon knuckle-dusters for inflicting them; it was the ying and the

yang of his trade. Hanson's motto was 'better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it.'

Moving through the storeroom, Hanson began selecting more items from various shelves and cabinets. Once satisfied, he placed them onto a small flat surface and did a quick check of each one. Lifting his right foot onto a stool, he pulled up his trouser leg and placed the ankle strap, containing a cold steel Braveheart boot knife with a four-inch double blade, around his ankle. Special Velcro straps that John had fitted insured a secure fit if he had to jog or flat out run. A small black zippered bag, around eight centimetres long, four centimetres wide and two deep, contained a set of picks and needles that Hanson could use to pick any number of locks.

Next, he snapped a full clip containing eight rounds into his Sig Sauer P230 handgun. At a little over 16 oz in weight and just over 6 inches long, it was an easy to conceal weapon. Pulling down the zipper on his jacket, he slipped the handgun into the underarm holster, then he pulled the zipper back up to conceal it.

Checking his wallet for cash and credit cards, he popped it into his back pocket, closing the flap over it.

Finally, he placed the wireless bluetooth earpiece into place and married it to his Blackberry.

Checking himself in the mirror, he looked at his own reflection, took one deep breath and for just a second or two, looked himself in the eye before giving a curt nod that was like a trigger, he was now in action mode. Exiting the storeroom, he moved through the command room that had developed a low buzz of activity. Striding forward he noticed the 2009 file was in Stephanie's hand. It made his heart swell with pride and triggered a wry smile to form on his lips as his eyes fell on Turner who was busy with Donald. Between them, they had pinned up photos from the police files and put the coloured felt pens to good use, creating a time line that chronicled Tom and Karen's known movements until their disappearance. Also there were various scribbled notations that John never bothered to read, he had his own task to focus on.

'Jane how are you doing?' he asked coming up behind her.

'Just printing off a load of news sheets, John.'

'Give them to Stephanie as you get them out.'

'Will do.'



Hanson knelt down by his sister. ‘How you doing, sis?’ he asked gently. He couldn’t help but notice she was now rocking gently back and forth as she read.

Without lifting her head, she answered in a barely audible voice, ‘*He’s a bad man, John.*’

John swallowed hard; he shouldn’t be putting her through this. ‘You can stop if you want to, Steph. You don’t need to carry on with this.’

His sister lifted her head and looked at her brother, looking at him for a full five seconds, longer than she had looked at him since they were children. ‘We need to get Tom and Karen away from this man, John. You have to find them.’ With that, she lowered her head and continued to read.

John simply nodded. He was so proud of her, so proud. Standing, he moved quickly over to the two men deep in conversation. ‘Speak to me guys.’

‘You need to go to The Spinning Wheel in Park Walk Avenue, John. It’s the restaurant where Tom and Karen was last seen,’ John informed Myers. ‘Speak to any staff who might have seen Tom and Karen last night. We’ll feed you fresh Intel, as it becomes available. Blue Eagle is doing a background check on each of the staff and also the owners for any priors.’

‘*Go find this bastard, John,*’ hissed Turner, ‘*Find Cupid.*’

John strode back to his sister, kissed her lightly on the head, ‘I’m leaving now, sis. Jane will be looking after you, okay?’

Stephanie simply nodded without raising her head. John strode out of the building with purpose, locking the main door as he exited.

Setting the Sat Nav for the restaurant, he pulled out of the car park in his four-wheel drive people carrier; its blacked out windows ensuring a degree of privacy. As the command centre faded in the rearview mirror, he offered up a whispered oath. ‘*I’m coming for you, Cupid. I will find you. As sure as night follows day, I will find you. I just pray it’s before 7 p.m. tomorrow.*’

## Chapter Ten

13 February - 11:20  
(Life remaining 31 hrs 40 mins)

**‘We enter the world with nothing, we leave with nothing.’**

‘Please calm yourself, Karen,’ soothed Cupid, lowering the table. As it became level, he moved to stand behind the couple, stroking their heads with a lover’s tenderness.

Karen was whimpering. Her breathing coming in small snatches as Cupid’s hand stroked her brow. She closed her eyes, trying to put herself somewhere else, but the feel of Cupid’s palm touching her, caressing her as if he were her lover, her protector, kept her chained to this moment, to this place.

‘*Get the hell away from her you psychopath,*’ spat Tom, bucking against the straps. His explosion of exertion caused the veins in his neck to bulge and a trickle of blood to run down his ankle where the straps had chafed through his skin.

‘Tom, Tom, I’m here to help you and Karen,’ smiled Cupid, ‘I’m here to save you both.’ Cupid lowered his mouth close to Tom’s left ear and whispered, ‘*But if you disrespect me again, I will cut out your tongue and then hers.*’

Tom didn’t speak, never said a word, but his eyes shouted, and they spoke volumes.

Cupid stepped back and sat down on the stool, his smile warm and completely normal, as if he were someone visiting with friends. ‘Let me ask you both a question. Do you truly love each other?’

Tom could hear Karen to his left almost babbling, the fear consuming her, and in a way, protecting her within the dark folds of a near comatose state.

‘Well, do you?’ repeated Cupid, his mouth inches from Tom’s ear.

‘*We do,*’ croaked Tom through dry lips. He knew that saying nothing was not an option. This maniac was here as part of some sick prequel to their slaughter, and to fight against that might just speed their murder. He needed

to give John as much time as possible.

‘It’s a wonderful gift, Tom, to offer someone your love, your heart. Have you offered your heart to Karen, Tom?’

‘Yes, yes I have,’ whispered Tom.

‘And has she...’ Cupid hesitated, his voice becoming almost husky, ‘*Has she told you that her heart belongs to you, Tom?*’

Tom knew that somewhere in all this was the answer to why this lunatic was doing this, why he had set out on a horrific bloody quest that had taken six couples from their loved ones, from their families, and their friends.

Tom breathed in short gasping snatches; Cupid’s warm breath, fanning across his cheek.

‘I’m waiting, Tom.’

‘Yes, yes she has. We love each other so... for pity’s sake, let us go, don’t do this. We don’t want to die.’

‘But don’t you understand, Tom,’ snapped Cupid, suddenly straightening up, ‘this is only death on a physical level. I’m giving your love immortality. You will be bound for eternity.’

Tom gasped as the table rose once more, bringing their tormentor back into view. Then he watched transfixed, as Cupid spread his arms wide, closed his eyes and looked heavenwards, looking like an old time fire and brimstone preacher. The man was completely insane, totally, utterly, completely insane.

‘What a gift, Tom. What a thing of pure poetry, such beauty. Nothing and no one will ever come between you. Your love will remain pure, perfect.’

‘*It’s perfect now.*’

‘Only on a physical level, it can be corrupted and spoiled, Tom, but I will protect you from that. I will seal your love and encapsulate it for all time.’

‘Please, don’t do this. I’m begging you,’ croaked Tom, ‘*Let us go.*’

‘Oh you are going to go, Tom, trust me. You’re going to a much better place, a place where you will spend eternity at Karen’s side and her by yours.’

Cupid moved forward and pressed the hidden button bringing the table back down to its previous level position. He then turned, unseen by Tom and Karen, and he pointed a small remote control at the camcorder, bringing it to a halt. It would lie dormant until needed again, dormant until Cupid commanded it once again to capture the culmination of Cupid’s quest; the

coupling.

Once again, Tom could see his reflection and that of Karen at his side. He choked back a sob, trapping it in his throat, unwilling to allow this monster to see his grief.

Cupid strolled towards the door, feeling calm and relaxed, which he was. 'I will return tomorrow, Tom, and then you and Karen will make your final journey, your journey to paradise.'

Tom stared at the reflection of Karen lying naked at his side, feeling the surge and anger run through him at her degradation, '*Why... why did you have to take our clothes?*' Came his strangled voice.

Cupid paused, turned and said, 'Don't you see, Tom? It's how we come into this world. We enter with nothing, and we leave with nothing. That is how you will leave, with nothing, nothing but your love.' Then he was gone, switching off the light as he went, leaving the cloak of darkness falling over them once again.

'*Karen! Karen!* Tom tried and tried to get through, but the shield of her subconscious had formed around her. He squeezed her hand, and he called her name constantly, but she had now gone over the edge, hiding somewhere deep within herself.

The frustration Tom was feeling, the dread for Karen that was twisting within his gut, brought forth a cry bursting through his lips. It was the only release he had, and the only thing left in his control. '*Jooooohn! Jooooohn!*' Tom screamed at the top of his voice, screamed until he couldn't scream any more, until he was so hoarse he could barely speak, and through it all, Karen never made a sound, never uttered a word. His breathing collapsed into a panting rasp. His throat was stinging as he greedily sucked in each breath, but in his mind, he was still yelling, still calling for his friend, because he knew in his heart, felt it in his soul that John was their only hope. If any man on earth could find them, it was John Hanson.

## Chapter Eleven

13 February - 11:48  
(Life remaining 31 hrs 12 mins)

**'I always have tea and biscuits at twelve o'clock.'**

Turner stepped up next to Jane at the refreshments table and grabbed a disposable cup, 'Any coffee left?'

'Gallons,' she smiled, passing him the ever-working coffeepot.

'How does she do that?' he frowned, nodding towards Stephanie as the last of the six files was placed back onto the centre worktable.

'She's amazing, isn't she?' replied Jane, following his gaze. 'Do you know she can read two pages at one time, one eye on each?'

Turner looked at her waiting for the punch line. 'You're making that up, right?'

Jane shook her head, 'Seen her do it a number of times. Like I said, she's amazing.'

'What are we actually hoping she can do. I mean, it's a great party trick, but... what is she actually gonna bring to the table?'

'You mean apart from the files?'

'Was that a joke?' responded Turner poker-faced.

'Apparently not,' winced Jane.

Turner winked, 'Got you.'

'I'll give you that one,' smiled Jane, glad the detective had a sense of humour. As far as she was concerned it was the grease of life, it smoothed everything. 'Anyway to answer your question. John is hoping that his sister might be able to find some kind of common thread within the files, something missed when the files are all viewed in isolation. He knows it's a long shot, but...' Jane shrugged, but what she thought was what else is there but long shots.

'*You got those coffees, Richard?*' called Donald Myers.

'Caffeine's on the way,' responded Turner, heading back to the white board that was slowly filling with photos, notations and Post Its.

‘It’s twelve o’clock,’ whispered Stephanie, coming up behind Jane with her eyes glued to the floor.

Jane automatically looked at the large clock on the command centre wall. She tried, but couldn’t stop her gaze sliding across the digital counter next to it. Her heart jumped as she took in that it had already counted down over an hour and a half. Tom and Karen’s lives were slipping away before her eyes. Shaking her head, she managed to conjure up a smile as she turned back to John’s sister. ‘You’re right Stephanie,’ responded Jane brightly, ‘Time we were getting on, I suppose.’ Jane hesitated as Stephanie remained rooted to the spot and flicked Jane a quick searching look.

‘But, it’s twelve o’clock, Jane.’

Jane frowned, what was she missing? Clearly there was something about twelve o’clock, ‘What happens at twelve o’clock Stephanie?’

‘I always have tea and biscuits at twelve o’clock.’

‘Tell you what, you sit yourself down and I’ll bring you over a cup and a couple of biscuits.’

Stephanie didn’t move.

Jane had to think quickly, ‘Three biscuits?’

Stephanie nodded, happy now as she moved back to the seating area where she began reading the newspaper articles that Jane had printed out.

Jane was on her way back to her computer when the hotline allotted solely for John burst into life. Jane hit the loudspeaker button and heard Hanson’s voice crack the relevant silence like a whip.

‘Any new Intel?’ No chewing the cud, no greetings, no time.

‘John, it’s Jane.’

‘Speak to me, Jane.’

Stephanie stood and walked over and stared into the speaker perched on the central table, a wide beam on her face at the sound of her brother’s voice.

‘I got pretty much everything available from the net on Cupid, John. I’ve given it to Stephanie,’ replied Jane.

‘Okay Jane, I should be at The Spinning Wheel shortly. I’ll feed you any Intel that turns up.’ Hanson’s voice dropped to a soft tone, ‘How you doing, sis?’

Stephanie’s gaze never left the speaker, but had it been John in person, she would have only given him a few seconds of eye contact, ‘I finished reading the files, John,’ she beamed.

‘That’s fantastic, Steph, remember if you think of anything that links the couples, just tell Jane.’

‘I’m going to try really hard, John’.

Hanson smiled, ‘I know you will, sis, I know you will.’

‘Are you coming soon, John?’

‘I need to find Tom first, Steph, and then I will come and get you, but don’t worry, Jane will look after you.’

‘Jane, I forgot to mention, at twelve o’clock...’

Jane cut him off, ‘Tea and three biscuits.’

Hanson chuckled, ‘Thanks, Jane.’

‘You there, Richard?’ Moved on Hanson, his tone switching immediately back to business as usual.

‘Fire away, John,’ responded the detective.

‘You told me earlier that you had the city on high alert yesterday, waiting for a report of a couple dropping off the radar.’

‘That’s correct, what’s your question?’

‘Firstly, I assume there were no other reports of any other couples going missing?’

‘Correct.’

‘Give me a twenty second report of how you received the information on Tom and Karen.’

‘The owners of the restaurant, Colin and Andrea Bartlett, called to report a car abandoned in their car park when they closed shop at 10.30 p.m. Mrs. Bartlett gave us the number and we informed her that it belonged to a Mr. Thomas Wilson. She said he had been eating there with a woman that evening, but after receiving a call on her mobile, they left before finishing their meal. She said the woman seemed to be quite distressed after the call. Mrs. Turner placed that call at about 8.45 p.m.’

‘Did she see them leave?’

‘No but a waiter did. He saw them leave through a side door and head towards the car park at the rear of the restaurant after paying their bill. The waiter assumed they were collecting their car. Next thing that she knew was at 10.30 p.m., when she was locking up at the back of the kitchen, she spotted their car still in the car park. She called us and then the pieces started to slot together.’

“Where’s Tom’s car now?”

‘We had it transported back to a holding area. Not that we think it is going to provide any clues.’

Hanson nodded agreement. ‘Do either of the restaurant owners have any priors?’ checked Hanson.

‘No, but Blue Eagle has dug up something on Darren Simpson, the waiter working last night, who would have served Tom and Karen.’

‘Anything of relevance?’

‘He’s had a string of convictions for possession of every nasty substance from pot to crack cocaine. Last one was six months ago.’

‘Surprised he’s still holding down a job.’

‘Owner’s wife is his sister. I suspect that he is her cross to bear.’

‘Is there any CCTV footage from this restaurant?’

‘Unfortunately not.’

‘Any in adjoining premises?’

Turner went quiet.

‘Your guys checked, right?’

‘I... I can’t be certain,’ stuttered the blushing detective.

‘*Be certain,*’ snapped Hanson, ‘Call your people now and get back to me. Maybe you’ll get your first solid lead,’ shot Hanson. He closed the line as the restaurant came into view and prepared his game face. His watch told him that Tom’s life had dwindled to less than thirty-one hours; thirty-one hours to do the impossible, thirty-one hours to do what a whole team of detectives had failed to do, but that was what Hanson did, he and the impossible were old comrades, and he was about to re-new the friendship.



## Chapter Twelve

13 February - 12:05  
(Life remaining 30 hrs 55 mins)

**‘It is going to be a wonderful night, a truly wonderful night’**

Cupid snapped shut the padlock that looped through two links of the heavy chain which snaked around the two uprights of sturdy tubular steel. It made up the frame of the pair of gates, with their combination ensuring that the world remained on one side and his prize on the other. The only other person with a key was Adam. Loyal and trusting Adam, who never questioned his instructions, never questioned his calling to gather couples who had that most fragile, most precious of all things, love. He had it once. He had given of himself, and laid bare his soul to the woman he wanted to spend his life with, only to have her... Cupid found he was starting to shake at the very thought of her, so he cleared his mind and forced himself to focus on the ceremony, the coupling. Each year its sheer beauty, its magnificence reinforced his commitment to his mission to seal for all time that bond between two people who had made a vow, a vow that should never be broken, never be withdrawn.

Cupid’s mobile brought his mind back from the badlands of his reasoning to the present. He glanced at the caller ID before answering. ‘You have the liquid, Adam?’ asked Cupid after opening the line. He knew the answer would be yes.

‘I have it, sir.’

‘Good, that’s very good, Adam. Bring it to my couple and...’ Cupid hesitated, ‘and while you’re there, purify them. Check them again before I return tomorrow night.’

Adam knew what purify meant. It meant wash down the urine, often as not, the faeces, from the table where the couple was strapped.

Cupid’s tone carried annoyance, an accusation that his couple would do such a thing, but what did he expect. His couple, as he liked to call them, had been strapped down for over thirteen hours and they would remain so for

another thirty more before the joining. He knew he would have to purify them again, keeping them pure, prepared for the ceremony and their ultimate journey.

‘I will see that it is done, Sir.’

‘Do you have everything else, Adam?’

‘Yes, I have it all with me. I will deliver it later today.’

‘Excellent, Adam, excellent. It is going to be a wonderful night, a truly wonderful night,’ and with that, he was gone. The line closed, and another chapter in Cupid’s odyssey awaited to be written.

‘Yes,’ whispered Adam, laying down his own mobile, ‘A truly wonderful night.’ He glanced at the black holdall sitting in the foot well of the passenger seat of his car. Within it, sat the items that over the last six years he had come to know well. It contained items that at first were a mystery to him, but now they all held a purpose, a place in the jigsaw that was the joining, the ceremony that meant so much to the man who had been his savior, the man who had given him back his life. The most bizarre of all of the things the bag contained was the liquid, *lactated ringer solution*. His employer had taken great pains to explain how crucial it was to the ceremony. It was loaded with sodium, calcium and potassium. The combination helped create electrical activity if a heart was immersed within it. A heart, it had been explained to him, contained multiple pacemaker cells within its form that could be stimulated by the liquid. It could keep a heart beating for up to thirty minutes when removed from the chest cavity. Adam had seen it first hand on the first occasion six years ago. Following that first experience, he never stayed to watch as Cupid wielded his scalpels, preferring to wait some distance away until the screaming stopped. He would never voice his thoughts, but he knew his employer was insane. To do what he did, one would have to be, but Adam was loyal. He owed him his life and so he would close his ears, close his mind and shut out the screams, the horror. He owed the couples nothing, but he owed Cupid everything, and so Tom and Karen’s journey to the afterlife could not be avoided. As far as Adam was concerned, it was carved in stone and shortly, very shortly; it would be written in blood.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

**13 February - 12:02  
(Life remaining 30 hrs 58 mins)**

**‘All we need now is some remarkable information.’**

‘What is she doing?’ whispered Turner.

Jane followed his gaze to where Stephanie was shuffling back and forth in front of the large white board wall, the wall that just hours before was a blank canvas, but now had become a sinister portrait, a collage of notations and photos reflecting a six-year reign of terror of the serial killer Cupid. The photos ran from left to right, from 2004 through to 2009. Each set began with an A4 snap of each couple, photos that reflected normal life prior to being snatched by Cupid. Some were smiling, some were looking serene, some looked like passport shots, but all had that common theme, normality, life. The final shots of each were far from normal. The final shots were the ones that chilled the blood, transporting you into the dark world occupied by Cupid. These photos linked the couples, bound them together into a club where the required membership was simply love. In each, the couples were shown naked, strapped to a large flat surface side by side, hands held together for their final journey into oblivion, thanks to the tortured twisted mind of a maniac.

‘I’m not sure,’ frowned Jane, ‘but... my instincts tell me that we should give her a moment or two without interruption.’

Stephanie stopped in front of each group of photos, forcing herself to look up at each year; each set that culminated in the final shot of innocent couples

frozen in macabre unity, their lives extinguished at the perverse whim of a monster.

Donald Myers joined Jane and Turner at the refreshment table, ‘Rude to whisper, guys. Care to share?’

‘It’s John’s sister,’ responded Turner, nodding his head in the direction of Stephanie. ‘Jane thinks she might be on to something.’

Myers’s narrowed gaze took in the tall slim woman as she moved along the whiteboard, her head flicking up to take in the shots, and then quickly reverting to her study of the floor. ‘She’s a remarkable woman. John first introduced her to me around three years ago. I remember that he brought her to my office one day after I called him in on an urgent matter of national security. He was giving Stephanie a day out treat for her birthday when I got through to him. At the end of a lengthy meeting, I gave them a lift back to Stephanie’s apartment. Six months later, I met Stephanie and John again. During my conversation with John, Stephanie suddenly came up with the mileage of my car, down to the nearest tenth of a mile, from six months previously. Now I have no way of knowing if she was right, but... if I had written down that mileage on that day six months prior, I suspect it would have matched exactly the number she gave me.’

‘You can’t be certain of that,’ responded Turner, his scepticism clear.

‘I first met her about a year ago,’ joined in Jane, ‘since then, I’ve seen her at least twice a month here at the office. She can tell you on any chosen day when we’ve met, what I was wearing, what type of shoes, lipstick colour and how I had my hair,’ Jane chuckled softly, ‘first I knew about the biscuit thing though.’

‘Okay, so she has an eye for fashion,’ conceded Turner, ‘but I reckon a lot of this hype about savants is just that, hype, something to sell newspapers or add the spooky factor to a documentary.’

‘*Stephanie, would you help me for just a moment,*’ called Jane gently to the still pacing woman.

‘Okay Jane,’ came the monotone answer.

Jane guided her gently by the elbow to where the two men were standing, ‘Stephanie, would it be okay if I just ask you a couple of things?’

John’s sister kept her head down, her eyes continuing a study of her feet, and simply nodded.

Jane carried out a quick bit of finger work on one of the laptops and

placed it on the refectory table facing Turner. He slipped on a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles, hanging from a chord around his neck, and studied the screen. It showed a calendar for the year 1854 and prompted a look of surprise. Jane smiled and turned to Stephanie. ‘Can you tell me what day it was on 4 February 1854, Stephanie?’

Stephanie spoke so close to the end of Jane’s question that it was like one continual sentence, ‘Saturday, Jane. It was a Saturday.’

Jane enjoyed the stunned look on Turner’s face. ‘How about 22 November 1854, Stephanie?’

The speed was the same, the answer instantaneous, ‘Wednesday, Jane.’

Jane grabbed the laptop and brought up her office diary. A few taps brought up September the previous year. Jane scanned the days, ‘Stephanie, what was I wearing 12 September last year, when you came to the office?’

‘You had that cream blouse on, Jane, with jeans and those light blue trainers. Have you replaced that button on your blouse yet, Jane?’

Jane smiled, ‘No, I haven’t gotten round to it yet. I think I was wearing light pink lipstick that day Stephanie, wasn’t I?’

Stephanie shook her head, ‘You didn’t have any lipstick that day, Jane. You had a lip sore, remember?’

Jane blushed, ‘Of course, I remember now.’

‘Is this helping, John?’ questioned Stephanie, her expression one of innocence.

‘In a roundabout way,’ assured Jane, stroking her arm, ‘thank you for answering my questions.’

Stephanie gave Jane a fleeting upward glance and a smile that was pure contentment, contentment that she was helping her brother. ‘Can I go now?’ she asked, her eyes returning to the floor.

‘Yes, of course. Thank you, Stephanie.’

The three watched her move back to the whiteboard, continuing where she left off, shuffling along, flicking quick glances at the information that was spread across its surface like horrific graffiti.

Turner shook his head in disbelief. ‘Okay, okay, I have to admit that was pretty impressive, but...’ he paused, ‘how does that help us track down Cupid?’

Jane shrugged, ‘I think what John is hoping is that, unlike a computer that needs a code or a piece of software to achieve a certain task, his sister’s gift

will be able to filter through the bulk of data we have and come up with something that ties these victims together. Some kind of thread, no matter how tenuous, that links these people.'

'You were right, Donald,' admitted Turner, his gaze drifting across to the whiteboard, 'she truly is a remarkable woman. I've heard of savants with so called incredible gifts, but...'

'You thought it was hocus pocus.'

Turner blushed, 'No, no, I just thought it... well, I don't know what I thought, but seeing that up close was incredible.'

The conversation went on as the three of them sipped coffee and dunked biscuits, each needing to take a few minutes away from the intensity of sifting through the available information that was providing nothing beyond what they already knew. It was frustrating and mentally draining. Each was acutely aware that, somewhere, possibly close by, Tom and Karen were being held captive and their only hope of survival was the three of them, this strange girl pacing the floor in front of them, and a man called John Hanson.

'Okay,' snapped Myers, tossing his empty cup into a slowly filling waste bin, 'I need to speak to Blue Eagle.'

Jane lifted the laptop back over to the computer area, a thought suddenly coming to her as her caffeine fix seeped into her blood stream. When trawling the net for newspaper reports on Cupid for Stephanie to study, she had subliminally noted that one reporter had written more stories than any other journalist had. Why was that, posed her subconscious? It was probably nothing, but she decided to check it out. Why not, she surmised, she had nothing else to occupy her. Facts and leads were thinner on the ground than honest estate agents. So any spark, any fragment of anomaly had to be pursued. Maybe, he had information that had been overlooked. She could not, would not be looking back when this was over, with any shadow of doubt that she had not done everything humanly possible to get Tom and Karen back safely. Jane pulled up special search software that Hanson Securities had at their disposal and typed in the journalist's name, Giles Fuller, alongside one word, Cupid, and hit search.

Once again, Turner felt the heavy cloak of guilt fall about his shoulders. It was becoming a comfortable fit after seven years of failure and more difficult to shrug off with inner arguments of no leads to work with, other people not doing their job, and luck not being a lady, so many other

justifications that he had lost count. No matter how he tried to spin it within his head, he was the lead detective. It was his responsibility and it frightened him, because he felt completely impotent, completely helpless. Every night, when he closed his eyes, the souls of each couple invaded his dreams, wakening him in a cold sweat. He had to find this monster, had to bring justice to his victims, and then maybe, just maybe, he would find peace. Maybe he would enjoy sleep free from demons of guilt, and from screams for revenge. Moving over to the rest area, he picked up the six crime files, files he had read so many times that the pages had become crinkled and dog-eared, there had to be something within those pages, some shard of information that would crack open this case. It had to be there.

Stephanie walked back and forth in front the white board, not really looking at its contents any longer, her mind spinning like a tumble dryer. The rhythmic pacing to and fro helped her focus on the endless facts that she had absorbed in the last few hours, which were bouncing randomly around within her mind, a mind that was running like no computer ever could. She could pull the smallest detail out in a second, the most mundane fact from the deep, turbulent pool that was the history of her life. If it had passed before her eyes or travelled within earshot, it was snared within her memory forever. Now she was asking for something new, now she was asking her brain to sift, stack and divide the facts it held. Now it was running free, running like no software that had ever been written. In many ways, software was easier, because within it was written a code. You could press a certain key or group of keys and the action that followed would happen one thousand times out of one thousand, predictable, logical. With the mind of a savant, there were no such guarantees, no such solid boundaries of action. There was no doubting Stephanie's incredible memory, but what she was asking her brain to compute now was not just the regurgitation of facts, but the sifting of those facts to find a common thread. She was hunting for that link, the link that might give John the help he needed to find Tom. She liked Tom. Tom was always nice to her. She stroked her forehead feeling deep lines of concentration with her fingertips. She knew there was something among the files she had read, something that refused to surface from the deep pool of data that filled her head. Suddenly, it was there. Suddenly, like a tiny light at the end of a long dark tunnel, it came into view, but it faded just as quickly, snuffed out like a candle in the wind of uncertainty, disappearing back into

the murky depths, before she could capture it, and before it took form. She knew instinctively it was important to John, but she also knew she had to be patient. It would surface again and then she would be ready. John would be so proud of her when she had it and Tom would be saved.

Each person at the Hanson Security's command centre was lost in deep thought. Each was working their own path, paths that all led to the same goal, saving Tom and Karen. None of them allowed the demon of failure to approach the firelight of their endeavours, keeping it on the outer rims, hidden in the darkness where it scampered around testing their resolve, and their determination. It would remain there, barred access until the clock on the wall of the command centre, all too quickly, counted down the life of the couple by reaching zero. Then it could have centre stage. Then all hope would be lost, the beast would have won again.



## Chapter Fourteen

13 February - 12:05  
(Life remaining 30 hrs 55 mins)

**‘A bad man’s got him, John, really bad.’**

John had spent ten valuable minutes persuading the owner and his wife that he was legitimate, and that he was officially involved with the disappearance of the couple from their restaurant the previous evening. The couple complained that they had been questioned last evening for over an hour when the restaurant closed, and that there was nothing more they could add, but Hanson was persuasive. Seven minutes of methodical questioning of Colin and Andrea Bartlett followed, each one carefully phrased, each one approached from many angles, in an effort to gather every tiny shard of detail. Each answer washed around inside his head as if he were panning for gold, but not a single nugget was revealed; not a scrap of information of any consequence was uncovered. Each minute was a trade for information, because time was his currency. He had bartered and received nothing in return, apart from confirmation that the couple had seen Tom and Karen leave the restaurant the night before at around 8.50 p.m., after the woman had received a call on her mobile, a call that had clearly caused Karen some distress according to the Bartlett couple.

John checked his watch, seventeen minutes traded, little received in return. ‘I believe your brother Darren was working last night, Mrs. Bartlett?’

Andrea Bartlett immediately looked embarrassed, her wringing hands reflecting her discomfort merely at the mention of her brother. ‘He, um... he’s not here at the moment,’ she responded with a tight smile. ‘He *normally* works evenings.’

Hanson didn’t like the word *normally* or the inflection surrounding it. ‘I need to speak to him.’ John’s tone left no room for misinterpretation of how important this was to him.

Colin Bartlett spoke up, ‘Look we may as well be honest with you, Mr.

Hanson.'

'Call me John, and by all means be honest, it will save me from coming back to see you a second time unnecessarily.'

Colin Bartlett swallowed involuntarily. Something in the narrowing of this man's eyes made the prospect of him coming back a second time unnecessarily a "must avoid" scenario. 'Darren is something of a...loose cannon, he...'

'He's a drug addict, Colin. Let's not try and dress it any other way,' interrupted his wife. 'We've been struggling to get him clean for nearly three years, Mr. Hanson.'

Hanson could not help noticing the sagging shoulders and the tired expression as she spoke of her brother. Clearly, the struggle had come at a price.

'Why do you keep him on?'

'He's my brother, and for all his faults, I love him. Without this job, he would be dead in a month. While he's here, I can support him.'

'I need his address so I can speak to him.'

'He's um... he's not at home.'

'How do you know?'

'I call at his flat every morning, I have a key.'

'You called this morning?'

'Yes.'

'And he wasn't there?'

'No, no he wasn't.'

Hanson didn't have time to waste, but he also didn't want to miss a potential lead. He had to decide if Simpson was worth pursuing. 'I'm told that he saw the couple leave last evening.'

'Yes, we all did, Mr. Hanson, but Darren was closer.'

'Show me exactly where he was standing.'

Colin Bartlett walked over to a table that was set for two next to the side door. 'Darren was standing here taking an order. The man you are asking about, Tom Wilson, had been to the counter to pay his bill, and then he left in a hurry with his companion, using this side door.'

Hanson moved to stand beside the restaurant owner and he looked through the large picture window next to the side door. It gave a clear view along the length of the driveway to the area of parking for patrons. 'How

long was your brother taking the order, Mrs. Bartlett?’

‘I... I’m not sure what you mean?’

‘Did the couple just have a bowl of soup each or was it a large order. Did they have any wine. Did they know what they wanted or did they dawdle?’

‘It was a large order,’ responded her husband, snapping his fingers suddenly, ‘I remember Darren complaining about it.’

‘So he would have been standing here for some minutes?’

‘Yes, probably a good ten minutes.’

‘Is the driveway well lit at night?’

‘Yes, we have three halogen lights that come on at dusk.’

Hanson looked from the table to the end of the driveway. He could imagine Darren Simpson standing here fourteen hours previously, bored and looking out the window as Tom and Karen walked towards their car, only they never reached their car. Somewhere along the length of this driveway or in the parking area, they were snatched. The couple sitting at this table would have been engrossed in the decision between prawn cocktail and pate, so they would have their heads bent down. ‘Were Tom Wilson and his partner a walk in or did they pre-book?’

‘It was a booking,’ responded the wife, ‘I remember putting out the reserved note at 8 p.m.’

‘Yes that was odd,’ frowned her husband, remembering, ‘Mr. Wilson telephoned around 6.30 p.m. to confirm his table, and then called again about half an hour later to confirm again.’

Hanson ran that through his mind for just a second, ‘Did you take both calls?’

‘No, I took one,’ answered his wife.

At that instant, Hanson knew this was an ambush. Someone knew that Tom and Karen were coming to this restaurant and called to confirm that fact. One call was probably from Tom and possibly, the other from Cupid. The call to Karen’s mobile during the meal was to lure them out to the car park where they were bound to have parked their car. Tom didn’t do taxis and Hanson suspected that if someone had been observing him, as clearly they had been doing, they would have known this. There was no on-road parking here, so it was a safe bet that they would use the rear car park. The thing that bothered Hanson was that while Tom was nowhere near as big as him, he was well-trained. It would have taken a good man to take him down,

or a lot of luck and surprise. ‘You said that your brother wasn’t at his flat this morning. Had he been there since last night?’

Andrea Bartlett looked pale as she shook her head, the first glistening of tears forming at the corners of tired eyes.

‘He’s done this before,’ sighed her husband, placing a comforting arm around his wife’s shoulders. ‘He would just disappear for a few days, then resurface full of apologies and promises to get clean. I’ve tried his mobile dozens of times, but it’s switched off.’

‘There’s something you need to know, Mr. Hanson,’ sniffed the wife, pulling away from her husband and reaching for a tissue from her handbag. ‘Darren came to me last week and asked to borrow money, said he needed to pay off a debt. I knew what that meant. It was to pay his supplier, so I refused. He had asked me for five thousand pounds.’

‘*What!*’ snapped her husband, ‘but you never said a word,’ he accused.

‘*I told you I refused,*’ she retaliated sharply, ‘What does it matter?’

‘You think this has something to do with his disappearance?’ probed Hanson.

‘Yes, yes I do,’ came the reply between sniffs, ‘last time he got in over his head to his supplier, he was made to work off the debt by running drugs up and down the country for a week. I think that might have happened again.’

‘I need the name of his supplier.’

‘We, um, we don’t know who it is,’ took over Colin Bartley all too quickly.

‘You’re a bad liar, Mr. Bartlett. Now I need a name.’

‘Mr. Hanson these are vicious people,’ responded his wife.

Hanson had seen fear in all its guises and he was seeing it now. ‘I guarantee you that both of you will have nothing to fear from these people.’

‘You can’t watch us twenty four seven, Mr. Hanson.’

‘That won’t be necessary.’

‘If we give you a name and he finds out, he’ll... he’ll kill us.’ Andrea Bartlett had gone deathly pale. Years of working unsociable hours, dealing with her drug addict brother had robbed years from her features. Hanson couldn’t help but feel for her and her husband. They seemed like decent people.

Hanson leaned down and whispered into Andrea Bartlett’s ear. ‘I promise you, on my life,’ Hanson paused and allowed her to look deep into his eyes

where truth lay, ‘that you will never be bothered by this man.’ Two minutes later, he was walking out of the restaurant with a piece of paper. Written on it was the name of her brother’s supplier. As he strode towards his car parked in the rear car park, he pressed a button on his earpiece. Three blips brought him into the command centre through the speaker system.

‘John, what you got for us?’ responded Myers.

‘I need an address on a Frank Boyce, probably has form as a supplier.’

‘I’ll take that one,’ cut in Turner, moving to a phone on the centre desk.

‘You have anything new for me?’ asked Hanson.

‘You familiar with the phrase diddly squat, John?’ came in Myers.

‘More than I would like Donald,’ Hanson’s voice softened, ‘How you doing, sis?’

‘John, are you coming to see me?’

‘Soon, sis, I promise. Is Jane looking after you?’

‘I had my biscuits, John.’

‘Good, good. Make sure you save me some.’

‘Have you found Tom?’

There was a slight pause, a chilled silence filling the air within the centre, ‘No Steph, but I will, trust me.’

‘A bad man’s got him, John, really bad’

‘I know, sis.’

For several seconds an eerie silence fell over the command centre. ‘There’s something in the files, John, but...’ Stephanie hesitated, ‘it, it won’t come. I know there’s something.’

Hanson could hear the strain corrupting her voice, she was becoming stressed, ‘Jane, why don’t you make Steph a cup of tea and get her to sit quietly for a while.’

‘Yes, of course.’ Jane turned and guided Stephanie to the sitting area before approaching the refreshments table.

‘Oh, Jane, Steph will want...’

‘I know, John, three biscuits.’

Hanson smiled to himself.

‘John, are you intending to visit this guy Boyce?’ came in Turner.

‘You have an address for me, Richard?’

‘I’ve got some advice.’

‘Which is?’

‘Don’t go. The man is a certified psychopath. He lives in a virtual fortress where the word is that he runs his drugs and prostitution empire. Got form for just about anything resulting in pain or death that can be inflicted on a human being.’

‘Why hasn’t he been closed down?’

‘From what I read on his file, he never keeps any drugs anywhere near him or at the compound, and his girls are run by heavies on the streets. He’s slicker than snot, always careful to keep layers of single brain cell paid muscle between himself and the sticky end of the shit stick of his business. Seems, he’s been raided six times at the compound in the last two years without one shred of evidence. He got some ambulance chaser to pursue a successful complaint against the M.E.T. last year for harassment. Didn’t get the half million pounds he was seeking, but he got something more valuable.’

‘Which was?’

‘Breathing space, John. He made the force very nervous about tackling him again without ironclad proof of his activities. I spoke with one of the detectives at the M.E.T. familiar with our friend Boyce. He said he’s certain that he has been involved in a string of murders in the last ten years and responsible for a whole series of abductions from eastern bloc countries of young girls used to fill the demands of his clients. He fills them with drugs to make them pliable and dependant.’

‘Nice.’

‘Like I said, John, some men need to be avoided.’

‘You’re right, Donald, and Boyce is about to find that out. Give me the address.’

## Chapter Fifteen

13 February - 14:35  
(Life remaining 28 hrs 25 mins)

**‘This could take some time, Tom.’**

*‘Toooooom, Toooooom,’* Karen’s scream snatched Tom from a sleep enforced by exhaustion.

*‘Karen, I’m here, I’m here, It’s alright, I’m here.’* Tom was both horrified and relieved to hear Karen’s voice. He had tried to get through to her for hours without any response apart from snatched sobbing. Tom ignored the pain of the chafe burns on various parts of his body as he struggled to see Karen. The straps were not giving a fraction, and the more he twisted and turned, the more skin he lost as the wide strapping rubbed back and forth against him, each time he tried to see his distraught fiancée.

*‘Tom, whaa... what in God’s name is happening to us? I... I thought I was going to wake up and... and all this was going to be just a nightmare, but it’s not it...’* Karen’s strangled voice trailed away with the snatched sobbing returning to fill the darkness.

*‘Karen, you have to hold on, help will come. You just need to...’* Tom never finished the sentence as the metallic slam of a bolt being slid open filled the dark void around them like a crack of lightning. The screech of hinges telling them that one or both of the men from earlier had returned. A distant click brought light, and a soft whistle brought the answer that Tom had posed himself. The gorilla, as Tom had labeled him in his head, had returned, but what about Cupid?

*‘Tom!’* screamed Karen, *‘Stop them Tom, stop them.’*

*‘Hold on, baby,’* shouted Tom, *‘hold on.’*

*‘Touching,’* sneered Adam, suddenly filling Tom’s world as he leaned over the strapped man, with his face only inches away.

Tom refused to break eye contact with the brute, his warm breath telling him the man had eaten something laced with garlic recently.

*‘Whoa, Tom, I can see a lot of hate in those eyes,’* he smirked, *‘Gonna see*

a whole lot more when I give your squeeze here a bed bath,' he winked, disappearing from Tom's field of vision.

*'Keep away from her, you bastard,'* ranted Tom, removing more skin as he thrashed wildly against his bonds.

Adam whistled, relaxed and happy in his work, as Tom screamed. He placed several sachets of Ringers fluid into the small fridge that he had placed near the sink the week before. It would remain there until needed the following evening. He turned and filled the clean bucket that he had bought with water from the single tap. The once white battered sink beneath it was sporting a large dirt-filled crack. He had stopped at a small corner shop on his way over and bought the bucket and a new sponge. He was looking forward to cleaning Karen as his employer had instructed. He could just hose the couple down, because his employer always made sure that the buildings that he rented for the couplings had running water and that Adam always brought a hosepipe with his equipment. However, today he decided that he would hose down the man, but give some personal attention to the woman. He would enjoy that, but not as much as the reaction, it would cause in the man, Tom. He didn't like the defiant look in the his eyes. He needed to do something about that.

Tom could hear the huge man lumbering back towards them. Suddenly a stream of cold water blasted down over Tom, causing him to gasp and Karen to cry out in shock as the freezing water splashed over her. After twenty seconds or so, the water stopped as suddenly as it had begun. The gasping pair listening as the brute behind them whistled as he pulled the hosepipe back across the floor. Tom snorted water from his nose and blinked wildly trying to remove water from his eyes.

The whistling stopped, 'Bath time, Karen. I bought a nice new sponge just for you.'

*'Please don't let him touch me, Tom... Tom.'*

Tom clenched his teeth together and closed his eyes, but it couldn't stop the acid hot tears that squeezed from the corners and ran down his cheekbones. He listened as the giant man sloshed something into water and then jumped as Karen screamed. A high-pitched anguished sound reached every dusty corner of the vast space, and every cobweb hidden amongst the dark voids of the raftered roof.

Adam worked the sponge over the screaming woman. 'This could take



some time, Tom,' he leered.

Karen screamed again as Tom shook from head to toe, the frustration raging within, the burning tears continuing to fall. In his entire life, he had never wanted to kill anyone as badly as he wanted to kill this man. If the Devil himself showed up right now, he would sign away his soul in a heartbeat to have one minute alone with this monster.

Tom continued to cry. Karen continued to scream.

**Chapter Sixteen**  
**13 February - 15:45**  
**(Life remaining 27 hrs 15 mins)**

**‘Mr. Jekyll would take over and try a different tactic.’**

Turner’s warning ran through Hanson’s head once again as he looked down on Frank Boyce’s compound. *‘Don’t go, the man is a certified psychopath, lives in a virtual fortress.’* The description was accurate. It was indeed a compound of sorts. Clearly at one time, it had been a small farm surrounded by open fields that probably had been worked by generations of previous owners. Now a two-metre wall topped with razor wire and security cameras surrounded it. Hanson wondered what the previous tenants would have felt knowing that the place, which was once their home, a place where the land was tilled and worked to provide crops to feed the surrounding villages, was now a retreat for a drug baron with a hand in human traffic and prostitution.

The small copse that Hanson had selected to park, occupied an elevated position above the compound giving him a perfect view down onto the large stone built main house which acted as a hub for the surrounding four smaller outbuildings and what was clearly a stable block. His two-hour study had shown him that while the setup looked impressive, strong and formidable, it was in fact, all show. At least, it was to Hanson’s trained eye. His study showed a blind spot where the CCTV cameras back and forth swing, left a narrow corridor unguarded, where a man could slip through unseen by hidden eyes tucked away in some dark room. There was also the fact that during his study, he had only seen one lone guard patrolling the inside perimeter. Patrolling was probably misleading, as that would suggest some kind of diligence and alertness, two descriptions clearly alien to the slouching stroll he had witnessed by the overweight youth with the wires trailing from his ears, indicating an iPod or something similar. From his study, he guessed there were upwards of six men within the compound, but it could easily be more.

Hanson watched the last stubborn rays of gold slip behind the horizon to the west and started down towards the back boundary of the compound. It

was there that he would make his entry. There he would slip through the narrow corridor, then he would have his opportunity to ask Frank Boyce certain questions, politely and quietly. If he failed to answer, politeness would be aborted. Mr. Jekyll would take over and try a different tactic.

.....

Stephanie rubbed her head trying to ease the tension that was causing the pain behind her eyes. She walked back and forth in front of the long white board that was now so full of scribbles and notations placed by Myers and Turner that it resembled a subway wall. She was frustrated that she had not been able to find the thread, the link that she knew was so very important to John. She wanted to please her brother, because he did so much for her. She stopped, suddenly a single word sprang into her mind. '*Finger,*' she whispered.

'Finger?' asked Jane, coming up behind her. 'Is there something that you've found?'

Stephanie's head lifted for a fleeting second to look at Jane and then up to the white board. 'I... I'm not sure, but...' she stroked her temple, her deep frown a reflection of a turmoil within a brain not wired like other peoples. She had read each of the police reports on Cupid's victims. She could pick out from memory any one word from any line on any page of any paragraph, yet she was finding it impossible to get her brain to view and correlate the information she had taken in with a different format, to sift out the link she knew in her gut was there.

Jane led her by the arm to the sitting area, 'You need to take a break, Stephanie.'

'But John's waiting and... and Tom's in trouble and...'

'And you need to step back for a moment,' cut in Jane, who could clearly see that John's sister was becoming extremely anxious. 'Why don't you let me get you a cup of tea?'

Stephanie's tight features relaxed. She liked tea, tea and biscuits, three biscuits, not two or four, but three. She remembered that was how many her mum always gave her, but her mum was dead now.

Jane noted Stephanie checking her watch, 'I know it's not twelve o'clock Stephanie, but... let's just make an exception, shall we?' Jane watched her

inner struggle, 'I'm sure John would say it was okay.'

Stephanie actually smiled at the mention of her brother. Jane could see she was winning her over.

'Well, I...I suppose it will be alright, Jane.'

Jane guided her to a seat, patting her on the knee as she eased down. 'Just relax for a while, Steph. You'll feel much better, trust me.' As she was about to turn and head for the refreshment area, Stephanie suddenly grabbed her hand and began rubbing her wedding ring. 'What is it, Steph?'

She waited as John's sister closed her eyes, her grip tight on her hand, her fingers, stroking her wedding ring. 'Fingers, Jane, it's the fingers.'

'What about the fingers, what is it, Steph?'

The troubled savant shook her head, her eyes still tightly closed. 'I... I don't know but... I know it's the link, I think it's what John needs.'

.....

Adam felt a warm glow inside as he drove away from the airfield. It was generated as much by the man's wild thrashing as he washed down the woman, as the stroking of her body. Adam didn't like the man Tom. He wasn't like the others who were all reduced to blubbering wrecks. No, Tom was defiant, even aggressive and Adam took that as a challenge to his control. However, she was truly beautiful; the temptation to take her was great, but not as great as the fear of Cupid that quashed those urges. He'd seen the man go to work on six couples and done so in such a way that still sent shivers through him. The way he shut out the screams and the pleading as he went about the coupling, as he called it, was terrible to watch and so Adam didn't. He remained close by, but could not bring himself to look. He knew that his employer was insane, but he didn't care. The man had saved his life, given him confidence, and treated him as a friend when he never had any. So once a year, he would do what was asked of him, and then shut it out until that day came again. Valentine's Day, the day for all lovers over the world to give their hearts to each other. Cupid had let slip one night after too many drinks that he would never love again. That the woman he had hoped would be his partner in life had broken his own heart, but on Valentine's evening seven years ago, she had told him that their relationship was over, and that she wanted to be free. Cupid had raged that she would never be free, and that she would never give her heart to another. Adam remembered that

he had nodded at what he thought were the right moments, and then shook his head when appropriate. Since that night, his employer had not mentioned the woman again and Adam did not feel inclined to ask. To do so would risk seeing the temper that had unnerved him flare again.

Adam wasn't looking forward to 7 p.m. the following day, but nonetheless, he would do what was asked of him, then revert to the simple daily chores set him by his employer, driving him when asked, collecting merchandise and many other tasks that did not really tax him too much. The most enjoyable thing he looked forward to was the daily workout at the gym that he and his employer never missed. Well apart from the period leading up to Valentine's night each year, that is. There they were equal, brothers bonded in pushing their bodies to excessive limits and beyond as they sought the unreachable goal of sculptured perfection.

The mobile phone beeped into life, dragging his mind away from the thoughts of Cupid and the events that would be taking place the following evening. The music from the radio ceased as the mobile, to which it was married, took control of the in-car speakers. Adam knew before any voice floated out whom it would be. He only had one number logged in. Only one person ever called him for Adam had no friends, no family that he knew of. Cupid had become his friend and his family, all rolled into one.

'Yes Sir.'

'Adam, have you purified?'

Adam smiled, 'Our couple is clean, Sir.'

'And the liquid?'

'In its place in the fridge.'

'I want you to return tomorrow at 2 p.m. to check them. I will arrive at 4 p.m. for the ceremony.'

Check them, thought Adam, read as sluice them down again. He leered as he drove, one would be sluiced, and one would be sponged. 'I will be there at 2.'

'Your loyalty on my quest, means a lot to me.'

Adams chest swelled at the comment, 'I owe you everything, Sir.'

'You're a good man. I will see you at the coupling.'

The line went dead and the music refilled the car's interior. A good man, thought Adam. He could not in all honesty say the same thing about Cupid. He was strong and determined, frighteningly single-minded on his quest,

generous to a fault with Adam, but a good man. No, that was not a description he could give to him. He did have a description for him, but one that he would never use in front of him, because Adam believed he was the devil himself. Adam had also done his deal, signed his name by association with Cupid. So whatever the price, whatever the consequences, he was prepared to pay. He began to whistle softly as he drove at the thought of tomorrow's sponge bath filling his mind and making him tingle, but the greater pleasure was the thought of Tom screaming, as he went about his chore with diligence, paying attention to every inch of the woman.

## **Chapter Seventeen**

**13 February - 16:45  
(Life remaining 26 hrs 15 mins)**

**‘Things were about to get messy.’**

Hanson pressed his back against the outer wall of the compound. The sun had finally relinquished its hold and dipped over the far horizon, silhouetting the stark mix of beech and birch trees in naked black outline against the rapidly fading pale blue sky. The ping in his ear told him that someone at the command centre was calling through. Keeping his voice low, he opened the line. ‘What do you have?’ His voice was crisp, expectant. It said this is not a question; it is a demand, so give me something.

‘John, I did some digging into the newspaper coverage on Cupid.’

‘And?’

‘And there is something about one of the journalists that you need to know.’

‘If I need to know, Jane, then you’d better tell me, but make it the short version.’

‘Name is Giles Fuller, works for The Daily Scout. Not a big hitter in the newspaper world, but has a respectable fifty thousand daily circulation.’

‘Shorter, Jane,’ snapped Hanson, keeping his attention tuned to any sound beyond the razor wire-topped wall.

‘He’s getting the drop on every other paper each year on Cupid. His story is out on the streets before any other paper. We’re not certain yet how he is doing it.’

‘Do we have Fuller’s current whereabouts?’

‘Not at present.’

‘Find it. I’m about to enter Boyce’s compound. When I’m done here, I’d like a word with Fuller. How’s Steph doing?’ he asked, his tone changing.

For a second, Jane considered lying to her boss. He had his hands full and didn’t need any more pressure, but she decided against it, he wouldn’t thank her. ‘She’s getting tense, spending a lot of time pacing back and forth in front of the white board rubbing her temples. I’ve made her sit down and take a break.’

‘Sounds like she’s onto something.’

‘She... she mentioned fingers. Probably has no relevance, but she said she was sure it was the link you’re looking for.’

‘Nothing Steph says has no relevance, she doesn’t waste words, trust me.’

The sound of lazy shuffling footsteps some distance off caught Hanson’s attention. ‘I have to go. No more calls ‘til I call in.’

Hanson closed the line and turned quietly to face the wall. A quick glance at his watch told him that there was a little over twenty-six hours of life remaining. Closing his eyes, he locked onto the sound of the footsteps on the far side of the wall. He visualized that fat boy was about ten paces away, coming from his left. Earlier, Hanson had spotted a fallen tree against the boundary wall close to where he had spotted the narrow corridor, not covered by the CCTV cameras. The trunk was as wide as Hanson’s broad shoulders and angled slightly upwards towards the two-metre high wall surrounding the compound. The razor wire was attached to vertical brackets bolted to the inside face of the wall and extended approximately fifty centimetres above the top of it. It meant the top of the stone wall at around thirty centimetres, could be used as a step to jump over the wire. If someone were able to hit the fallen tree at a run and spring off the top of the wall, they could easily clear the wire. The drop on the other side would be around two and a half metres. Not a problem for Hanson, but from the moment he made his run until the moment he hit the ground on the far side of the wall, he would be creating noise. For three seconds, fat boy would be aware of something happening.

Hanson eased back, avoiding loose stones and branches. Five paces would be sufficient. He wanted to time his run so that the guard on the other side of the wall was level with the fallen tree. That way, as he landed on the other



side, he would drop behind him. He would have turned by then; the sound of Hanson's run, hitting the tree and the top of the wall unavoidable. Surprise would be his weapon, closing in on the youth in less than a second of his feet hitting the ground on the far side. The youth's position and reaction would dictate how Hanson took him down. That was a variable, going down wasn't.

He took several deep steadying breaths as the youth's footsteps got closer. Adrenalin was kicking in, feeding his muscles, his heightened hearing picking out a smoker's cough from the far side of the wall that the youth was near.

Three, two, one. Hanson leapt forward, hitting the fallen trunk at speed, running up the length to the end, and then springing upwards with powerful legs, catching the top of the wall cleanly with his right foot, and he cleared the razor wire with ease. Hanson hung in the air for a beat. He only had a split second of time to make his assessment. It needed to be quick, because below him slightly to his right was fat boy, half turned towards him, with his eyes wide in surprise at the sight of the large black silhouette coming towards him. However, what concerned Hanson the most was the Rottweiler at the youth's side, a thick chain leash linking the two. The dog had heard him way before the youth and even before Hanson's feet had made contact, the dog was turning, preparing to lunge.

Things were about to get messy.

## Chapter Eighteen

13 February - 16:55  
(Life remaining 26 hrs 5 mins)

**‘God help Frank Boyce.’**

‘Where is John at present?’ asked Blue Eagle, his voice distorted to a tinny ring by the loudspeaker.

‘As we speak, he’s infiltrating Frank Boyce’s compound.’

‘God help, Frank Boyce.’

‘I doubt he’ll get much assistance from that quarter,’ snorted Donald Myers.

‘I have the information that Jane asked for earlier. Is she available?’

‘I’m here, Blue Eagle.’

‘Fuller, he’s going to be at the opening of a new night club called The Dragos in Fulham at 7 p.m. this evening. Apparently, he’s covering the event for his paper. The word is, it’s going to be the new mecca for the rich, the famous and the beautiful people.’

‘I missed out on all three of those,’ sighed Jane.

‘From what I’ve seen, you pass the third requisite with flying colours,’ responded Blue Eagle.

Myers and Turner enjoyed Jane’s discomfort as she blushed, bright red. ‘Um... well, thank you for that, but you’re speaking blind. I look dreadful.’

‘That green sweater suits you, Jane.’

Both men looked at Jane’s sweater.

‘Camera to the left of the clock,’ informed Blue Eagle, ‘Smile gentlemen.’

All heads turned to look at the camera.

‘Okay enough, have you got that address, Jane?’

Still staring at the camera, Jane gathered up her jaw. ‘Um... yes, yes I’ve got that. I’ll pass it onto John when he calls in.’

‘Call me when John is clear of the compound, I’ll try to get access to Fuller’s email accounts by then.’ The screen went blank.

‘Big brother!’ Threw in Turner.

Myers was about to respond, when a soft screech pulled all of their attentions to the whiteboard where Stephanie was running a thick black marker pen along the surface linking the women in each of the six sets of photos.

‘Fingers,’ she whispered, without turning, ‘it’s the link.’ Turning suddenly, Stephanie did something Jane had never seen her do. She lifted her head and treated them to a beaming smile beneath dazzling green eyes. It told them that she had found the link for John, for there was no doubting whom the smile was for.

As quickly as she had lifted her head, the moment was gone as she resumed her study of the floor. Jane wished that John could have witnessed that fleeting few seconds when something of magic had taken place. When a beautiful young lady emerged from her prison. She made a note to be sure he knew.

‘What is it, Steph?’ encouraged Jane, stepping quickly to her side, ‘What is it you’ve found?’

Stephanie looked at Jane for a fleeting second, her features now calm, enigmatic even, ‘The answer, I’ve found the answer.’

## Chapter Nineteen

13 February - 16:55  
(Life remaining 26 hrs 5 mins)

**‘Broken nose, some lacerations and a gunshot wound.’**

Hanson drew his telescopic baton while still in the air. A quick flick extended its full twenty-two inches. As he hit the dirt, the dog leapt, barking wildly and pulling the fat youth stumbling towards him in his exuberance to get to him. The youth’s sheer weight slowed the dog and allowed Hanson a slim window of opportunity to act. The large dog was scrabbling at the ground, its body low, as it tried to get purchase on the loose soil to start his run. Hanson surged forward, placing a foot directly onto the dog’s head, using it as a stepping-stone to leap over the snarling dog, and hitting the youth with a blow to the temple as he closed in on him. The youth immediately dropped to the ground unconscious, acting like a human anchor with the dog’s chain wrapped firmly around his wrist. As Hanson landed beyond the fallen man, he took two quick steps forward, as the dog turned and lunged at him, his vicious jaws getting to within inches of his face, before the dead weight of the youth dragged him down.

*‘What the hell you doing to that dog, Jumbo?’* came a lone voice from the darkness near the house.

Hanson skirted the dog that was now spinning and yanking at the chain in frenzy, his jaws dripping saliva as it attempted to reach him. The voice from the darkness was getting nearer, the footfalls telling him it was just one man. Hanson melted back into the darkness as the man approached, and then stepped up silently behind him as he materialised from the darkness. Placing a powerful arm around his neck, he held him easily in a chokehold, the shorter man’s feet skidding across the loose soil and his hands scrabbling behind him as he spluttered noisily. As he fell into unconsciousness, Hanson let him slip to the ground. He quickly removed two nylon ties and secured the man’s hands and ankles so that the ties intertwined, making walking difficult when he came around. He would like to have tied the youth attached to the dog, but that was an option not open to him. Listening for a few

seconds, he judged there was no further immediate threat, so he moved swiftly towards the main house. He knew there were more men from his earlier observation and he knew he would probably have to neutralise them before he could get to Boyce. In total, he had counted six, including the overweight dog walker, and the guard now sleeping peacefully behind a tree. All he had to do was find the other four while he still had the element of surprise.

The stone built main farmhouse was an impressive two-storey structure, topped with slate grey tiles and sporting new windows, which while in keeping with their Georgian appearance, were clearly UPVC replacements. Surrounding it were five other smaller buildings that Hanson had studied earlier. The largest of the group was clearly a stable, blocking the wind, giving confirmation as it gusted occasionally to lift and deliver the soft snorting of horses within. It seemed Boyce liked to play the country squire in between peddling drugs and prostitution, thought Hanson. He discounted this building along with three others that had no windows or signs of light. A pair of timber garage doors giving its purpose away fronted one of the three. Two others looked like storage sheds, which left the last one holding Hanson's interest. It was slightly smaller than the stable block, but bigger than the garage. Its two large windows facing the main house, spilling light onto the gravel driveway backed the theory that at least one, or more, of the remaining four guards were inside.

Sliding quietly up to the building, he placed his back to the hard stone wall and listened. From within, he could hear a television set clearly tuned to a quiz show where questions were being asked. Several male voices were offering answers from within, one or two were correct. A quick snap glance through one of the windows flooded his brain with information that he correlated within a second or two. Four men were seated at a square table in the centre of what looked like a living room. A flat screen was fixed to the wall opposite the door. The four men multi-tasked as they played cards and threw in the odd suggestions as the quizmaster churned out questions for cash to a hopeful contestant.

The door was slightly recessed into the thick stone walls, so by stepping up close to it, he was hidden from view of anyone looking through either of the windows, even if they pressed their face up against the glass. Closing his eyes, he breathed deeply two, three, and four times. His brain gave him a

brief flicker, a show of the sequence he was about to initiate by knocking on the retro style UPVC door. One man would probably rise to answer his knock, the other three, he hoped, would take partial interest, their attention split between the door, the TV and the card game. Hanson lifted a large hand. The man answering the door would receive a fierce jab with the heel of his hand to the point of the nose. It would almost certainly break, dropping the man to the floor, putting him beyond the need for Hanson's attention for several seconds. This would be all the time he would need to deal with the other three men.

He rapped on the door with three quick taps.

*'Doors open, you pratt,'* came an impatient voice from beyond.

*'Yeah and leave that frigging dog outside. Damn thing keeps farting,'* came another. The resulting laughter faded as Hanson banged the door again.

*'If that's you pissing about Jumbo, I'm gonna insert my foot up your backside,'* warned a growling accented voice, shaped by a lifetime spent on the seedier streets of London. The door opened, allowing Hanson to match the voice to a face, which presently held an expression of wide-eyed shock. Hanson then stepped quickly forward, matching the heel of his hand to that same face. The muffled crack was the result that Hanson had planned. A broken nose would bleed freely; eyes would water to the point of blurring vision. Man one was out of commission for the time frame he needed to deal with the three gorillas that were slow in assimilating what had just taken place.

The man stumbling back with the smashed nose was broad, a little over six feet tall with a battle-scarred face that was like a road map of a life chosen on the dark side. The blow took him over onto his backside and eventually ignited the three remaining men to jump to their feet, each chair skidding back over onto the parquet floor. All three were in shirtsleeves, their jackets draped over the chair backs, which had allowed Hanson to confirm that they were not wearing guns. First man to get enough brain cells to work in sync and operate his feet, lumbered towards him, a huge haymaking swing with a fist like a sledge hammer arcing down towards Hanson's head. Hanson timed it to perfection as he stepped in to the closing man, easily blocking the blow with a powerful forearm and snapping in a rock hard fist into the man's open solar plexus. The man let out an exaggerated gasp as he dropped to his knees grasping his chest as he tried to get his lungs to take a breath.

Man three was now coming around the table, screaming to give himself courage. Hanson pulled the telescopic baton from his pocket, flicked it open and delivered four vicious swiping blows to the man who stopped in his tracks at the first strike that immediately opened a six-inch laceration to the left side of the man's temple and cheek. The final strike to the man's right knee sent him to the floor writhing in agony.

The whole sequence from the moment he entered the room had taken less than seven seconds. Man four, the smallest of the group, simply stared in wide-eyed disbelief at the carnage that had just taken place. These were men he had seen tackle three or four opponents each. One was an ex-cage fighter. They were seasoned fighters, yet one man had just taken them out as if they were schoolboys.

Hanson pointed the baton at the man, 'Where's Boyce?'

'*Main house,*' he snapped immediately, his arm jerking up to point towards the large stone building.

Hanson pointed to a chair, 'Sit!'

The man complied instantly. '*Please don't hit me.*'

Hanson pulled the man's hands behind the chair and tied them with a nylon tie. He then quickly and expertly tied the still writhing men at their wrist and ankles. Moving to the door, he turned and gave the stunned group a rock hard stare as he brought a finger to his lips, then he was gone. They had only met John Hanson two minutes before, and none of them wanted to renew the acquaintance.

Hanson was not surprised to find the large double doors of the main house open. Boyce clearly felt safe here inside the razor-topped boundary wall. Stepping quickly through, he found himself in a large hall that smelt of wood and polish. To the left, a broad timber stairway wound around giving access to the upper floor. There were two closed doors to the right of the hall. Both seemed to be original, battle scarred with shiny brass knob handles, both in harmony with the original timber panels that covered the walls, panels that had looked down on generations of honest, decent men and women who had worked this farm. Now they looked down on scum, low lives, and filth. Pushing random thoughts aside, he focused on the door at the far end of the hallway that held his interest. Slightly ajar, it allowed a fan shape of light to

splash across the floor. It also allowed a muffled smattering of voices that Hanson quickly filtered down to two people, both men. He moved quietly up to the door taking in the heartbeat of the house, listening for any other sounds that would indicate any other people in the house. There was none.

The sounds within pointed to an office, the whirr of a computer, a printer. His view through the crack of the door confirmed his thought, two men. Both were away from the desk, so Hanson could not be sure which one was Boyce. He had to know this as this was the man who would need to be coherent; the other was going to take a nap. One of the men was a little taller than Hanson was, and a lot broader. Short sleeves indicated powerful arms that Hanson did not particularly want to feel around him. The other man was a good four inches shorter than he was, with a physique that looked as if at one time, it might have been toned and muscular. Now it spoke of a liking for food and lack of exercise. He suspected this was Boyce, but he needed to be certain. He stepped through the door into the room with a disarming smile on his face. ‘Mr. Boyce?’ he asked, looking between the two men.

The shorter man’s head flicked in response. Hanson was right; this was Boyce.

‘*Who the hell are you?*’ growled the larger man, closing in rapidly across the gap.

Hanson waited until the larger man had committed himself, his leading right foot hitting the ground at the same instant Hanson’s left foot swung round in a blur, sweeping the heavier man’s foot from under him, and sending him into an arm whirling stumble, exposing the man’s right side of his body to attack. Before entering the room, Hanson had slipped the nylon knuckle-dusters onto his right hand; the first jabbing punch was to the man’s kidneys. It dropped him to his knees with a thud. A second controlled blow with knuckle-dusters to the man’s temple put the lights out.

Boyce was on the move, lunging towards his desk drawer, but as he looked up, his hand pulling it open, he was staring down the barrel of a Sig Sauer P230. Not that he would have known the details, but he knew a gun when he saw one. ‘*Do you know who I am?*’ Spat the overweight sweating man, his features reflecting hatred but no fear, and his voice a snarl of contempt even in his present situation.

Hanson didn’t answer, he simply pointed the barrel of the gun to the seat behind the desk.



As Boyce sat, his hand flashed forward and hit an intercom button, ‘*Get in here now, all of you.*’

Hanson’s calm smile as he sat in the chair on the opposite side of the desk was not the reaction Boyce had expected. ‘You need to look at your staffing policy, Boyce. Most of your men are sleeping on the job.’

The first hint of doubt, the first flicker of fear, took control of the drug dealer’s features. He had never seen Bruno, the giant man lying on the floor to his left, put down by any man. Also one of the men in the living room was an ex-cage fighter with an unbeaten record. Yet here was this man sitting calmly in front of him as if he had strolled in through a park. ‘You came here to kill me, get on with it, creep,’ his defiance was exaggerated, masking the fear swelling up inside him.

‘That’s one of the options, if you don’t give me what I want.’

Boyce relaxed. There was a deal to be done here; this wasn’t a hit from a rival dealer. ‘Best spit it out then.’

‘Darren Simpson.’

Now the drug dealer was truly confused, ‘*What the hell do you want with that loser?*’

‘My business.’

‘Mine as well, he owes me money.’

‘Not my concern.’

‘It is if you want Simpson,’ smirked the now comfortable drug dealer.

‘You’re starting to annoy me,’ whispered Hanson, slipping his gun back into its holster. The chilled edge to the man’s voice in front of him and the slight narrowing of the eyes was not wasted on Boyce, but he’d made a mistake. Boyce had a gun in the drawer to his right and despite the fact that this man was clearly dangerous; putting his gun away when he was two metres away on the other side of a desk would be his downfall. It took Boyce less than half second to reach down and pull open the drawer. A further half second and he reached towards the chunky black pistol. He never got his hand around it, because Hanson had guessed right on the gun. As the drug dealer’s eyes had dropped to the drawer, Hanson had moved. Vaulting onto the desktop, he slid across the shiny surface, his foot slamming into Boyce’s chest, sending the drug dealer crashing over onto his back, still sitting in the chair. Hanson slid off the far side of the desk, his left foot coming down on the wheezing man’s chest, pinning him to ground with his full two hundred

and fifty pounds.

Hanson checked his watch, 17.10 p.m., 25 hours and 50 minutes of life remaining. He leaned down, took a firm grip of the drug dealer's shirtfront, and dragged him easily off the floor. Righting the chair, he shoved Boyce none too gently into it and slid the desk phone across to sit in front of the now pale man. 'Call Simpson, get him in here.'

Boyce tried to hold his nerve. He could still get a deal out of this, some compensation. Two things happened in quick succession that made him change his mind. Bruno the giant that Hanson had dispatched earlier, suddenly staggered to his feet, shook his head and roared as he surged towards them. Hanson drew his Sig and fired a shot. The bullet smashed through the muscle just above the knee, collapsing him screaming in agony to the floor. Hanson turned to Boyce, but didn't have to say a word. The drug dealer snatched up the phone and punched in a number, and after four seconds, he spoke.

'Darren, it's me, get yourself back to the farm... *I don't care what I told you!*' Screamed Boyce, '*Get here.* He... he's coming in ten minutes,' stammered Boyce, staring down at his writhing bodyguard.

'Put your hands on the desk,' instructed Hanson, moving around to the far side of the desk.

The drug dealer went white, shook his head keeping his hands tight under his armpits. '*But... I... I did what you asked,*' he pleaded.

Hanson stepped forward his voice barely above a whisper, each word separated by a seconds pause, 'Put... your... hands... on... the... desk.'

The shaking drug dealer whimpered as he placed his trembling hands palms down onto the desktop.

'Left or right?' Hanson asked calmly.

Boyce's deep frown gave away the turmoil within, 'I... I don't understand.'

In a swift practiced move, Hanson reached over his shoulder, drew out the Venom Testudo Knife with the 18 centimetre blade. He flipped it easily in his hand to get a reversed grip and drove the point deep into the desktop between the dealer's hands, causing him to scream like a girl, as he yanked them back, returning them to the safety of his armpits. '*It's the choice that I'll give you of which hand to keep, if I ever have to come back here again,*' hissed

Hanson. 'You've never heard of Darren Simpson,' warned Hanson, his eyes narrowed to razor slits. 'Say it.'

Boyce's lips fluttered soundlessly for a second or two before the answer came, '*I... I never heard of Darren Simpson.*'

Hanson pulled the knife free, reached over his shoulder with both hands, slipping the knife back into its sheaf in a fluid movement. Then he did several things in quick succession. First, he tied Boyce to his chair with nylon ties. Next, he slashed open the trouser leg on the bodyguard to expose the wound. He quickly stuffed the entry and exit hole with gauze and tied a tourniquet just above the wound, ensuring it was tight. 'Release the pressure a turn if the ambulance isn't here within five minutes,' he instructed to the groaning giant.

Finally, he called into the command centre at Hanson Securities, as he exited the compound to wait for the arrival of Darren Simpson. 'Send an ambulance to Boyce's compound,' he instructed Jane.

'What are they dealing with?' asked Jane.

'Broken nose, some lacerations and a gunshot wound.'

'On it, John. I assume none of those injuries are related to you?'

'If infliction is classed as related, then yes.'

'Ouch,' winced Jane.

'Something else I want you to do, Jane...' Hanson paused, as a car pulled up at the compound gates and a medium height, thin balding man exited, 'Hold on, Jane.'

Hanson walked over to the man, 'Are you Darren Simpson?'

The man hesitated, looking around for Boyce's bodyguards or the Police. He knew something wasn't right here. '*I... I might be,*' he stuttered.

Hanson knew it was Simpson. 'Okay, I've got Simpson, Jane, I'll call you back in five.'

'Get back in your car,' instructed Hanson, pointing at Simpson's battered Skoda.

Darren Simpson didn't know who the man was, but what he did know was that he was big, and spoke with a tone indicating there was not a second option that came free of an unpleasant attachment.

On the short trip to where Hanson had parked his car, he explained who he was and why he wanted to speak to him. He also explained that he would not be hearing from Frank Boyce again. That this was his opportunity to

break away from that life, and to repay his sister for the loyalty and support she had given him. Hanson gave Simpson the address of Hanson Securities, assuring him that there were people there waiting for him and that once he had given his help, he would be free to go.

Driving away, Hanson called the command centre, 'Jane, Simpson's on his way. When he gets there, get Donald and Richard to question him about the night at the restaurant. Simpson seemed a little sketchy when I spoke to him, so get Donald to try out his hypnosis thing.'

'Will do, anything else?'

'Yes, call Simpson's sister at The Spinning Wheel, and let her know her brother is alright.'

'Okay, John.'

'Also tell her that Boyce has developed amnesia as far as her brother is concerned.'

Jane snorted back a chuckle at how her boss might have induced that memory loss 'There's something else, John.'

'Let's have it.'

'Steph believes the link we have been looking for is the fingers of the dead women.'

'Is that it?'

'At the moment. She's becoming frustrated at not being able to explain herself. Just keeps saying it's the fingers.'

'Okay, just keep an eye on her. She'll work it through.'

'Will do.'

John checked his watch, 17.45, 25 hours and 15 minutes remaining. 'What do you have on Fuller the journalist?'

'He's going to be at The Dragos night club in Fulham at 7 p.m. to cover the opening for his paper. There's an early evening bash for celebs before opening to John Q. Public later in the evening.'

'Give me a post code.'

Jane came back with the information she had already to hand.

Hanson entered it into his Sat Nav, 'Fifty minutes travel time. Should be there for around 18.35.'

'I've got Blue Eagle on the line, John. He needs to speak to you urgently.'

'What do you have for me, Sir?'

'I've been doing some digging into Fuller's e-mail accounts, cross-

checking with his editorials, and also a book he's written relating to Cupid over the last six years. There's also some relevant information from Richard Turner that has made something abundantly clear.'

Hanson could feel the tiny hairs on the back of his neck begin to prickle. Blue Eagle's tone warned him that something of significance was about to be given over. 'Care to share?'

As Blue Eagle gave him his news, Hanson slammed on the brakes, bringing his car to a skidding halt, the words replaying in his head.

*'Fuller's getting his information from Cupid.'*

## **Chapter Twenty**

**13 February - 18:50  
(Life remaining 24 hrs 10 mins)**

**‘Brenda Stiles had ceased to exist.’**

Cupid liked this time of day. The office and workshops were closed, the cleaners had done their work, not to his own office, of course. He cleaned that himself. It was a golden rule that his secretary imposed with unflinching diligence that no one was allowed to enter his office when he wasn't there. That way, his inner sanctum remained just that, a sanctum and tonight of all nights that was important, because on this night, the night before Valentine's, he would relive the taking of the heart promised to him by Brenda, his one and only true love. For two glorious years, he had devoted himself to her, sharing with her every aspect of his life, his business plans, his hopes and dreams for their future. He helped her choose her clothes, her apartment, educated her about good food and wines, and shared exotic magical holidays with her, and then the bombshell. She called him to say that it was over, that there was not a future for them, said he was suffocating her with his control. He had begged her, told her his love should not be seen as control, but a reflection of his depth of feeling. Eventually he had to accept that it was over, that she had lied when she had told him that her heart was his forever, so he left her little option. He took what was promised. He took her heart. Now it was his for eternity, as she had told him it would be. Now, he was able to hold it close each day, since it remained frozen in time within the Perspex cylinder in his inner sanctum. He was convinced, it contained the love she had felt for him before she became misguided, confused as to her true feelings for him, but none of that mattered any more, for he had what was promised to him and his quest had begun.

His mission in life was to show to the world that a proclamation of devotion to another was a fragile thing, a thing of beauty, a thing of purity that could only be protected by death's folds that would tie two people for all time, for infinity. The newspapers had failed to recognise his quest. Even

Giles Fuller had only printed snippets of the messages that he had sent to him each year, just snatches of what he was trying to get the world to understand. He had selected him as the one reporter that he would contact following each year's coupling, to reveal that another couple had been joined by their love for all time, never to be parted, never to have to suffer as he had. So each year, within hours of the coupling while Cupid was still on a high, he would e-mail Fuller from a random internet café, a different one each year, and tell him what he had done, tell him who he had coupled and where they could be found. Fuller's work had attracted Cupid. It showed that he was able to think outside of the box, to be able to view from all angles so something of an understanding had built up, it developed through Fuller's editorials where all others simply condemned him as a maniac, a madman. Fuller had put forward that there had to be a reason behind such acts, something that Cupid was trying to explain. Cupid realised that Fuller could only write so much without revealing that he was in direct contact with him, but one year he would demand that he write more, a full explanation. The book Fuller had written entitled, 'Cupid's Quest,' had come close, expressing many points that he had made to the journalist, but Cupid wanted more. He needed people to look beyond the physical aspect and look to the spiritual message he was trying to evoke, the purity, the power of true love transcending all things physical, transcending time.

Cupid's mind re-focused as he placed the cylinder down with trembling hands onto the shiny desk surface. He allowed himself a second or two to drink in the beauty of the heart suspended within, before stepping back into the hidden chamber where he removed the framed photo from the wall, placing it with great reverence next to the cylinder. Switching on his desk fan, he slipped a latex glove onto his right hand and began to unscrew the lid of the container. This moment was the one he craved each year. It was the one time that he would allow himself to reach in through the formaldehyde liquid and touch the heart that had touched his. It could only be for seconds, because even with the desk fan blowing the fumes away from him, it would not take long for his eyes to react to the embalming fluid. Nevertheless, those few seconds while he looked down on the framed photo of his beloved Brenda, his mind would erupt with a kaleidoscope of wonderful memories, memories that, like this heart, were his to keep, to savour and relive for the rest of his life.

As always, his hand shook as he dipped it into the fluid, the familiar jolt running through his body as he came in contact with the heart, quickening his own, as he stared into the smiling face with the dancing eyes of his one true love. As the memories continued to cascade through his head, he withdrew his hand and sealed the lid back into place. Quickly, he peeled off the glove and dropped them into a plastic bag, which he sealed with a tie wire, and then he opened the window fully to dispel the strong odour. By morning, after the use of some powerful air freshener, there would be no trace, no indication that anything unusual had taken place. The framed photo of the smiling Brenda would be returned to his secret room along with her heart, his heart.

He sat at his desk facing the still open sanctum taking several deep breaths. The hidden lights illuminated the framed photo with the cylinder below in a soft golden glow. It created the look of a shrine and that's what it was to Cupid. Here was where he came to replenish his commitment, and to reaffirm this odyssey that he had set for himself. Closing his eyes, he thought back to the night that he confronted Brenda at her flat, the flat he had chosen; the flat he had furnished and decorated. He heard again the surprise in her voice as he used his key and walked in through the front door.

*'James, what are you doing here?'*

*'We need to talk this through, Brenda. You're... you're clearly confused.'*

The tall slim raven haired woman turned her back on James Holt and walked back along the corridor to the spacious lounge, as she answered, *'I am not confused and your being here will not change my mind.'*

*'You just need to clear your mind,'* he pleaded, pacing after her.

*'That's exactly why I can't be with you anymore,'* she snapped, wheeling on him, *'You've cleared my mind of all my own thoughts, my own choices and filled them with yours. I don't know who I am anymore.'*

James Holt recalled the two hours of back and forth arguing that spiralled along with his temper and then came that moment, the comment that resonated through his head like rolling thunder. Each word, each syllable bounced around like an out of control laser.

*"I don't love you anymore, James, I don't love you."*

He remembered challenging her to deny what she had told him so many times. That her heart would always be his and that it was filled with love, love that belonged only to him.

*'Things have changed; I don't feel the same way anymore. We should*



*move on.'*

However, James Holt didn't move on. In his head, he knew that Brenda was simply confused. Possibly others had filled her head with these crazy ideas, so he did what seemed the most logical thing. He took what was promised, he took Brenda's heart. She kicked and thrashed as he dragged her to the bath, but he was strong and he effortlessly subdued her. He strangled her there and cut out the organ that he knew still carried her love, his love. He held it, still warm in his hands, and shed tears at the realisation that it was his forever. Her heart and all of the love it contained was his. The experience was of such simple purity, he knew right there and then, he would have to share that most ethereal, magical moment with others. He remembered looking at the clock as he held his beloved Brenda's heart close to his chest. It was 7 p.m., it was Valentine's Day, and it was the birth of Cupid.

Over the next week, Holt dissected the body, disposing of it at various locations. It was just a husk. It meant nothing any more. All that was Brenda was within the heart he now possessed. She had no family that she kept in touch with and it became clear over the following weeks that friends she had were all aware of her intention to move on, so her disappearance did not surprise them. Holt scrupulously cleaned the apartment and when the lease came up for renewal, he allowed it to lapse.

As far as the rest of the world was concerned, Brenda Stiles had ceased to exist, and in a physical sense, she had, but for Cupid, her spirit, her essence would become the nucleus of his existence. During that year leading up to the first coupling, Holt formulated within his mind how he could achieve eternal unity of a chosen couple, an unbreakable bond that would withstand time. During that time, Adam came into his life by fate's hand. He believed he was sent to assist him in his quest, and his calling. So six couples had their love immortalised, encapsulated within the impregnable folds of death, frozen, and protected for all time.

Holt's wandering and twisted mind came back to the present. There were still things to do before the coupling tomorrow night. Maybe, this would be the year that the world truly understood his quest. Maybe this year they would respect his work, and maybe this year, others would experience the epiphany of understanding of the purity, the sanctity of love and devotion through the coupling of Tom and Karen.

The time was near, Tom and Karen were ready, and Cupid was ready.

*'Happy Valentine's, Brenda,'* he whispered, sliding the secret shelf closed, *"Happy Valentine's."*

## Chapter Twenty-One

13 February - 18:55  
(Life remaining 24 hrs 5 mins)

**‘You need to come with me, Mr. Fuller.’**

*‘Fuller’s getting his information from Cupid.’* Hanson made the leap in a millisecond, ‘Could he be Cupid?’

‘Negative. David did some digging. Fuller was out of the country when the third and fifth murders took place. He has to have gotten information via email to be able to get the story put together so quickly. I’m attempting to access Fuller’s email accounts through a contact at his paper.’

‘I need to move, Sir. Keep me up to speed with anything new.’

‘You got it, John, watch your back.’

‘Always.’ Hanson closed the line and set off for The Dragos nightclub. The trip took a little over twenty minutes longer than he had anticipated thanks to traffic and a detour caused by road works. He parked his people carrier two streets away and walked to the nightclub. As he expected, there was heavy security at the door. A quick reconnoitre of the back of the building showed securely barred windows along with a pair of sturdy steel fire doors.

Hanson’s Bluetooth chirped, ‘Hanson here.’

‘John, it’s Blue Eagle.’

‘Go ahead, Sir.’

‘You at The Dragos?’

‘Affirmative, but security is tight. I could force my way in, but it would get messy. I need to stay below the radar to get to Fuller.’

‘You see a tall, black, security guard at the front door?’

Hanson’s gaze swept past the small crowd of chosen guests filing into the club, ‘Got him, Sir.’

‘He’s ex-regiment. He’s expecting you.’

Hanson checked his watch, twenty-three hours and fifty-five minutes of life remaining. Tom and Karen’s lives were slipping away. ‘Has Simpson

arrived at command centre yet?’

‘Affirmative,’ cut in Jane, ‘Donald’s working with him now.’

‘Any more from Stephanie?’

‘Yes, she has discovered that all of the ring sizes of all the female victims were not standard sizes.’

Hanson made the leap, ‘So all the rings needed to be altered,’

‘Exactly, we know that none of the women used the same jewellers to purchase their rings. We also know that most jewellers farm out alterations of items of jewellery, rather than employ full time staff, so we are trying to cross reference to see who they use, but most outlets are closed for the day, so it’s slow going,’

‘Tell Stephanie well done.’

‘Will do, John.’

‘I’m going in after Fuller, so I will be out of comms for a period.’

‘Why don’t we just get some of Richard’s people to pick him up, John?’

‘We follow procedure, he’s gonna get himself lawyered up and start bleating about his rights. We don’t have time for that. I’m bringing him into headquarters.’

‘Roger that.’

Hanson approached the tall burly black doorman. There followed a brief eyeball-to-eyeball exchange, where not a word was spoken, but an understanding of crystal clarity passed between them. The security guard simply gave a curt nod and stood to one side to let Hanson pass through into the club.

The interior was themed on a medieval dungeon with mock stone walls, plenty of heavy chains and softly lit cells with wraparound seating and a central table that created privacy for secret rendezvous. Hanson swept the club in less than five minutes, tracking Fuller down to a small bar at the rear, away from the thumping music of the main dance floor at its centre. The journalist was wandering from group to group, interviewing on the fly, a photographer shadowing him snapping away as he asked questions of the low level celebrities all too willing to answer a few questions, if it meant getting some free coverage and a photo in the tabloids.

Hanson eased up behind Fuller who stood a little over five feet six, nearly a foot shorter than he stood, and leaned down to speak close to his ear. ‘Mr.

Fuller, I need you to come with me please.’ The authoritative tone and firm grip on Fuller’s arm seemed to persuade the journalist to go with him, but as Hanson turned to lead him towards the front door, the smaller man stopped in his tracks, his easy smile disappearing, ‘What exactly is this about?’

‘I’ll explain outside, Mr. Fuller.’

Fuller pulled his arm free from Hanson’s grip, his sixth sense sending him a warning, ‘I don’t think so, pal.’

Hanson watched small ferret like eyes flicking around, looking for any of the club security staff. He closed in on the smaller man who took a step backwards. ‘You need to come with me now, Mr. Fuller.’

‘You need to tell me what this is about,’ Fuller’s voice was louder than it needed to be. He wanted others to be roped into what was taking place, his features showed that he felt safe, comfortable. After all, despite the fact that the man trying to take him outside was a formidable figure, he was inside of a busy club on its opening night with security staff all over the place.

Hanson had had enough. He wasn’t about to stand here, while his friend’s life slipped away, trying to persuade this hack that going with him voluntarily would be the least painful option of choices A and B. He stepped quickly forward, grabbed Fuller by the shirtfront, and spun him around, taking hold of the reporter’s right wrist with his left hand and bending it back against the joint, causing the smaller man to wince as he danced on tiptoe trying to ease the pressure. ‘Move to the main entrance,’ hissed Hanson, increasing the pressure.

Fuller complied with a mincing side step on the left hand side of him, but not before the photographer that had been shadowing the hack began screaming for security and made a run at him. Hanson timed his move as the weighty photographer came at him from his right, his right fist snapping out in a blur to catch the overweight man on the point of the nose. The man stopped in his tracks, falling back onto his backside on the floor. It was too easy and didn’t even require Hanson to break step. The three security guards who were now coming at him from the front were a different proposition. The trio came to a halt, blocking the way out for him and Fuller. ‘*Let’s see how tough you are now,*’ winced the reporter, trying to stay on tiptoe.

Hanson was going to need both hands, but he couldn’t afford for Fuller to run either. He pulled the telescopic baton from its pocket, flicked it open to its full length and hit Fuller with two vicious swipes, one to the side of each

knee. The reporter screamed and dropped like a pile of dirty laundry. He wasn't going anywhere for a few minutes.

The stunned look and slight backward step from the three security men, told Hanson what he had expected. These men were used to dealing with drunks, mouthy yobs, but not a professional. 'Stand aside now and no one needs to get hurt,' warned Hanson, pacing forward.

The nearest man, also the biggest, roared like a bull and came storming forward at him, clearly intending to be the one dishing out any hurt. Hanson sidestepped neatly and delivered a snap punch to the man's exposed temple, dropping him to the floor, and then continued to pace forward. 'Last chance,' he warned, bearing down on the last two men.

'Stand down, lads,' came a voice from behind them. The doorman who had let Hanson through earlier, stepped between the two backpedalling guards and walked casually up to Hanson. 'Just been talking to a mutual friend.' Hanson knew he was referring to Blue Eagle, 'He suggested that I gave you a clear path out before you take out too many of my men.'

Hanson kept a wary eye on him, not certain which way this was going to go. 'I just need to leave with him,' he answered, pointing at the writhing journalist still on the floor, without taking his eyes from the guard. He might be ex-regiment, but Hanson had just downed one of his men.

The man nodded, 'I heard about your friend Tom. Come on,' he offered, reaching down and dragging the complaining reporter to his feet, 'I'll help you get him outside.'

As the two men got Fuller out onto the pavement, he began to scream that he was being kidnapped, but he was persuaded to be quiet when Hanson's powerful fingers located a nerve point at the side of his neck. 'Appreciate your help,' thanked Hanson, extending his hand.

'Hope you get your friend back,' responded the doorman taking it, and then turned without any further exchange and paced away.

Ten minutes later, Hanson had Fuller in the back of the people carrier, with his hands secured with nylon ties. 'Jane, I'm about to head back with Fuller. ETA around 20.05 hours.'

'We'll look out for you, John.'

'When I get back we need to review everything we have and plan our next move.'

'I'll let everyone know.'

Hanson broke the connection and started the people carrier.

‘You care to tell me what the *bloody hell* this is all about?’ Came an unhappy voice from the backseat.

Hanson turned and looked into the pasty features that had spent too long in smoke-filled rooms. ‘You have information on Cupid.’

Fuller’s eyes grew wide. Of all of the scenarios for his abduction, Cupid clearly wasn’t one of them, ‘*I... I’ve got no idea what you’re talking about.*’

Hanson paused before responding. He wanted the journalist to take a good look into his face, into his soul. ‘You lie to me once more and I will hurt you in ways you can’t even begin to perceive. You withhold any information that I need and Cupid will seem like a Sunday School teacher in comparison.’

The journalist nervously licked his lips as he watched Hanson’s features change. It was a subtle shift, he heard the edge lacing his voice, shrank down in his seat under the intense stare from eyes that burned into him from beneath lowered lids. Fuller was an experienced reader of men, an interpreter of expressions, and an expert on voices. All three skills led him to an easy decision. Truth would be his new best friend, his survival instinct warned him that the alternative would reveal a further side to the man just two feet from him.

Fuller did not intend to develop the relationship. ‘What do you need to know?’

## Chapter Twenty Two

13 February - 20:10  
(Life remaining 22 hrs 50 mins)

### **‘Jenny Cartwright and Bruce Schofield butchered in 2006.’**

It had only been around nine hours since Hanson last entered his offices, but it seemed so much longer. In that period, some solid information, some critical clues had been uncovered, but now it was time to stand back and weave together what they had, and to formulate the way forward. He had reluctantly released his grip on each second of Tom and Karen’s life and would continue to do so like a miser until the end, wanting something in return for each relinquished moment. Something, anything, that would point to their whereabouts. Despite the incalculable odds, he would not give up on them. While one second remained, he would hunt and if the worst should happen, if time cheated him, he would continue. He would pursue Cupid to the gates of hell and then kick him in.

Hanson dragged the hapless reporter by the scruff of his jacket and launched him towards Richard Turner. ‘Giles Fuller, Richard, you might want to get started on him.’

‘What about my rights?’ squealed the sweating man, struggling to remain on his feet.

‘*Rights!*’ snapped Turner, dragging the still tied man to the whiteboard. ‘*What about their rights?*’ screamed the detective, stopping in front of the first set of graphic photos, ‘*Jenny Cartwright and Bruce Schofield butchered in 2006.*’

Fuller blanched as he took in the coloured shots. These were photos not released to the general public after they were deemed far too graphic, too horrifying.

Turner yanked him roughly along to the next set, ‘*Alison Pierce and Will Stevens 2007.*’ They moved on, ‘*Rose Collard and Stephen Stratton, both eighteen years old 2008.*’

‘*Please enough,*’ begged Fuller, looking as if he might collapse.



*'You think they all didn't beg, Fuller?'* yelled the clearly distraught detective, *'You think Cupid took any notice of their calls, their pleadings?'*

The command room had gone deadly quiet, each set of eyes taking in the scene of the close to the edge detective and the panting journalist. His eyes were flicking from photo to photo as the stark realisation of what the monster that he had been communicating with had inflicted on his victims struck home.

Hanson eased up and put a strong hand on the detectives shoulder, 'Take a break, Richard. Donald can make a start with Fuller.'

As if on cue, Donald took a grip on Fuller's arm and led him to a side room.

'May... maybe, I will,' he agreed, shaking his head as if coming out of a daze. 'I'll um... I'll just grab a coffee,' he continued, looking embarrassed as he wiped a trembling palm across his lips.

Hanson squeezed his shoulder, 'We're gonna get him, Richard, just hang in there.'

'Should have got him years ago, John, I missed too much, I can't believe I missed the clue of the fingers.'

'Wood for trees,' replied Hanson.

'Buck stops here,' retaliated the unhappy detective.

Hanson could see the self-recrimination, the inner agony the tired detective was going through as he swept his gaze along the photos on the white wall. 'Would have, should have, could have, doesn't matter now. We now work as a team.'

Turner sighed heavily. 'Thanks, John.'

'For what?'

'I think you know,' he responded, moving away towards the refreshment table.

Hanson watched him go. He knew that whatever the outcome, Cupid would have left his mark on the unhappy detective that could never be erased. No argument, no reasoning could take away the guilt that would remain with the man, every breath of the rest of his life, eating away at him like a cancer.

'John.'

Hanson turned to his secretary, 'How are we doing, Jane?'

‘I thought we might give Donald a little time with Fuller before we all meet up. It would also give you a chance to speak to Stephanie.’ Jane nodded towards the rest area where his sister sat on the edge of a seat, her head flicking up and down as she studied her brother, waiting for him to acknowledge her.

Hanson’s features softened immediately as he paced towards her, ‘I’ll spend ten minutes with Steph,’ he called over his shoulder, ‘Then I’ll shower up before the meeting. Can you rustle up some food please Jane, I could eat a scabby horse.’

‘Would that be with stirrups or without?’

‘Saddle, the whole works,’ he grinned, as he sat next to Stephanie, placing a muscular arm around her shoulders.

‘Can we go now, John?’ asked his sister, rocking back and forth, with her deep green eyes flicking nervously between her brother and the other people milling around the large room.

With her warm breath on his cheek, it was now Hanson’s turn to feel guilty. Stephanie was clearly agitated at having to spend so long away from her familiar environment, the comfort blanket of her routine dragged from her grasp. ‘I need to be here a little longer, sis,’ replied Hanson softly. ‘We’ve now got some solid leads and thanks to the connection you made with the ring sizes, we have something to work with.’

‘Can we get Tom and Karen back now?’ asked Stephanie, rubbing her right temple as if in pain.

Hanson took hold of his sister’s hand, pulling it away from her temple, gripping it between his large hands in a firm protective grip. ‘I promise you that we are going to do everything we can, sis, and if we do, I’ll tell Tom how much help you’ve been.’

Stephanie visibly relaxed, ‘I like Tom, John. He’s always nice to me.’

Hanson kissed the back of her hand, ‘Everyone likes you, sis.’

Stephanie giggled softly and pulled her hand away, ‘You’re silly, John.’

Hanson stood, more relaxed now that his sister had calmed, ‘That’s me, sis, your silly big brother.’ He gently lifted her chin, so that she was looking up at him, his heart soaring as she giggled again when he gave her an exaggerated wink. Hanson moved away to the small bathroom at the back of the compound, stripped and showered. He pulled on a tracksuit that he kept in a locker in the bathroom and stepped out feeling refreshed into the

electrified atmosphere of the command centre. He could feel the optimism crackle like static electricity. They had leads and they had the link discovered by Stephanie. They had a chance. Hanson checked his watch 20.48 p.m., Tom and Karen had 22 hours and twelve minutes of life remaining.

‘Here’s your food, John.’

Hanson took the large plate overflowing with chicken pasta and sat at the large centre table. ‘Let’s get to it people,’ he instructed, digging into the heaped plate. ‘Donald, kick us off, give me some glad tidings.’

‘I placed Darren Simpson into a deep hypnotic state earlier. I tried straight forward questioning, but I was convinced he had a block, and it proved right.’

Hanson swallowed quickly, ‘Hope this is worth indigestion.’

‘If I’m right, it will be. I think Simpson saw Tom and Karen’s abductor.’

‘He saw Cupid?’

Donald sucked in through his teeth. ‘That’s assuming that the abductor and Cupid are one and the same person.’

‘You think he has an accomplice?’

‘I’m not saying that, John. What I am saying is we should not assume anything. We need to push the fact that this is Tom and Karen to the back of our minds and stay objective.’

Hanson knew Donald was right. They had to remain professional, focused, ‘Point taken, Donald, so we have an unknown person sighted by Simpson, who may have been the abductor, and may or may not have been Cupid?’

‘Pretty much sums it up. Simpson saw Tom and Karen walking arm in arm along the driveway leading towards the back of the restaurant heading for the car park. Shortly afterwards, he happened to look up from taking an order from some clients and saw a man walking the same way, but only the back of him, so no ID. But he did note that he was a very large man. Less than three or four minutes later, a car pulled out from the back of the restaurant and past the window where Simpson was standing.’

‘One car?’

‘Exactly, one car. He was still taking the order from the couple for a full five minutes after that. No other car left the car park area.’

‘Did he get the car model?’

‘We struck lucky when I hypnotised him. Turns out, it was his dream car, a Jaguar XJ6.’

‘Registration?’

‘Luck ran out there,’ sighed Myers.

Hanson continued eating as Richard Turner joined in.

‘I checked for other businesses in the area for any CCTV coverage that may have picked up the coming and going of vehicles from the restaurant.’

‘And?’ Pressed Hanson mid-chew.

‘There’s a McDonalds burger place at the top of the road leading from the restaurant. It’s a one way system, by the way, that might have picked up the Jag.’

‘Anyone check it out?’

Turner shook his head, ‘They’re closed now, not open again until tomorrow morning at 8 a.m.’

Hanson made a mental note to call to the burger joint in the morning.

‘What about Fuller, Donald?’

‘Singing like a bird. It seems he gets an e-mail from Cupid around 9 p.m. every Valentine’s Day. Tells him where his victims can be found and goes into a long-winded explanation as to why he carries out the atrocities. Fuller said he made an anonymous call each year at 9.15 p.m. to alert the police.’

‘That’s true,’ confirmed Turner, ‘It’s on record. The call was always too short to trace. We assumed it was Cupid.’

‘Doesn’t excuse him for withholding the e-mails,’ snapped Hanson. ‘There could have been information in them that would have helped you, Richard.’

‘I’ve seen the e-mails, John,’ responded Myers, ‘They’re just the ramblings of a maniac trying to justify his actions, nothing that would lead us to him. It would have simply created a feeding frenzy among the profilers.’

‘We could have traced the source of the e-mails,’ snapped Hanson.

‘Fuller tried that,’ cut in Blue Eagle’s voice over the sound system. ‘The paper has a hacker they use for this kind of thing. I had our people check it out, source proved untraceable. Seems Cupid covered his tracks well. He might be a psychopath, but he’s not stupid.’

‘Doesn’t excuse Fuller’s action, Sir.’

‘Oh trust me, John, Fuller’s not coming out of this with any awards,’ confirmed Turner. ‘He’s going to feel the full weight and then some.’

Hanson pushed away his plate and with it, any further thoughts of Fuller. ‘Right people, let’s start combing through what we have.’

‘I can summarise if you like,’ offered Jane.

Hanson simply nodded as Turner and Myers took a seat at the large central table on either side of him, and facing Jane, who had taken up position at the whiteboard wall now covered in photos and notations. Behind them, the silhouette of Blue Eagle filled the large flat screen, facing the whiteboard.

Hanson glanced across to his sister. Stephanie had fallen asleep in one of the easy chairs in the rest area. He was relieved. He was about to trawl through all information they had on Cupid, some of which would cover details about the way Cupid butchered his victims. Details he didn’t want his sister to have to go through again. He knew she had already read the police reports, but he also knew that she would have read those reports with a kind of closed mind, simply looking for the link, that thread that joined the victims. He knew from experience that she compartmentalised information that would cause her distress, locking it into a tiny box inside her head, its lid firmly closed shut. Hearing those details being discussed could pry open that lid. He didn’t want that, sleep would protect her, Hanson would protect her.

He checked his watch, 21.25 p.m., twenty-one hours and thirty-five minutes of life remaining. ‘Okay, Jane, let’s get started.’

Jane took a deep breath, ‘I thought I would give a quick recap of everything we have, including a resume of the reports Richard has provided. I thought it might help refocus us as a group.’

Hanson nodded approval.

‘Cupid first appeared in 2006. The consensus from the profiler is that something happened to him in 2005, something involving a relationship that tipped him over the edge.’

‘Pity he didn’t shoot himself,’ suggested Myers.

Several nods supported his thoughts.

Jane continued, ‘Whatever happened, probably occurred on Valentine’s night at

7 p.m. Somewhere in his mind, he has set himself a mission, a quest he calls it in his ramblings, to join lovers for eternity by...’ Jane hesitated, finding the words disturbing even now, even after reading the police reports many times, ‘By cutting out his victims hearts and exchanging them, stitching their chest’s closed after filling the cavities with a solution called lactated ringers solution.’

‘Is that the solution that stimulates the heart to keep beating?’ asked Blue Eagle.

Jane swallowed deeply, trying to keep down the contents of her stomach, ‘Yes... seems he wants the hearts to keep beating within the chest cavities after he has exchanged them, he...’ Jane paused for a second time, trying to keep composed, professional, ‘He cuts the hearts out while the victims are awake. We know this because the autopsy reports show no sign of any sedative or anaesthetic.’

Her voice had dropped almost to a whisper. The room went quiet for a second or two as each person dwelled on the horror that each of Cupid’s victims must have suffered. A horror none of them wanted Tom and Karen to have to go through, or any other couples, for that matter. This maniac had to be stopped.

‘Jane, are you alright to continue?’ asked Hanson gently.

‘Yes,’ she responded in a firm voice lifting her chin. To fall apart would be a minor victory to Cupid. She would not allow that.

For the next thirty minutes, Jane went through the information gleaned from Simpson relating to the Jaguar car, and the large man seen heading for the car park at the rear of the restaurant. She recapped the details supplied by Fuller, the rambling e-mails from Cupid, confirming the profilers reports that something had tipped him over the edge back in 2005 and his twisted quest had begun.

Questions and suggestions came from each of the group as Jane spoke, but it was the final information that she revisited that caused the most excitement. The link found from Stephanie was a breakthrough for the team. To have a linking thread through all of the victims was a positive step towards finding Cupid.

‘So we know that each of the female victims had rings that had to be altered, none of them were standard sizes?’ checked Hanson, looking to Jane.

‘That’s correct. Stephanie did a great job.’

Hanson looked over to his sleeping sister, a slight lump developing in his throat at the thought of what she had gone through, at what he had put her through. ‘Okay!’ he snapped trying to cover his emotions, ‘Do we have a link as to who carries out the alterations?’

‘There are half a dozen specialist firms that carry out this sort of work,’

confirmed Blue Eagle, ‘However by the time we had the lead from Stephanie, all of the companies had closed for the day. We managed to get hold of some emergency numbers through the records on security companies who cover the premises, but they were only minor staff members who couldn’t give us any information of relevance. We are not going to get anything of use until 9 a.m. tomorrow morning, John, when the businesses reopen.’

For the next few hours, the group twisted and turned the information, dissected it, revisiting every scrap to see nothing had been missed. By 1.30 a.m. on Valentine’s Day with 17 hours and 30 minutes of life remaining, Hanson called a halt, ordering everyone to get some sleep. Each was clearly exhausted and that was not going to help. So Hanson told them to be effective in tracing Cupid and in finding Tom and Karen, they needed to get some rest.

Myers and Turner each took a bed in one of the rest rooms. Blue Eagle’s silhouette simply faded out. Jane lay on the large sofa in the rest area, while Hanson took a seat next to his still sleeping sister. He wanted to be near to her. Within seconds of closing his eyes, he dropped into a black pit of disturbing images. He twisted restlessly as vivid images of mutilated bodies, open chest cavities and beating hearts besieged him. It was a haunting place, a place where Cupid peeked out from the dark corners, his face just an outline, a dark mask that taunted Hanson, challenging him to find him.

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Forty miles away, as Hanson twisted and turned, Tom snapped awake from a troubled one, screaming out his friend’s name, ‘*Jooooohn, Jooooohn!*’

## Chapter Twenty Three

14 February - 01:35  
(Life remaining 17 hrs 25 mins)

**‘Come and get us, John, for God’s sake, come and get us!’**

*‘Jooooohn, Jooooohn!’* Tom’s eyes flew open, his own screams waking him up. He found he was shivering badly, despite the fact that Cupid’s henchman had thrown some kind of cover over them. The temperature in the building they were in had dropped dramatically. Added to this was the fact they hadn’t had anything to eat since they had been snatched and only a few mouthfuls of water.

Tom cursed himself for letting his guard down in the restaurant car park. He remembered the sound of footsteps coming up behind them as they strode towards his car. The call Karen had received on her mobile during their meal telling her that her mother had been taken into hospital with a suspected heart attack, completely occupying their attention. Now, he had time to consider it, Tom knew it was a bogus call to get them into the car park. The blast of the spray in their faces as they turned must have been some kind of nerve gas, because everything went instantly black. The next thing he remembered was waking up tied to the table where they now lay.

Blinking rapidly he tried to gather his senses. He could feel Karen’s hand in his, but unlike his, which was shaking with a shivering reflex that he was unable to control; his fiancée’s hand was motionless. He made a conscious effort to control the shaking, and to hold his breath, so that he could listen for Karen’s breathing. He sucked in air noisily as he picked up her shallow breaths. She was alive. ‘Karen, Karen, can you hear me?’ Her breathing remained low and even, so he decided to leave her alone. He didn’t believe she was asleep, but that she had shut down, gone into herself, gone to a place of safety. He had seen it many times before in combat with many people. He would leave her there. It was the only thing he had control of at present, and the only thing he could do for her.

Tom closed his eyes, his voice hoarse, barely a whisper. *‘Come and get us, John. For God’s sake, come and get us!’*



.....  
Forty miles away, John Hanson twitched in his sleep, something disturbing him, something like a voice at the end of a long tunnel, a plea, a cry for help.  
.....

At a detached house in an affluent suburb not an hours travel from where Tom and Karen lay, an area occupied by teachers, bankers and professional people with an average of two point two children per household, Cupid slept. A man liked by his neighbours, known as a quiet, private person; a dream neighbor you would want living next door, someone you would ask to keep an eye on your children while you popped to the shops.

The following day, Cupid would not be going to his place of work. He never worked on Valentine's Day, wanting no distraction from enjoying this most important day in the year. His mobile phone would be shut down on this day, so he could follow a ritual he had developed over the years, leading up to the most magical, most ethereal of moments, the coupling.

His day's ritual would begin with a late breakfast, while he listened to their favourite music. He and Brenda had their own tape that contained many poignant songs that they shared, special songs, songs that spoke of commitment, eternity, and of love. Just before lunch, he would leave his house after showering and travel to a local park where they used to walk. There he would watch couples taking a walk during their lunch break. There he would reaffirm his commitment to his mission, his quest. Next, he would travel into the city to their restaurant and eat lunch, again watching couples as they spoke, exchanging special words, committing to each other, promising their love, and their hearts. At three thirty, he would begin his journey to the place of coupling, arriving at 4 p.m. He liked to have time with his chosen couple, to prepare them for their journey into eternity, and to prepare them for the coupling.

As Cupid slept, now in his well-kept house amongst the teachers and the bankers, his mind was already looking to next year, to his next couple. Tom and Karen would be a triumph, but next year would be even better, even more magical.

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At 1.48 a.m., Adam Black grunted as he bench-pressed 600 pounds in the converted garage of his small north London house. It was a colossal amount of weight, and even though it was nowhere near the world record of over a thousand, it was still an awesome amount being pushed by huge arms and an incredible 58-inch chest. He liked to work out late at night and into the early hours of the morning. It was his time, his alone. He would take another hour and then he would sleep, because tomorrow was a big day. Not so much for him, but for Cupid, whose entire life revolved around building up to this one day each year, the coupling. Tomorrow there would be no work, no errands to run, no daily work out with his employer. This was the day each year where so much planning came to fruition. The day that sated Cupid's hunger to achieve his mission, his purpose.

At exactly 2.30 p.m., Black would go to the place of the coupling and ensure that the chosen ones were made pure, as Cupid called it, and ready for the ceremony. Black smiled at the thought of further antagonising the man Tom, as he washed down his woman, watching him buck and kick, making wild threats. He wished he could release him and challenge him to carry out those threats, but that wasn't going to happen. He never would disobey James Holt. In truth, he feared no man, but what he had witnessed at the hands of the man known to the world as Cupid, chilled him to the bone. No, he would settle for a little fun with the couple before Cupid arrived at 4 p.m. and the coupling would begin.

He would wait outside during the ceremony. Witnessing just one of the couplings had been more than enough for him. Outside he would block out the screams that would eventually slide into quiet whimpering. Cupid would leave around 8 p.m., leaving Adam to check that nothing of any significance was left behind, and that all of the blood around the table was cleaned away so that the couple looked their best before revealing them to the world.

Following, there would be the period of calm, the period where they would not speak of such things again until Cupid made his new selection. Then the cycle would begin again. Adam would begin to stalk the chosen pair, building up a file of where they lived, where they worked, telephone numbers, any information that would be of use as they built once again towards the coupling, but that was the future. For now, he had to focus on

tomorrow, this year's coupling, this year's lucky pair, Tom and Karen.

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Exhaustion eventually took Tom, sleep slipping its cloak around him again as the demons that came with it attacked him once more. It was 2.30 a.m., life remaining 16 hours 30 minutes.

## Chapter Twenty Four

14 February - 08:00  
(Life remaining 11 hours)

**‘It’s about the problem with the cockroaches, Jarvis.’**

By 8 a.m., Hanson had showered, dressed with a clean set of the same clothing and kit as the day before, had a quick breakfast and was at the doors of the McDonalds outlet along the road from The Spinning Wheel. He had left instruction with Jane and Donald to chase down any links between the jewellery shops who supplied the engagement rings to the victims and the specialist companies who carried out alterations.

As Hanson entered the burger outlet, he was surprised how many people used it for the special breakfast deal being offered. Striding towards the counter, he hoped the spotty youth behind the counter dishing out orders left and right to half a dozen even younger youths was not the manager. ‘Could I speak to the manager, please?’ asked Hanson to the entire group.

‘That would be me,’ beamed the spotty youth.

Hanson sighed deeply, ‘Could I have a word in private?’ Hanson studied the nametag on the youth’s shirt, ‘Jarvis.’

‘Bit busy now, Sir. Could you come back in an hour or so?’ he responded, thinking that Hanson was probably a rep.

Hanson raised his voice, ‘It’s about the problem with the cockroaches, Jarvis.’

Jarvis went white, as all heads in the restaurant turned, and all burgers stalled in mid-air. Moving as if a scalded cat, from behind the counter, he took hold of Hanson’s elbow, something Hanson would not normally allow, and led him towards the back of the restaurant where there were no clients. ‘*There are no cockroaches in this restaurant!*’ He hissed, a frozen smile locked onto his features as he wilted under the gaze of the many customers whose eyes moved between their food and the spotty manager.

‘Yes, I know,’ responded Hanson calmly, ‘But I needed to get your attention.’

The youth now looked confused, ‘Who are you?’

‘My name is not important, but what I’m about to tell you is. You have a CCTV camera that points to the front street. I need to see the film from Sunday night.’

‘I... I don’t understand, are you a policeman?’

Hanson shook his head, ‘No, I’m not and I don’t have time to explain. I just need to see that film.’

The youth raised himself to his full height, which was still a foot shorter than Hanson was, and threw back his head, ‘I’m sorry, Sir, but I would need to get permission from the head office before I could do that.’

For a second or two, Hanson considered dragging the youth to wherever the unit was positioned to persuade him that it might be a good idea to show him the film. Instead, he punched one of the speed dials on his mobile and turned from the youth. Blue Eagle answered after two rings. Hanson explained what he needed and then rang off. The youth had returned to the counter where a queue had started to build up, despite the rumour of cockroaches. In less than five minutes, a phone on the back wall pulled spotty boy away from his chores. The glance that he shot across to Hanson told him that Blue Eagle had done as asked. The youth strode quickly across, ‘I’ve been instructed...’

‘Let’s not bother with any explanations, Jarvis. Just show me the film,’ cut in Hanson .

At exactly 8.35 a.m., Hanson was striding out of the burger outlet with his Bluetooth connecting him with Blue Eagle.

‘What do you have, John?’

‘Got a partial number on that Jag, Sir. Texting it through to you now.’

‘Okay, I’ll see what we can do with it.’

‘Anything on the jewellery shops?’

‘Not yet, John. If I were you, I would head into the city, most of them are based there. May have something for you by the time you get there.’

‘On my way, Sir, speak to you soon.’

Hanson sat in a coffee shop in the centre of the city waiting for a call. He had nowhere else to look, no clues to follow. He felt completely helpless as the minutes slipped by taking Tom and Karen’s remaining life with them. It

was now 9.48 a.m., nine hours and twelve minutes of life remaining. He jumped as his Bluetooth suddenly beeped, his mind coming back into focus from the dark avenues it was reluctantly being sucked into. ‘Hanson here.’

‘John, it’s Jane.’

‘Give me something, Jane.’

‘You need to head for a company called, *Jewels of Distinction*. All six victims had their rings altered by that specialist firm.’

Hanson felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle, ‘This has to be the lead we are looking for, Jane.’

‘We feel the same here. I’m sending you the postcode.’

Hanson closed the line, paid at the counter and trotted to his car parked twenty metres away. Logging in the postcode, he noted the estimated time was forty-five minutes, but he intended to make it in less time. As he set off, his Bluetooth beeped again.

‘John, it’s Blue Eagle.’

‘What do you have for me, Sir?’

‘We came up with over a hundred matches for a Jaguar XJ6 with the partial that we had. I cross referenced it for any cars bought by companies.’

‘You’ve got something, I can tell.’

‘Damn right we’ve got something. *Jewels of Distinction* purchased a Jaguar XJ6 two years ago. The owner, James Holt, made the selection personally, according to the dealership I spoke to just five minutes ago.’

Hanson felt his stomach tighten; that confirmed it. Cupid was connected with that company.

‘I’m on my way there now, Sir. ETA is thirty-eight minutes. Can you get Turner to send back up?’

‘He’s already on his way. He should arrive shortly after you. Keep me posted.’

‘Roger that, Sir.’

Cupid hummed gently to the sounds of the love songs that meant so much to him. He ate his breakfast as the wonderful music washed around him, reminding him of why he was on this mission, and why this quest was so worthy of his time. At 10.38 a.m., he stepped into his shower and luxuriated as the steaming water cascaded over him, purifying him, preparing him for the day ahead, for the coupling of Tom and Karen.

.....

Hanson pulled up to the kerb side in front of ‘Jewellery of Distinction’ at exactly 10.39 a.m. Traffic had been heavy and a dustcart had refused to move as it loaded up outside of an old peoples’ home halfway through his journey. This was clearly not an outlet for the general public. There was no shop window, no fancy stones on display, just an impressive pair of modern chrome and glass doors with a large brass plaque to one side bearing the company name. Hanson waved the beeper at his people carrier as he covered the six metres to the chrome doors in quick purposeful strides. Not surprisingly, entry was by invitation only. He pressed the intercom and looked up at the camera above his head as a thin reedy female voice came through the grill within seconds. ‘Do you have an appointment, Sir?’

‘No, I don’t, but I need to speak to James Holt.’

‘Mr. Holt is not in today, Sir. He never works on Valentine’s Day, something of a tradition.’

Hanson replayed the words inside his head *he never works on Valentine’s Day*. ‘Ma’am, I can’t explain right now, but I need you to open the door and let me in.’

There was silence for a few seconds before a male voice came through the intercom, ‘What is the nature of your business, Sir?’ Crisp, business like, slightly challenging.

‘I have certain questions I need to ask in reference to James Holt. Now please open the door.’ Hanson studied the lock on the door and reached inside his jacket, his hand closing around the butt of the Sig.

‘Are you a police officer, Sir?’

Hanson was about to pull out the Sig and blast the lock, when a squeal of tyres behind him drew his attention. He watched as the seventh cavalry made up of Richard Turner and half a dozen armed police exited a police car and a van. He turned back to the intercom, ‘No I’m not, but they are,’ he pointed behind him.

Two minutes later, Turner was busy taking statements from James Holt’s secretary and the half a dozen other staff, ranging from the one security guard to the five jewellery workers who carried out ring and bracelet resizing, resetting of stones, cleaning jewellery and the complicated procedure of gem cutting.

Hanson slipped away, entering the inner sanctum of James Holt's office. On the face of it, just another office like thousands of other offices, but this had a feel about it; something Hanson couldn't put his finger on, something inexplicable. He sat in the winged chair behind the desk, wondering if this was where Cupid sat, and if this was where he planned his atrocities. It was as that thought tumbled through his mind that Hanson looked down at the carpet and saw it. It was the faintest of marks on the pile. A mark that would have escaped most people's attention, but Hanson wasn't most people. He saw things differently than the average man and what he saw there was an indication that something had swept across the face of this carpet on a regular arc, many, many times. After a quick study of the bookcase, Hanson found the hidden spring lever. Five seconds later, he was staring in disbelief at the heart of Brenda Stiles. Ten minutes later, he left the office, having viewed some of the handy work of Cupid, captured on the six DVDs he found on the shelf next to the Perspex container.

Turner saw him coming out, and saw the cold expression on his blanched features. 'What is it, John?'

'I'll tell you later. What have you got?'

'James Holt seems to be our candidate.'

'He's not a candidate, Richard. He is Cupid.'

Turner's eyes slid across to the open office door, 'Proof?'

Hanson simply nodded.

'Holt's also got a gofer, John, guy called Adam Black. He is a huge mother from what I gather, and he drives a Jaguar XJ6.'

'Where's Holt now. We're running out of time?'

'No-one seems to know. None of the staff knows why he never works on Valentine's Day or where he goes, but I do have his address.' Turner handed Hanson a slip of paper. 'I could send a team over there, but we, how shall I put this, we would be obliged to follow certain procedures.'

Hanson fixed the detective with a rock steady gaze, 'I also have a certain procedure Richard and trust me I'm obliged to use it.' Hanson moved back into the office and came out with an object wrapped in a towel that he had taken from the small bathroom serving the office.

'Do I need to know what that is, John?' asked the detective, as Hanson headed for the chrome doors.

'It's the heart of this whole affair, Richard. I suspect it's where this whole



thing started.’

‘Keep in touch,’ called Turner as Hanson disappeared through the door.

Hanson checked his watch, as he fed in Holt’s address into his Sat Nav. 11.05 am., seven hours and fifty- five minutes of life remaining. He sped out of the road, heading for Cupid’s lair, travel time thirty- eight minutes. He prayed Cupid would be there, prayed he could end this, bring Tom and Karen home, and put an end to this monster’s reign of terror.

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Cupid left his house at 11.42 a.m., later than he had planned, but he had wanted to hear certain tracks a second time before he left. Now, he was feeling mellow, and ready for the day ahead, with the culmination of the coupling of Tom and Karen to look forward to. As he drove sedately out of his road, he had to swerve to avoid a black people carrier speeding along at breakneck speed, but he refused to allow a crazy driver to spoil his day. This was his day, Cupid’s day.

## **Chapter Twenty Five**

**14 February - 11:43  
(Life remaining 7 hrs 17 mins)**

**‘Happened again, Sir, missed Black by seconds.’**

Hanson pulled up outside of Cupid’s address at 11.43 a.m. Locking the doors, he trotted to the front door and rang the bell with his hand inside his jacket on the butt of his Sig. He waited, the adrenaline pumping freely into his blood system, as he willed the door to open.

‘You just missed him, love,’ a voice from behind him came.

Hanson wheeled around, his hand staying under his jacket.

‘Left about two minutes ago,’ continued the chirpy woman leaning over the party fence.

‘Do you know where he’s gone?’ asked Hanson, with no real hope of an answer.

‘Couldn’t tell you, love. Don’t really speak to Mr. Holt much. He keeps himself to himself does that one,’ she chuckled.

‘Do you know what kind of car he drives?’ asked Hanson hopefully.

‘Yes dear,’ she beamed, ‘A red one.’

Hanson smiled weakly and walked past the woman, hitting speed dial as he walked back toward the people carrier. ‘Richard, it’s John. I missed him by a couple of minutes. See if you can get any information from the computer in his office. We’re looking for a rental property, if things follow the same MO as previous years, and something isolated, probably been rented for at least six months.’

‘In all honesty that’s a long shot, John. We tried tracing that information over the last six years with the previous victims and ended up in a maze of bogus companies set up in countries around the world, countries where information is like trying to grab hold of smoke.’

‘Do what you can, Richard. Also see if you can find out what type car he’s driving. Maybe you could feed the information to your eye in the sky boys and the city’s CCTV network. Only information I have is that it’s red.’

‘It’s red?’

‘Yeah, yeah, I know, cuts it down to a couple of million. Do the best you can, Richard.’

‘On it, John.’

Hanson hesitated before he asked the next question, ‘Have you seen those DVDs in Holt’s office?’

There was a slight delay from Turner, ‘Yeah, I saw them. Make sure you get this bastard and use whatever procedure you have to.’

‘Count on it. I need the address for Adam Black, Richard.’

‘You need to take care with this guy. From what I can gather, the man is built like the proverbial brick outhouse.’

‘Like I said, I need his address.’

‘Okay hold,’ instructed Turner.

Two minutes later, Hanson was heading for a small terrace house in North London. He had a couple of questions he wanted to put to Adam Black, ETA 12.45 p.m.

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Adam Black also had his own routine for Valentine’s Day, in fact most days. It involved a massive breakfast of cereal with honey, covered in skimmed milk, followed by four poached eggs on four slices of whole wheat bread and a plate of pasta and chicken. All of which was washed down with a protein shake. There followed a punishing session at his local gym four miles away between 7 a.m. and 9 a.m. This routine never varied, even though he often worked out until 2 a.m. in the morning. Other hardcore clients at the gym called him the animal behind his back. That’s where they felt safe. Most of the regulars remembered a bloody scene when a giant of a power lifter had made fun of Adam Black’s lopsided smile. There followed a three week stay in hospital for the power lifter, while his broken ribs mended, fragmented cheekbones were set and internal bleeding brought under control.

In truth, Black was a walking chemistry set. The anabolic steroids he took on a daily basis mimicked the body’s natural testosterone, causing acne on his face, chest and back, as well as a multitude of side effects, increased aggression being just one. Other more dangerous effects included the

enlargement of the left ventricle of the heart, which could lead on to heart disease, further aggravated by the fact that the blood chemistry often changed with excessive use of the drug. The increased sexual desire it created within him was in complete opposition to the fact that the drugs he took, actually shrank his testicles, a fact he was aware of, but chose to ignore.

At 10 a.m., the mountain that was Adam Black was in a small greasy spoon just ten minutes' drive from the gym. He liked it there, because they gave him huge portions, they liked him there. Truth was they feared him there. He had raged around like a bull elephant one day, when he found a hair in his scrambled eggs, threatening to feed the chef through the food blender. Now they smiled for England when he walked in, loaded his plate with whatever he ordered, but only ever charged him the standard price. Their benign smiles remained in place until he left. On this particular morning, his mobile rang at exactly 10.15 a.m, as a fork full of scrambled eggs was about to be shovelled into his gaping mouth. Black checked the screen; he knew it would be him. 'Good morning, Sir.'

'Are there any problems, Adam?'

Cupid did this every year, 'No sir, there are no problems. I'll be there at 2.30 p.m.'

'This is going to be our finest achievement, Adam, a moment that will leave its mark, and its message in the sands of time.'

Black wasn't sure about any message, but James Holt believed it and he wasn't about to rain on his parade, 'Yes, Sir, a special moment.'

'The eyes of the world will be on us, Adam. Perhaps at last they will understand.'

Black wasn't sure about welcoming the eyes of the world, but his thoughts didn't really matter. James Holt believed it, wanted it, and so it would be. 'Yes, Sir, I'm sure you're right.'

'I'll see you at 4 p.m., ensure all is ready.'

'You can rely on me, Sir.'

'I know, Adam, destiny awaits us.'

Black closed the line and went back to the mountain of food in front of him; destiny would have to wait.

At 10.45 a.m., Black left the café and walked back to his XJ6. He would now go back to his North London house and clean up, take a short nap, and

then leave for the airfield at around 12.50 p.m., so he would be there for 2.30 p.m. The nap might be cut short as John Hanson was also heading for the same address. At 12.45 p.m., he would be banging on his front door.

.....  
*'Tom, Tom!'*

Tom stirred from sleep. He could hear the voice but he didn't recognise it. Sleep deprivation, lack of fluid and fear's clammy grasp distorted Karen's words to a pitiful whimper.

*'Karen, thank God. Hang in there, baby. It's going to be alright.'*

*'Tom I... I don't want to die.'*

Tom squeezed his eyes shut to hold back the tears of frustration. The pain from the sores along his back and legs was nothing compared to the agony he was going through as he listened to his fiancée beginning to unravel. *You should be able to protect her*, screamed the voice inside his head, *you're a failure Tom, a failure.*

Karen let out a wail like a wounded animal, and it was more than Tom could bear.

*'You're not going to die, Karen. You have to hold on. John will come, I promise you, he'll come.'* Even Tom could hear the doubt in his own voice, but that's not all he could hear. The sound that was torturing his soul was the gentle sobbing to his left, the sound of Karen slipping back into the pit, bringing down the shutters on reality once again, and closing out the spectre of Cupid.

*'John will come, he'll come,'* repeated Tom, his voice monotone, barely above a whisper. *'He'll come.'*

.....  
Hanson parked two houses away from the house where he knew Adam Black lived. On the narrow driveway, sat a bright red Jaguar XJ6 with a registration number that matched the one traced by Blue Eagle as being owned by *'Jewellery of Distinction'*. This was it; this was where Hanson would finally close in on Cupid, because Black would tell him where he was and where he was holding Tom and Karen. As surely as night followed day, he would give him the information he needed, for John had knowledge of certain techniques, techniques he had seen performed in some of the most

hostile cesspools of the world, where the gathering of information through the infliction of pain was an art form. Hanson himself had never been involved in that form, but he had seen it first hand and he would not hesitate for a heartbeat at using them to get what he needed.

The front of the property was highly visible to a number of other properties and to any passerby or traffic of which there was a constant flow. He walked quickly past the terrace house, jogging down a small side road, which he hoped would take him to the back of the houses. It was a good guess. Fifty metres along, he came to a narrow lane. It was clearly a service lane, which ran between the rows of terraced houses, which backed onto each other. Hanson paced quickly along it, counting the back gates until he came to the one that would give access to Adam Black's rear garden. He tried the catch on the heavy timber gate, but it was locked. A quick glance over the top, showed a garden around thirty metres long, heavily overgrown with shrubs and trees, blocking any view to the rear of the house, clearly a rarely used access. Hanson gave a quick look along the lane in both directions, bent his knees, sprang up and vaulted over the gate, landing softly onto the weed-covered path on the other side. For a few seconds, he stayed crouched, listening for any sounds, or any shouts that would alert him that he had been seen. Silence, no shouts, and no sounds apart from a dog yapping somewhere several gardens away occurred. Standing slowly to his full height, he moved forward. Time to speak to Adam Black. At least that was the plan, but that plan was about to backfire, because of something happening at the front of the house.

Adam Black stepped out through his front door, eased it closed and dead locked it. For just a second, Mrs. Blake's dog yapping away in her back garden three houses away captured his attention. He only ever did that when someone was moving around in the lane at the back of the terrace houses. Inserting his key back into the front door, he decided to check, and then changed his mind as he studied his watch, 12.48 p.m.; he needed to get going. He also decided that he was just being paranoid. This day was doing that to him. Striding quickly to his beloved Jag, he climbed in, started the V6 motor in a quiet purr and fed gently out into the traffic, and then eased along the road.

Hanson checked his watch as he reached the kitchen door of Black's house, 12.52 p.m., 6 hours and 8 minutes of life remaining. Peering in, he could see an empty kitchen, a sink full of pots and pans, and a small breakfast bar with high stools tucked under. One work surface was loaded with a mix of boxes and large tins that he could see were supplements used by body builders. The door leading from the kitchen was closed, which is what he wanted to see. It would help to mask any sounds as he dealt with the lock. Removing his pick kit from one of his pockets, he unzipped and selected a long angled pick, which he inserted into the lock. Fifteen seconds later, he was standing with his ear against the door that led from the kitchen to the main house.

After ten seconds, without a single sound from beyond, Hanson eased open the door and stepped into an inner hall. Praying to the God of loose floorboards, he glided forward, checking each door of the four that fed off the passageway leading to the front door beyond and a small lobby. First door was to a garage that had been converted into a gym. It smelled heavily of sweat and gave the indication of countless hours spent pushing weights. The amount of weight attached to some of the dumb bells and particularly a weight bar set up on a bench press area, told of someone with immense strength.

Second door was to a lounge area, and it was empty. Third door was a storage room; last door was a small separate dining room, clearly never used.

Moving forward, Hanson's sixth sense started to give a warning. There was not a sound to indicate that there was another living person in the property, no creaking boards from upstairs, no music playing, no one coughing, no sounds of anyone sleeping, no one using the bathroom, not a single indicator that Adam Black was at home. Three minutes later, he had completed the search of the upper floor, culminating in a quick glance out of the upstairs front bedroom window causing him to curse loudly. The red XJ6 was gone. Adam Black must have left as he entered the back garden. He quickly called Blue Eagle.

'Go ahead, John.'

'Happened again, Sir, missed Black by seconds. He's left his address in the last five minutes, driving the red Jag.'

'Any chance of following him?'

'None, streets around here are a warren, could have gone in one of a

dozen directions. Do we have any CCTV in this area?’

‘Hold, John.’

Hanson paced across the room pulling out drawers.

‘Negative, nothing in that area.’

‘What are the chances of a Police chopper?’

‘Nothing available, already tried when Holt set off. Best I can do is alert Richard to put out an alert for both vehicles. If they flag up, we can track them.’

‘I’m going to search the house to see if anything gives us a lead as to where they’re holding Tom and Karen.’

‘Richard is attempting to access all of the files on Holt’s computer, but it’s proving difficult. I’ve sent out some of our people to assist, it’s just taking time.’

‘We haven’t got a lot of that, Sir,’ snapped Hanson checking his watch, 1.09 p.m., 5 hours and 51 minutes of life remaining.

‘Hold it together, John. We just need one break, everyone is working flat out.’

Hanson sighed in frustration, ‘I know, but I can feel Tom and Karen’s lives slipping from my grasp.’

‘Fat lady’s not clearing her throat just yet, John.’

‘No, but she’s walking towards the mike.’

‘Well, let’s see that she never makes it, stay positive.’

‘Roger that, Sir.’

The beep told Hanson that Blue eagle had gone. He began a systematic search of the property, looking for any shred of information that would lead them to where they were holding Tom and Karen. They just needed a break. If Black were here now, it would be his neck breaking.



## Chapter Twenty Six

14 February - 14:38  
(Life remaining 4 hrs 22 mins)

**‘Wakey wakey, people, time to get you spruced up.’**

At precisely 2.38 p.m., Adam Black opened the security gates at the rented airfield and parked his Jaguar in one of the parking bays just outside the dilapidated hanger. On the journey over, he had fantasized about washing down Karen. He also considered taking her, while Tom bucked and screamed at his side, his hand glued to the fiancée’s as he ploughed into her, but he quickly discounted that. As much as he would love to bring his fantasy to life, Cupid would kill him. He had no doubt of that, not one single doubt. The coupling to him was like the Holy Grail. Anything that threatened the purity of that moment would face his displeasure. Black had no wish to face Cupid’s displeasure.

As Black entered the cold hanger, he could hear gentle snoring coming from the large table. Flicking on the lights, he called out to Tom and Karen, *‘Wakey, wakey, people, time to get you spruced up.’*

Tom blinked rapidly, as he tried in that first few seconds of awareness to convince himself that the whole experience had been a nightmare, that he was at home in his warm soft bed with Karen beside him, but then he heard it, the whistling. The animal that had taken them, and had trapped them here was back.

Tom could hear the man moving about behind him, and he heard the hose being dragged across the floor. He knew what was coming, but even so, he still gave a strangled gasp as the first spray of ice-cold water cascaded over him. The hose down lasted for at least a minute and the man had made sure that a long blast had hit him in the face, making it impossible to catch his breath, so that he ended up choking and gasping for air.

‘Sorry about that, Tom, but we have to have you looking your best for Cupid. Now, I think I will use a bowl and sponge for Karen, rather than the hose, bit more of the personal touch,’ Black leaned over Tom, his lopsided

leer taunting him, ‘Know what I mean, Tom?’

Tom squeezed his eyes shut and began to shout inside his head. The same word repeated over and over again, ‘*No,no,no,no,no.*’ He knew that the man was trying to torture him, knew he was gaining some sadistic joy out of his frustration, his impotence, so he shut himself down as the man stroked the sponge over his fiancée. Throughout, she never made a sound, remaining trapped in a place far beyond here, a place of safety deep inside of herself. He had to find a similar place, because the only thing he could control was the denial of outward suffering to the brute who worked the sponge back and forth over Karen’s naked body as he attempted to goad Tom, and inflict maximum mental agony.

‘My God, Tom, what a fine piece of meat this woman is; such firm breasts and what about...’

Tom shut down, repeating the word, like a mantra inside his head denying the animal his pleasure, creating a barrier to the external world, the world inside this building.

*‘No,no,no,no...’*

Cupid walked into the airfield hanger at precisely 4.00 p.m. ‘Is everything ready, Adam? he asked, his voice slightly husky, as he walked around the table, looking closely at Tom and Karen.

‘Everything is ready, Sir. They have been cleansed and the camera is running.’

*‘Please, please, let us go,’* croaked Tom, *‘You don’t have to do this. It... it’s not too late to just let us go.’*

*‘Oh, but it is, Tom,’* hissed Holt, bringing his face down close to Tom’s. ‘You and Karen are heading for eternal unity, the purity of your love. The sanctity of your promise to each other is about to be wrapped and protected in the folds of death. You should be thanking me for bestowing this on you. Don’t fight it, accept and embrace it, your destiny cannot be altered.’

For the first time, since they had been snatched, Tom felt death’s shadow fall across him. His dogged belief that John would come began to slip from his grasp, as he looked deep into the unblinking eyes of Cupid, for there he saw death and all hope fade. Closing his eyes, he tried to block out the voice in his head that kept repeating the same thing, over and over again, *‘John’s*

*not coming, he's not coming, he's not coming...*

.....

At 5.38 p.m., Hanson stood amongst the shambles of what had been Adam Black's home. A home he had virtually ransacked searching for clues. For the last hour and a half, he had trawled through a laptop he found in a small bedroom, clearly used as an office, searching through its internet history and countless files that revealed not one lead, not one scrap of information that would point to where his friend was. Black's main interests were sites dealing with hardcore bodybuilding, suppliers of supplements and anabolic steroids. Hanson had nowhere to go until he had some direction to head for. Constant contact with headquarters at the office of Hanson Securities brought the same response each time, '*Nothing yet.*' Each second that slipped by taking Tom and Karen's life with it, cutting into his soul like a razor, each increasing the inner agony he was going through. His Bluetooth beeped once, making him jump, 'John, it's Blue Eagle. We've had a break. Richard traced a mobile number for Adam Black while he's been trawling through Holt's office. Would appear no one there amongst the staff were aware of it. We managed to get access to the account and went through the log of calls over the last twenty-four hours. It would also appear that he calls and receives from one mobile only, another number unknown to the staff here. We suspect it belongs to Cupid. It's a top up phone so we can't trace ownership, and it is possibly stolen. We triangulated the last call made on Black's mobile. It came from a deserted airfield approximately forty miles from your present position. We contacted the owners of the land who informed us the entire airfield, complete with several buildings and an old hanger, has been rented to a company based in Panama for the last six months, contract runs out tomorrow, 15<sup>th</sup> February.'

'Send me the coordinates, Sir.'

'On their way, John.'

'What about Richard?'

'He's my next call, but he has at least sixty miles to cover.'

'Helicopter?'

'Still none available.'

Hanson fed in the coordinates.

'I could mobilise some locals, John,' suggested Blue Eagle.

‘No thank you, Sir. No disrespect to them, but I don’t want anyone blundering in there.’

‘Your call, John.’

‘I’m on my way.’

‘God speed.’

Hanson’s Bluetooth beeped as the line was closed. He wasn’t holding his breath for any help from God. The only person that was going to save Tom was him. If he had to, he would sign with the Devil right now, if it guaranteed his friend’s life. Running from the terraced house, he left the front door swinging wide open. Black would not be coming back here. Feeding in the coordinates into his Sat Nav, he noted the time, 5.42 p.m., 1 hour and 18 minutes of life remaining, travel time given as one hour twenty minutes.

Hanson sped down the road, reaching fifty before he had to brake for the first corner. Too many miles were left to balance against remaining life. He made a silent vow to reverse that equation as he stomped on the accelerator.

## Chapter Twenty Seven

**14 February - 18:31**  
**(Life remaining 29 minutes)**

**‘Whoever you are, you’re too late.’**

For two and a half hours, Cupid had been standing behind the table above Tom and Karen’s heads, speaking incessantly about his mission, and his quest for perfection in the pursuit of love and commitment. His rambling rhetoric of explanation anaesthetised Tom into submission, and Karen never made a sound. Tom knew from the news coverage of Cupid over the years, that a couple was killed on Valentine’s night. To be discovered and spread across the tabloids and TV screens of the nation, and the world the following day.

Now as he lay with his hand glued to his beloved Karen, he had mentally given up on life. He was tired to the point that he couldn’t think. The sores along his back, his legs and buttocks radiated a constant searing pain and he just wanted this to be over. He wanted the pain to stop and the nightmares that happened each time he closed his eyes to end. What he didn’t know was how the couples were killed, this along with many other details relating to Cupid were kept from the general public. Some were withheld for tactical reasons, others because they were trying to be sympathetic to the families of the victims. It was as Tom floated within his world of physical pain and mental anguish that a group of words used by Cupid cut through the woolly protection that his mind spun enveloping and protecting him.

‘That is why, Tom and Karen, I must open each of your chests, cut out your hearts and exchange them. For only then can your love find immortality, only then can you be as one for all eternity.’

Tom replayed the words in his head, struggling to see if he had the combination wrong. Even this maniac couldn’t be thinking of cutting out their hearts, he had to have misheard.

The sound of a trolley being wheeled behind them caused Tom to strain against the head restraint, but suddenly it didn’t matter, because the trolley came into view in the overhead mirror. On it, he could clearly see a number

of surgical instruments, bright chrome implements that told Tom he hadn't misheard. Cupid was about to cut them open to exchange their hearts in some morbid belief that he was giving their love eternal life.

*'Don't do this,'* spat Tom, thrashing with renewed energy against the straps, as Cupid lifted a shiny scalpel from the table and moved to the side of the table next to Karen.

*'It will soon be over, Tom. Karen will be first to give her heart, then you. Embrace this moment, eternity awaits you.'*

*'Please..., please don't do this!'* Blood was now seeping freely from the deep sores on Tom's wrists and ankles as he continued to buck against his bonds. His breathing collapsing into ragged gasps as he tired, his weakened state robbing him of his strength.

Cupid moved with slow deliberation placing the tip of the scalpel onto Karen's chest, directly between her breasts, and then he lifted his head back, staring to the rafters as if in prayer. Karen remained motionless, paralysed with fear. *'Accept this woman into the eternal life as she gives her heart freely to this man,'* screamed Cupid.

*'Get away from her!'* screeched Tom, unable to pull his gaze away from the scalpel and his fiancée. His pleadings collapsed into a pitiful wail of acceptance of the horror that was about to take place.

Adam exited the hanger through the side door. He knew from experience that the first cut would come shortly; when it did, the screaming would begin. The woman was quiet now, but when the blade bit into her flesh that would change. The same thing had happened before. For now, he had done his part. Now he would leave Cupid to his coupling, to his quest. Closing the hanger door, he moved across to the parking bays lit by a single halogen light fixed to the sidewall of the building. Here his bright red Jaguar sat next to Cupid's car. He would sit inside his beloved XJ6; turn up the music on his sound system until Cupid had completed his work, then when cupid had been fulfilled and left, he would clean up behind him. Then there would be the period of calm that followed until next year, and the next coupling.

Adam got within six feet of his car, when the sound of running caught his attention. Turning he caught the sight of a shape coming at him out of the darkness. Had he been a little quicker, he might have been able to avoid the baton that arced down from his right, catching him across the left side of his

face, opening a deep laceration and causing him to stumble back, crashing into the Jaguar.

.....

Hanson had made the trip in less than fifty minutes, pulling up in a small copse of trees a hundred yards from the gates of the airfield. He could see why it had had been chosen as he killed the lights and rolled to a stop. The only road that fed past it had a signpost at its entrance, a mile back from where Hanson now parked, claiming private access only. No unauthorised vehicles allowed. The grass and weeds growing across it gave testament to the lack of traffic. A quick look through night glasses showed two cars parked inside the fencing next to a large building that could have been a hanger at one time. One of the cars was clearly a Jaguar, and the other had to be Cupid's. Hanson checked his watch, 6.32 p.m., 28 minutes of life remaining. There was no time for surveillance, no time to reconnoitre; he had to get inside the fence line. Tom and Karen's lives were in his hands. He jogged towards the razor-topped fencing a hundred metres from the main gates. Quickly he cut several of the fence links with a pair of wire cutters kept in an extensive toolbox in the back of the people carrier. Many items were never used, but under the rule of Hanson, he would rather have it and not need it, than to need it and not have it. Inside the fence line, he tucked under his arm the item he had taken from James Holt's office, as he moved quickly and quietly towards the parked cars. Twenty metres out, a door opened in the side of the building allowing a splash of weak light to fan out onto the grass outside the dilapidated building. A large man followed; his shape alone telling Hanson this was Adam Black. He almost faltered on his approach as a scream from inside the building cut into the still night forcing Hanson to draw on all his professionalism to ignore the pitiful cry that despite its distortion he knew came from his friend Tom.

*'Get away from her.'*

Hanson had to put this man away and get into the building. He dropped the item he was carrying under his arm onto the grass and surged forward, drawing his telescopic baton as he closed in on the giant who had begun to turn, clearly hearing him approach. He would have preferred to just draw his Sig, double tap him in the head and run to the hanger door, but that would alert Cupid, who he knew must be inside the building.

Hanson delivered a vicious swipe across the left side of the man's head, sending him crashing back into the side of the red Jag, but to Hanson's surprise, the man stayed on his feet. Before Black could gather his senses, Hanson delivered six devastating blows to his head and arms, but the man simply grunted at each, surging forward like a wounded buffalo with blood streaming down both sides of his face.

Hanson jumped to the side easily, avoiding the brute and he delivered a savage snap kick to the side of the man's right knee, sending him down in a massive heap of cursing muscle. The loud pop told Hanson the giant's knee had dislocated.

Avoiding the fallen man, Hanson moved to the dropped item and gathered it up. As he turned, he was stunned to see that the grunting man had climbed up onto his good leg, and was blocking his way to the small door. A high-pitched scream from inside the hanger triggered a lopsided smile to form on the giant's face. *'Whoever you are, you're too late,'* he hissed, gritting his teeth as he dealt with the pain that Hanson had already inflicted upon him.

*'Stand aside,'* warned Hanson, bending to place the item back onto the grass. His eyes remained fixed on Black, who made the mistake of allowing his gaze to drop for a split second to the object.

*'You'll never get past me, you...'*

Black never finished the threat, as the man coming at him, suddenly closed the gap between them faster than he had ever seen a man move. The first blow hit Black in the windpipe. That one alone would have killed him as his airway collapsed. The second blow was with the heel of the hand, hitting him just below the nose and driving the bone up into his brain. Both were delivered in a blur of movement, giving Black no time to react. As the massive man dropped backwards onto the grass, Hanson quickly gathered up the object and entered the building.

As Hanson entered, Tom screamed again, *'Nooo, don't cut her!'*

Hanson quickly took in the scene, his blood running cold at seeing Tom and Karen strapped to a large table. A man, who he guessed was Cupid was standing to one side, with a scalpel in his hand, a ribbon of blood running down Karen's ribcage, telling him that he had already cut into Karen's chest, causing her to release a high-pitched scream that scurried away to every dark corner, and every recess of the hanger.



*'Stop!'* Shouted Hanson, running forward, the Perspex tube containing Brenda Stiles' heart held high above his head.

*'John,'* whimpered Tom. *'He... he's cut her, she... she's bleeding.'*

Cupid took two steps back, his features twisted in confusion at the entrance of Hanson. Where was Adam? Screamed the question in his brain. *'No, you can't be here,'* he snarled, waving the bloody scalpel at the stranger, and then lunging forward, pressed the blade against Karen's throat, bringing Hanson's forward motion to a sudden halt. *'You're spoiling everything,'* he hissed, *'This is a moment of purity, a moment of...'* James Holt stopped talking when he seemed to notice for the first time the cylinder Hanson was holding above his head.

*'Give that to me,'* he snapped, his voice low laced with venom.

Hanson took a gamble, *'Take it,'* he replied, throwing the container high above Cupid's head.

Hanson watched as the scalpel dropped from Holt's hand, falling to the floor as he turned and tracked the container sailing over his head. Reaching up, he attempted to snatch it from the air, and then he roared in anguish as it crashed to the floor ten feet away. The lid flew off the speared heart and the liquid within spilled across the dusty floor of the hanger.

Hanson raced forward, putting himself between Cupid, and Tom, and Karen. *'You're safe now, Tom. It's over,'* he called over his shoulder.

*'I... I knew you would come,'* cried Tom, the quiver in his voice reflecting his relief. *'I knew you would come.'*

Hanson felt the white hot rage flare up inside, as he allowed himself a quick look at his friend and Karen, while Cupid scabbled on the floor trying to get Brenda Stiles' heart back into the container. Frantically, he was trying to sweep the liquid back into it. He winced as he took in the sores covering the pair, the caked blood on Tom's wrists and ankles, and the deep two-inch cut in Karen's chest that needed treatment urgently. He turned back to Holt, who had staggered to his feet, clutching the container to his chest.

*'Get away from my couple,'* he bellowed, pacing towards Hanson.

Hanson drew his Sig and shot Holt in his right kneecap. He didn't pay him any attention after that, as he crashed to the floor screaming, the container falling from his grasp to skid away once again. Quickly releasing the straps holding Tom and Karen, he warned them to lie still. Reaching into one of his pockets, he pulled out an emergency kit for wounds and quickly

pulled the lips of the deep cut together and secured it with butterfly strips, and then covered it with a clean gauze and plaster ‘You need to let go of Karen’s hand, Tom, so I can lift her,’ he urged gently.

*‘I... I can’t, John,’* came the rasping reply, *‘He... he glued them together.’*

The white rage flared again within Hanson’s chest. He walked over to Cupid, pulled out his SIG and shot him in the other knee, enjoying every decibel of the high-pitched wail from the monster.

*‘John, is... is that you?’* asked Karen, her voice weak and her teeth chattering with the cold.

Hanson quickly placed a blanket over Karen to allow her to regain her dignity, ‘Hey, you’re safe now, I’ve come to take you home.’ He stroked her head and told her to lie still. He turned to Tom and helped him sit up slowly, the agony clear as he grimaced at each tiny movement. The glue on their hands had broken down during their captivity and after some persuasion; John managed to separate their hands with only a small loss of skin. ‘I need to get the two of you warm, Tom.’ Lifting Karen first, he carried her outside and placed her into the Jaguar, started the engine and set the heater to high. Returning, he found Tom on all fours cursing as he crawled towards Cupid.

‘Come on, Tom,’ soothed Hanson, reaching down for his friend.

*‘G...give me your gun,’* gasped Tom, fighting the pain.

‘Not a good idea. You would probably shoot yourself in the foot.’

*‘He... he has to pay, John, he has to pay.’*

‘He will, I promise you.’

Hanson helped his friend up and carried him out to the Jaguar. Inside the blower was working well and the temperature was doing wonders for Karen. *‘Tom said you would come.’*

‘Tom was right,’ winked Hanson. ‘Now you two sit tight.’

‘Where are you going?’ asked Tom, studying his friend.

Hanson’s eyes narrowed and his jaw lifted slightly, ‘There are a couple of things that need tying up inside.’ No one else seeing the slight change in Hanson’s features would read too much into it. Tom was not just anyone; he had served with his friend in some of the worst hell holes on earth. He had seen that change of expression many times; it always ended badly for someone. Tom knew today was going to be no different.

Hanson re-entered the hanger, Cupid who had managed to prop himself

against one of the walls. *'I'll... I'll plead insanity,'* hissed the wounded man. *'I'll end up in a plushy hospital. I...I can afford the best barristers available,'* he grimaced, the pain distorting his features.

Hanson grabbed the man by the shirtfront, lifted him and slammed him onto the table, occupied just a short while ago by Tom. Strapping the man down, he ignored the screams as he straightened his legs, pulling tight the ankle straps that were still sticky with Tom's blood.

Hanson leaned down, locking eyes with Cupid.

*'You're not going to end up in a plushy hospital.'*

*'Go... go to hell,'* spat Cupid in defiance.

Hanson's eyes narrowed as he reached over his shoulder and pulled out his Venom knife. *'You first,'* he hissed.

Tom wrapped his arms tightly around Karen as she buried her head deep within his embrace. Even with the heater at full blast and with the windows closed, the screams from within the hanger were clear. They went on for less than twenty seconds. John Hanson walked out minutes later, opened the Jag door and leaned in, *'I'm going to get the people carrier, and then I'm taking you two to the hospital.'*

Tom nodded, *'What about Cupid?'*

Hanson gave his friend a rock steady stare, *'Cupid turned over a new leaf. It seems he had a change of heart.'*

Hanson closed the door and went for the people carrier. On reaching it, he opened the boot and quickly changed his clothes with a spare set that he always carried, placing the ones he was wearing into a plastic bag. They would be destroyed later; the stains would never come out completely.

Ten minutes later, Hanson had Tom and Karen in the back of the people carrier, heading away from the airfield, and away from Cupid, just as a stream of police cars came wailing down the track. Richard Turner was in the lead car and after a brief conversation with Hanson, he led his officers back towards the airfield gates. John called HQ and gave them the news that he had Tom and Karen safe and he was on his way to hospital to have them checked out.

Blue Eagle called through and asked to speak to Tom. Hanson switched to loudspeaker. *'Hey Tom, I hear you've had a couple of days rest and relaxation.'*

‘Yeah, just been lying around all day, Sir.’

*‘Well, I hope John’s not going to go soft and pay you for those two days. I sure as hell wouldn’t.’*

Tom shook his head and chuckled. This is what he wanted, normality.

‘Tom?’

‘Sir?’

*‘Good to have you back.’*

‘Thank you, Sir.’

A beep indicated the line had closed.

‘Was I imagining things, John, or was Blue Eagle being nice to me?’

‘Don’t get used to it, it won’t last.’

Tom caught his friend’s eye in the rearview mirror, ‘Thanks for coming for us, John.’

Hanson shrugged, ‘I had nothing else to do. Oh and Blue Eagle was right, I’m not paying you for those two days.’

Tom’s laughter was what Hanson wanted to hear. It’s what he craved during the past two days, something he thought he had lost forever, but John Hanson was a man who didn’t give up his friends easily. Death’s jaws had come up light this day. Tom and Karen were both plucked from them at the thirteenth hour. Hanson had stared into those jaws many times and would, he was confident, stare into them many more times in the future, but on this particular occasion, on this particular day, they had been cheated.

Well, almost.

## Epilogue

### **‘My heart belongs to you.’**

The day following Tom and Karen’s rescue, John Hanson had a meeting with Richard Turner that completely changed his opinion of the man. It would lay down the foundations of a friendship which would span many years where their paths would crisscross many times both socially and within their fields of work. Hanson smiled often as he remembered that meeting. The details of which would never be repeated to another soul.

‘Thanks for coming in, John. How are Tom and Karen?’

‘All things considered, pretty good. Physically they’re a bit battered, but I reckon they will be fit again in a week or two. Mentally, well that’s another story.’

Turner nodded, he had seen the psychological damage that victims had suffered in post crime trauma, and it was an ugly thing. ‘They seem to be a strong couple.’

‘They are and they have good support from friends and family, so we remain hopeful.’

‘I spoke briefly with them yesterday. They seem to be suffering from memory lapses on what took place at the airfield.’

Hanson shrugged, ‘Happens.’ He noticed a shift in Turner’s expression as he came to the real point of the meeting.

‘Could we, um... could we go through the events yesterday, after you arrived at the airfield?’

Hanson settled himself in the chair on the visitor’s side of Turner’s desk and simply nodded. He knew there were massive holes in the brief scenario that he had given over to Turner when he arrived at the airfield yesterday, so was prepared for some tough questions.

‘You told me yesterday that you believe James Holt and Adam Black had some sort of disagreement and that Black killed Holt. Subsequently, when you arrived, Black attacked you and you killed Black in self-defence?’

‘That’s pretty much it,’ agreed Hanson, studying Turner carefully.

‘Can we start with the question of the gun Black used to shoot Holt with John?’

Hanson made no comment. He knew this would come up, how could it

not. He was not about to leave his gun on site, so the lack of a firearm at the scene was always going to come back to bite him.

Turner opened a drawer and took out a small handgun, which he placed onto the desktop. 'Would you be prepared to swear that this was the gun you saw at the scene?'

Hanson stared into Turner's eyes for several seconds, 'Do the bullets recovered match that gun?' he asked quietly.

Turner reached into his pocket, took out two badly mashed bullets, and placed them next to the gun. 'You mean these bullets, John?'

Hanson picked up one of the bullets, and even in this condition, he could see that they never came from his Sig.'

'You recognise the gun. Maybe you saw it at the scene, John?'

Hanson raised his head from the study of the bullet and fixed Turner with a steady gaze, 'Looks familiar.'

'Hope it's more than familiar. I've confirmed in my report that this is the gun that I collected from the scene along with these bullets.'

For several seconds, their eyes remained locked, as an unspoken understanding passed between them.

'In fact, now that I see it up close, I can confirm that this is in fact the gun I saw at the scene.'

'That would explain why it's got Black's fingerprints on it,' informed Turner.

'Certainly would,' agreed Hanson, seeing Turner in a new light.

'Of course... if there was a camcorder recording the whole thing, one sitting up high on a ledge where one might not see it. Well, that might make things easy to put together, wouldn't you say, John?'

Hanson looked deep into Turner's eyes. How could he have missed that? Cupid was obviously recording each of the couples that he'd seen the DVDs, for Christ's sake. 'I suppose a recording could help to clarify things,' agreed Hanson.

'A recording like that would give us all the answers we would need as to how Cupid met his end.'

'There's no arguing that,' affirmed Hanson, his eyes still locked with Turner's.

'It might show how Black cut out Cupid's heart, threw it to one side and stuffed Brenda Stiles' heart into his chest cavity.'

‘Would have been ugly, Richard.’

Turner swallowed and simply nodded, his voice failing him for a beat. ‘Problem is,’ he continued regaining his composure, ‘things go missing at this station sometimes. You know, I’ve heard of items ending up, by mistake mind you, in the incinerator in the basement, can you believe that?’

‘That’s terrible.’

‘Terrible is right, John.’

Hanson dropped his eyes to the gun, ‘Wouldn’t a detailed forensic study of the scene possibly throw up, what shall we say, other scenarios?’

‘Depends on whether the lead detective on the case was unhappy with this particular scenario.’

‘That lead detective would be you?’

‘None other.’

‘Happy?’

‘Ecstatic, but there is just one other thing.’

‘Which is?’

‘A lot of the details of how Cupid murdered the victims were kept secret from the public. A lot of the tabloids picked up scraps and of course, the families were advised, but to actually see loved ones being butchered would be something that I would not want the families of victims to see, but that would only be a problem if such recordings existed.’

‘Absolutely,’ confirmed Hanson.

‘Did you happen to see any such recordings when you were at Holt’s office yesterday?’

Hanson shook his head, ‘Can’t say that I did.’

‘Even if they did,’ shrugged Turner ‘like I said, things go missing sometimes.’

Basement?’

‘Who knows?’

Hanson nodded agreement, ‘Who knows?’

Turner stood and offered his hand, ‘I think we’re done here.’

Hanson took the extended hand in a solid grip, fixing the detective through clear blue eyes, ‘If ever you need a friend, you only need to call. I’ll be there.’

Turner held the grip, ‘A friend like you, I could use. An enemy...’ Turner simply shook his head, his features losing some of their colour, as he

remembered the recording he had watched.

There followed a two month feeding frenzy among the tabloids covering the reign of Cupid. Giles Fuller was in the forefront of the pack, despite the charges hanging over him, determined to get his slice of the media pie.

Hanson had to square away his decision to deal with Cupid as he had with his own conscience. It wasn't a difficult argument. If Cupid had been allowed to reach a courtroom, he would have used it like a soapbox to preach his distorted view of his so-called quest, his mission to bring lovers to eternal unity. The families of each of the victims would have had to have suffered the minute details of the slaughter of their loved ones. Every grisly moment of their death would become fodder for the press and an opportunity for every weirdo and nut job to inflict further pain with sick letters and e-mails targeting the families. Some would argue that to set yourself up above the law was to act as God. Hanson would argue that the evil that some men do, takes away their rights to a judge and jury, and where God couldn't act, he would. Cupid had stepped into his world, abducted people dear to him and attempted to take their lives. He had simply repaid in kind.

The next occasion that Hanson met Richard Turner was at Tom and Karen's wedding three months later. John was the best man while Stephanie and Jane smiled and giggled as bridesmaids. It was the most magical of days and a testament to the human spirit following the traumatic episode they had been subjected to. The bond that had formed between them and forged in the fires of their ordeal, would never be broken. Nothing they would face on life's journey would ever come close to testing their strength of will, their devotion or their commitment to each other, as that episode had.

During the service, there was a poignant moment when prior to the official vows, Tom and Karen recited a short paragraph each had written for the other. The words spoken were a testament to the depth of the love that each felt for the other, moving and sincere, but it was the line that each finished with, the same line, that would stay with Hanson his entire life. Five simple words that separately were harmless, innocuous, yet put them together in a certain order and in any language they became a powerful testament, the message within them universal, eternal.



‘My heart belongs to you.’