

CHAPTER ONE

ONEIDA, NEW YORK STATE. NOVEMBER, 2007.

Sam Tynnan had no idea how close to death he was; after all, he was used to writing those scenarios for his characters, not himself. But he was tense, breath held, for an entirely different reason at that moment; everything around him seeming suddenly suspended. The faint rustle of tree tops in the breeze on the forest edge a hundred yards back from the house, a dog barking somewhere in the distance, the muted strains of Paco de Lucia's 'Concierto de Aranjuez' from the next room.

Suspended, expectant – the clawing hope and ambitions of the past eighteen months now honed

down to just a few moments – as Sam Tynnan mentally grasped for the perfect paragraph on which to finish the book that might earn him a million.

Sam knew more than most what a lottery it was. Writing full-time now for nine years, he knew that a manuscript could garner you anything from a 20 cent rejection slip, through advances that wouldn't feed a secretary for a month, to low- and high-five figures, low and high-six, to the pinnacle, seven-figure advances.

His agent, Elliot 'Elli' Roschler, had read Sam's initial outlines and had seemed really excited, 'Looks like this could be the big one.' But that term in itself had changed meaning in the past few years. Since the publication of Adam Dayne's *Magdalen Code*, the market had been turned on its head. Suddenly religious and mythology thrillers were flavour of the month and foreseeable future. Dayne himself had earned over forty million dollars from the book, but there'd been a score of sky-high advances and royalties riding in its wake.

Sam looked at the words on his computer screen with due reverence. No more worries about mortgage and credit card payments, no more concerns about holidays and the money and time lost taking them, no more asking Kate if she could hold on for the maintenance payment until his next advance came in.

It felt so close now, so tangible and real. He could imagine Elli's exuberance as it came through and he read it. Then days later the calls would start: the first

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bid, another one or two topping, then the juggling and Elli playing one publisher against the other to stoke the fire for the final auction.

But despite the heady figures Elli had projected seeming unreal – especially after such a long dry spell – a part of Sam felt as if they were not only real, as if already half in the bank, but also fully deserved.

Because this particular book had been a battle. A harder battle than any book he'd written so far.

And his at-home office was strewn with the remnants of that battle: chapters and segments written and re-written, deconstructed and reconstructed, spider-scrawl writing in the margins and often continuing on the back of pages; countless filled notepads, which had accompanied him even on shopping trips and dinner dates and were by his bedside every night, in case a chain of thought hit him that he feared he might not get back in quite the same way again.

Then there was the mountain of books and papers: fourteen volumes on Nostradamus alone, the *Bible* and *Koran*, Steinsaltz's *Talmud*, Bukhari's *Hadiths*, Tahawi's *Aqeedatut*, *The Clementine Vulgate*, and countless reports, commentaries and quotes from the Internet.

But the other reason Sam felt he deserved this now was because, after all these years of writing, he knew that ideas as good as this rarely came along. In fact, often they didn't come along at all. If he hadn't by chance stumbled across a Nostradamus passage while

researching something else, then linked that to a chain of current events, he might never have hit on the idea. Coming just four months after his mother's death, it was as if she was reaching a hand down from heaven. 'Here. Here's the jigsaw piece in your life that has so far been missing.'

So tangible, so real now. *So close.* Sam reached out one hand and touched the screen, as if that physical contact might help the last words flow. Just a few more lines now and he was finally there.

'What's the hold-up?'

'Don't know.' The computer operator, mid-twenties, looked up only briefly from his screen. He shrugged and smiled lamely. 'Takes time to finish a book, I guess.'

'You guess, huh, Cali?' There were twelve years between them, but most importantly three levels of rank. The younger man's smile faded as his section commander leant over the desk. 'Why don't you do me and everyone else here a favour and remind us what the last communication said?'

There were another six men in the room – a dingy, bare-walled warehouse unit with a desk, computer, three chairs and two benches its only furniture. No one said anything, but there were a few faint smiles.

They'd been with Washington a little longer; long enough to know better. Or perhaps because they

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were the front end of any ops. One slip from favour and Washington could make sure that you were first through any door, the first to face a bullet.

And now also because they were playing out the final scene of an op; long months of planning boiled down into a few hours, then those final frantic minutes when one foot wrong or a split-second mis-timing invariably spelt death. No second chances.

Washington, Cali, Ohio, Illy, Montana, Utah, Nevada, Texas... When their section had first been put together fifteen months back, they'd each been offered a choice of state name to mask identities. 'So choose any you like – but *not* the state you live in. And *not* Washington – that's already taken. That's me.' Clear reminder of rank positioning at the outset. And three- and four-syllable States could be shortened to easy nicknames, but *not* Washington.

Cali held one finger by his screen. 'Says here in his last email... "Up to page 434, just a page or so to go now. Hope to finish later this afternoon and get the whole thing through to you before you head off."'

'And what time was that?'

'Two-eighteen.'

Washington checked his watch. 'Three and a half hours just to write a page or so?'

'Endings could be like beginnings, I suppose – the hardest part. Got to make sure everything's wrapped up neatly – no loose ends. Then there's final polishing

and—’ Cali broke off as he caught Washington’s withering look. He nodded. ‘But, *yeah*, it’s a long time.’

There was still nothing from the six apart from a faint shuffle, a creak from one of the bench seats. Weight being shifted, unease settling deeper. They’d already been waiting over three hours on a knife-edge, and now might face another hour or so.

Stocky and broad-shouldered, their Kevlar vests made them look larger still. The only light in the room was from a desk lamp by the computer, and with their black combat fatigues they made ominous shadows.

‘Any indication of whether Roschler has left his office yet?’ Washington asked.

‘Not really. All his link says is that he’s online, but may be away from his computer. Which could mean anything: simply doing something else at his desk, he’s somewhere else in his office, or in fact he *has* left, but kept his computer on overnight to link to from a home computer.’

Nevada, the strike team leader and second in command to Washington, spoke for the first time.

‘If he *is* linking from a home computer, that’ll mean a last-minute shift Wyo’s gonna be none too happy with.’

‘Yeah, I know.’ Washington grimaced.

Wyo, head of the second team, was waiting with similar white-knuckle anticipation four hundred miles away. And while they’d covered that eventuality and

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a score of others, it was a gentle reminder that *still* something could go wrong.

But from his years of running ops like this, Washington knew the weight behind that comment. Consoling themselves in these final tense moments that someone, somewhere, was in more danger and with more at stake if it all went wrong.

Washington knew that on this particular op, more than any other, that was far from the truth.

‘Where are you now?’

‘Just crossing thirty-eighth.’ Glancing through his taxi window, Elli Roschler picked up on Sam’s intimation. ‘But if I head back now to pick it up, I’ll be late for this early dinner meet.’ Elli checked his watch. ‘Already looks like I might be a few minutes over. I’ll grab it straight after – should be no more than a couple of hours. You say just three minutes ago you sent it?’

‘Yeah. I tried your office line first to see if it came through OK.’

‘Just missed me. And Maggie left ten minutes before me tonight.’ Elli eased out a slow, satisfied sigh. ‘My, my, Sam. Finished...*finished!* You must be on cloud nine.’ Elli chuckled. ‘That is, when you’ve pinched and shaken yourself out of that haze of unreality that you *have* actually finished.’

‘A couple of Carlos Terceros should do that for me.’

‘I’ll raise a glass to that too over dinner.’

‘Anything exciting?’

‘Nah, not really. Warts and all bio. Fallen soap star. Mother beat and abused her, drugs and drink later which she blames on that. AA and rehab, gets married then discovers she’s a lesbian, more drugs and rehab. Oh, and her dog, from the trauma of all this, is now in therapy too. You know, the standard American success story.’

They both laughed. In the past nine years of their association, they’d become more than just agent and client, they’d become close friends. Elli and Mike Kiernan – a fellow writer of Sam’s and Oneida, NY State resident – had been the first to offer their condolences and shoulders to cry on when three years back Kate had left him and headed for the West Coast with their son, Ashley, then only six, to pursue her career. After a decent period of mourning for the relationship, Sam’s friends had done their utmost to play matchmaker for him. But invariably the set-ups had left Sam feeling all the more lonely and out of sorts, thinking of how both Elli’s and Mike’s marriages had stood the test of time, their homes full of the photo evidence: anniversaries, family holidays, Christmas and birthday snaps with their sons and daughters. But Sam knew that they meant well. Good friends. And thankfully all of that had stopped when Lorrena had walked into his life a year ago.

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‘And I daresay you’ll be raising a champagne glass or two with Lorrena tonight?’ Elli commented.

‘Yeah, sure will.’ Sam glanced at his watch. It was still an hour or so before she was in. She’d recently started taking Italian language evening classes; a sudden desire to learn her parents’ native language.

‘I’ll pick it up on my way back from dinner and start reading straight away tonight. So looks like a midnight-oiler.’ Elli chuckled, then became more serious. ‘And Sam?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Well done. Because I know at times this one hasn’t been easy for you.’

‘Thanks.’ Sam sighed, as if finally shedding the last of that burden. ‘Let’s just hope you’re still saying “well done” when you’ve read it.’

‘I’m sure I will...I’m sure I will.’

After they’d said their goodbyes, the house felt even stiller, more silent. There was nobody else to talk to until Lorrena came in, and no manuscript to dive into any more. He’d *finished!* He felt suddenly at a loose end, slightly empty, as if someone close who he’d spoken to every day had just walked out; pretty much how he’d felt when Kate had left with Ashley, in fact.

The TV was on a news channel on mute – Sam often did that to relieve the solitude; it made him feel plugged into and part of the world outside, but

without the disturbance. The classical CD he'd been listening to had finished.

He went into the lounge to slot in another. He wanted something with energy now to kick him out of his mood, start celebrating that he'd actually, finally finished. Fifth down in the CD rack he found *The Police – Greatest Hits*. Perfect. Took him back to his teens. He selected track four, 'Message in a Bottle', and he swayed to it on his way through to the kitchen, joining in on the chorus as he grabbed a Bud from the fridge. He took a swig as he part-danced his way back to the lounge.

With the song's heavy bass and percussion, at first the sound of glass smashing didn't fully register; and when it did, Sam's head swivelled sharply back to the kitchen – perhaps the fridge door had swung open and one of the other bottles had fallen? But a stark beam flickering haphazardly through his lounge disorientated him, and he'd only just started to react to the silhouette lunging towards him, when an arm was clamped around his neck, yanking him back again.

The grip was strong, rigid. Sam's legs felt suddenly like molten jelly, ready to give way, but the arm held him firm as he was dragged back, shuffling frantically to keep up, to his office.

'Khoob, computeresh hanooz mutassil ast. Mohkam giriftee-esh?'

'Baley, man daaramesh!'

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Sam could now see another two men: one taking a seat at his computer, another at the end of the lounge by the front door, no doubt in case he decided that escaping that way was an option. Sam didn't know what they were saying, but he'd heard enough from his research over the past eighteen months to recognise the language: Arabic or Farsi. But the man by his computer now addressed him in English.

'The book you've just finished. Who have you sent it to so far?'

'I...I don't know,' Sam stumbled. 'Can't remember now.'

He was in shock but there was also another sharply rising panic: if they took his copies of *The Prophecy* from the computer *and* got hold of Elli's copy – that was it. No more copies out there.

'Let's try that again, shall we?'

Heavily accented, but still American English – as if they were Arab immigrants from New York or Buffalo who'd arrived in the USA five to ten years back. Not the clear but lilting cadences of the Saudi and Egyptian nationals he'd spoken to while researching.

Sam felt the air shunt out of him as his back hit the floor and of the men straddled him, pinning him down. A hand was clamped tight to his throat and a gun thrust into his face, its barrel inches from his nose.

'Where, mister? *Where?*' the man straddling him

shouted, speaking for the first time. Computer-man was suddenly busy, eyes fixed to the screen as he sifted through Sam's files. The gun was cocked.

Last copy then gone! And he couldn't send a mob like this Elli's way. What if they went to his house while Miriam and the kids were there and...?

Sam's breath came out with a shuddering gasp as the trigger struck home with only a click. Computer-man's chuckle rode its hollow echo.

'Where did you buy that gun, Hadi? A Gaza marketplace?'

'Never given trouble before.'

The gun was prodded closer, the man's leer fading as his eyes took on a fresh, pinprick intensity.

'For the *last* time, where...*where?*'

Computer-man already had his email file history up, and Sam realised the futility of holding back; they'd find it any second in any case.

'Elliot Roschler – my agent. I sent him a copy a short while ago.'

A couple of key taps, then a slow sigh from computer-man. 'OK, got it here. Elli Roschler. Sent nine minutes ago.' A gentle nod to the man towards the front door out of Sam's vision, then he half-turned to Sam again. 'Anyone else?'

Sam thought for a moment. 'No...no. That's it.'

'And no other copies sent to Roschler before?'

'Ah, wait – yes.' Sam suddenly remembered. 'An

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outline and the first three chapters when I started – then this, just a few minutes ago.’

The hand gripped tighter around his throat, as if punishing him for the momentary forgetfulness, gunman’s teasing leer rising again as the cold of the gun barrel was traced below his left eye. Sam shuddered, his body’s trembling tipping into overload.

‘And nobody else?’

‘No – he was the *only* one. Nobody else.’

‘And apart from the hard copy we see here,’ computer-man gestured towards the papers strewn across his desk and a side cabinet, ‘any other disk or CD copies?’

‘No, no...that’s it.’ Sam swallowed hard, feeling his Adam’s apple pulse against the hand on his throat. ‘It’s all here.’

‘Sounds like a story to me,’ gunman said. ‘No other copies sent out in all that time. And *no* disk copies.’

Computer-man raised a quizzical eyebrow, and after a second gave a gentle, submissive nod as he turned back to the screen.

‘Where else, fuckhead? *Where else?*’ gunman screamed, and Sam felt some of his spittle land on his face. ‘There *have* to be other copies somewhere.’

‘No, there’s no more – I *swear!*’

At the far end of the room, the third man was talking in Farsi to someone on his cellphone. Sting

was singing about sending an SOS to the world, but nobody was listening.

The trigger was pulled. Another empty click.

Sam swallowed back sour bile.

Computer-man sniggered. 'That really is one whore of a gun, Hadi.'

'Or maybe I just didn't put in enough bullets.' Sly, concessionary smile from gunman.

'Ah, the old Russian roulette routine. Never fails.'

'Except I can't remember how many bullets I put in – two or three.' The smile widened, but his eyes stayed fixed coldly on Sam.

'Bound to hit one soon, I suppose.'

'Yeah.'

The third man, finishing his call, came over with a paper shredder, plugged it in, and started feeding in the loose manuscript pages from Sam's desk and side cabinet.

The trigger was cocked again.

'For the last time – *who else?*' Gunman glared malevolently, all trace of humour, teasing or otherwise, suddenly gone. 'And think *very* carefully before you answer this time.'

'I swear – nobody else. Nobody!' Sam glanced pleadingly towards computer-man, sensing that he held the main sway. 'We had to keep everything tight on this one – as you can imagine.'

Computer-man's eyes searched his long and hard.

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Then, after a frozen moment that felt like a lifetime, again that gentle nod.

‘Yes, I *can* imagine, Mr Tynnan.’ He blinked heavily and sighed. ‘I think he’s telling the truth, Hadi. So just finish it.’ He turned back to the computer, as if Sam was no longer of any relevance, and slotted in a re-start disk to wipe it clean.

Sam’s heart sank. He should have guessed that they’d kill him anyway once they had what they wanted. A moment ago he was desperately clinging to eighteen months’ work, now life itself was slipping from reach. Tears welled in his eyes, the gun and the man beyond suddenly blurred through them.

‘*Please!*’ he pleaded, but his voice sounded distant, disembodied.

‘That is, if there’s a bullet up next,’ gunman said, ignoring him.

‘Oh, Hadi, you’ve no heart – enough torture for the evening.’

CHAPTER TWO

LONDON, ENGLAND.

‘There’s been another increase in activity, Adel.’

‘How much?’

‘Fourteen per cent since yesterday.’

Adel nodded thoughtfully. ‘How about the other TAME sections?’

‘Section one is just waking up. But for TAMEs three through seven, much the same. Some even higher.’

Adel cast a brief eye around the room: seventy-nine other computers, each with their own operators, with most of the on-screen text in Arabic, Farsi or Urdu.

Pre-9/11, there’d been less than forty Arab translation operatives between the USA and Britain.

Echelon could sift through millions of phone and email messages worldwide and pass that on to the NSA and GCHQ and, in turn, CIA and MI5; but when Arabic, Farsi and Urdu keywords were added to the pot, that extra flood of messages had to be read and analysed. And that had been half the problem. Swamped by the sudden deluge in Arab-language ‘activity’ in the run-up to 9/11, those operatives had been unable to sift through and find those few vital messages – at least in time.

They weren’t making that mistake again.

Adel Al-Shaffir, born in Dumyat, Egypt, but for the last twenty years, ever since his LSE days, considering himself very much a Londoner, headed TAME2. His counterpart, Jalil El-Abinah, New Jersey-born to Lebanese parents, headed TAME1 in New York. TAME3 was Paris, 4 Berlin, 5 Madrid, 6 Rome, and the other twelve TAMEs – Terrorist Activity Monitoring and Evaluation centres – were spread between Tel Aviv and Jakarta.

Recruitment had been key. Arab nations such as Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia had keen self-interest in combating terrorism. But then Arafat had been half-Egyptian, Al-Zaqawi Jordanian, and Bin Laden Saudi. What if you got a rogue operator, one who made sure those vital messages were overlooked? So, apart from a strict vetting process, areas of responsibility were changed regularly so that it would be practically

impossible for a terrorist cell to ensure their particular messages hit a ‘sympathetic’ computer.

Few felt the pressure of that more than Adel Al-Shaffir, responsible for this room full of mostly Muslim men balancing dual moral ethics: on one hand that they were tracking the bad guys, yet on the other were betraying their own.

So Adel had to act not just as their boss, but as an adviser, friend and confidant, so that he was close enough to gauge if that latter moral ethic became too much for them. Correspondingly, secrecy was more vital in their department than any other: they could never talk outside about what they did. Because while they might have come to terms with that latter ethic, others might take a different view – so such talk could be their death sentence.

At times for Adel the pressure of it – balancing not only his own shadow life and ethics, but that of all his men – was too much, would bring a tremble to his hands, wake him in the dead of night in a cold sweat. *Was there something he’d missed?*

Adel considered the stats. *Fourteen per cent?* On its own, it wasn’t too much to worry about. But there’d been ten or eleven per cent increases now every day for a week, with five and six per cent increments for a few days leading up to that. A good hundred and twenty per cent increase overall. Something was happening out there.

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Sam heard the shot this time, felt the sticky warmth of his own blood on his face and neck. But the pain seemed to be in his chest rather than his head, and the man pinning him down was slumped against him.

And through a blurred, watery haze – some of the blood had run into his eyes – he became aware of other gunshots and frantic activity: a flurry of footsteps and sharp, urgent voices, computer-man raising his gun just before two shots ripped into his chest and threw him back a yard, three more shots from deeper in the room out of sight – one of them thudding into the body against him as Sam felt it move a fraction; perhaps a last death spasm rather than him trying to raise up again.

And then a figure in dark combat fatigues was leaning over him. ‘Are you OK?’ One hand grabbed the shoulder of the body slumped on him and hefted it brusquely aside.

‘Yes, I...I think so. For...for a minute I thought...’ He swallowed back the sour tang where some blood had trickled into his mouth. Sam tried to quickly, desperately adjust to what had happened, while his still-racing heart drum-tattooed it home: *still alive, still alive...alive!* ‘That...th—’

The man gripped Sam’s shoulder, pressing reassuringly. ‘Don’t worry, you’re OK! Rest easy.’ He gave a quick scan of Sam’s body to make sure he

hadn't missed anything on his first assessment. 'We got here just in time.'

'Certainly does look that way, Mr Tynnan,' another voice added.

The man who'd spoken was in his mid-forties, thickset with a touch of grey at the sideburns and a healthy tan, as if he topped it up with regular trips to Florida or the sunroom at his local health club. He wore the same combat fatigues as the others, but without the automatic rifle or helmet, and his jacket was loose at the top to show a crisp white shirt and tie beneath. As if this was just a tiresome distraction from his office duties.

Nevada moved aside and started directing his men on clean-up as Washington crouched down, taking his place.

'We'd in fact hoped to get here sooner.' Washington's easy smile pulled into a tight grimace. 'We've been on to them for a while now, but they still caught us on the hop. Our plan was to cut them off while they were at your back door – not already through it with a gun at your head.'

Sam sat up, wiping the blood from his eyes. Washington proffered a hankie, which with a nod of thanks Sam used to wipe away the rest.

'*They?*' Sam glanced towards the nearby bodies, one of them being zipped into a plastic body bag.

'Extreme jihad cell. Like I say, we've been tracking

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them for a while.’ Washington sighed softly. ‘And they’ve been tracking *you* for a while, too. Checking your emails back and forth, *anything* regarding *The Prophecy* they could pick up on. That’s why they came in now – you sending the final copy to Roschler.’

Sam shook his head as he struggled to make sense of it all. An extreme jihad cell? And now an anti-terrorist squad? It was all too much. ‘But if they knew already who I’d sent to – why all their questions?’

Washington contemplated Sam soberly. ‘Oh, they *knew* all right. They just wanted to see if you’d tell them the truth. Also to find out about any loose disk or hard copies they might not know about. If you lied about the electronic copies they knew about, then there was a good chance you’d lie about the rest.’

Sam closed his eyes as a shudder ran through him. All that would have meant was more toying with him, more Russian roulette and empty chamber clicks before he finally snapped.

‘*Elli!*’ Sam’s eyes flicked open again, Washington’s mention of Roschler sparking the thought. ‘They’ve probably sent people there too. You’ve got to get to him!’

Washington held out a calming hand. ‘Don’t worry. Already taken care of. Another of my teams should be there soon.’ Washington patted the cellphone in his breast pocket. ‘They’ll call me the minute they have news.’

Washington asked if Roschler might still be in

his office, and Sam related their conversation of ten moments ago.

Washington grimaced. 'One consolation, at least. His not being there when they visited. *If they have.*'

Sam nodded numbly. Except that if they *had* visited, that would be the last copy of *The Prophecy* gone. Eighteen months of work down the drain. Though right now, Sam reminded himself, he was lucky to be alive; adjusting to losing *The Prophecy* and all the possible knock-on wreckage from that was stage two. One step at a time.

'Are there any other copies of *The Prophecy* out there, My Tynnan?' Washington asked, bringing a furrow to Sam's brow: *replay of the earlier nightmare questioning?* Washington held a hand out. 'I need to know, Mr Tynnan. Truly I do. Because if there *are* copies out there, these people will find out and come for you again. And next time, we might not get here in time.'

Sam looked at Washington levelly. He wished there were more copies out there, but having a gun in your face, and now panicking that the last copy might have already been lost, somehow focused the mind. With a tired sigh, Sam repeated what he'd said at gunpoint: no spare disks, the only electronic copies were with him and Elli Roschler, and no full paper copies, just odd pages and part chapters. 'What little they might have not shredded.' From the look of it, he'd be lucky if there were thirty intact pages left.

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Washington joined Sam briefly in scanning the desk and side cabinet. ‘And nothing else anywhere?’

Again that uneasy *déjà vu* as Washington’s eyes searched his. Sam started to shake his head, then suddenly remembered those first three chapters sent to Roschler. ‘...Almost a year ago now, and the same way: email file attachment. But apart from that, nothing else. That’s it!’ Sam sighed, the stark reality settling: if they got that last complete copy now from Elli’s computer, he was sunk. Even if Elli had kept those three chapters separate somewhere – he’d still be missing a giant four-hundred-page hole in the manuscript. He’d *never* be able to rewrite and knit it all back together.

Washington fired a quick look round the room, part of it taking in the activity of his men, then, bracing his hands with an audible slap on his thighs, stood up. ‘Right. We’ve got to get you out of here.’

The last of the three body bags was being carried out, and Sam joined Washington briefly in looking at them, as if they might hold the answer to why they had to leave. Then he remembered Lorrena. ‘My... my girlfriend’s due back here soon.’ Sam checked his watch. ‘About forty minutes.’

‘Don’t worry. When she arrives, my people will still be here cleaning up. They’ll bring her to the hotel where I’ll take you now.’ Again that sobering stare as Sam grasped for any semblance of the reality that had been brusquely yanked away from him only moments

ago. 'You *can't* stay here, Mr Tynnan. It's not safe. A back-up man, or even a whole team, could come back to check what happened to their friends – and we can't take that risk with you. *Or* your girlfriend.'

'OK. OK.' But still Sam looked around numbly, as if unsure what to do.

Washington snapped him out of it by telling him he'd need to grab a few things for overnight, and minutes later they were heading quickly up Sam's driveway. It was mid-November, but already the night air was brisk as Sam followed Washington and another of his team towards a grey Chevy Tahoe. A long black SWAT truck sat behind it. Sam could see a driver at the wheel of the Tahoe, but the windows on the truck were too heavily tinted for him to see inside.

The other man sat in the front by the driver with Sam and Washington in the back. They turned at the end of his road heading away from Oneida towards Syracuse, and neither of them spoke for the first few minutes of the drive.

The lights each side thinned as Oneida's residential outskirts gave way to farm fields, Sam's mind and the pit of his gut as dark and empty as the night landscape rolling by. Whether from the motion of the car or the butterfly nerves still raging in his stomach, Sam started to feel queasy. He bit at his lip, swallowing it back as he looked at Washington.

'Who are they? You said that you've been tracking

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them for a while. Do you know exactly what within *The Prophecy* might have made them target me?’

Washington applied thought for a second, a faint smile touching his lips. ‘We thought you might be better able to answer that, Mr Tynnan. After all, *you* wrote it.’ He met Sam’s eyes steadily, but his smile carried no trace of tease; simply softening a home truth. He was about to add something more when his cellphone rang. He checked the display before answering and exhaled heavily. ‘It’s my Roschler team.’

Sam looked at Washington expectantly as he started speaking. He’d just escaped with his life; now he’d know just how much of it was left worth living for.

CHAPTER THREE

FIVE MONTHS LATER.

‘Are you OK?’

‘Yeah, I’m fine...*fine.*’ Sam held Mike Kiernan’s searching gaze for a few seconds to lend assurance.

In the first couple of months after that day, that question had hardly ever been asked, because it was patently clear then that he was far from OK. Night after night he’d drink himself into a stupor to try and forget that he’d lost *The Prophecy*; half his days were spent sleeping it off and hiding away from the world so that he didn’t have to face just what he was going to do next.

‘Come on, Sam, don’t let what happened crush

you,' Lorrena would cajole. 'You're stronger than that. *I* need you, and if you haven't realised so does young Ashley. You've only spoken to him twice on the phone since this happened.' Before, he'd speak to his son every weekend.

And he'd get emails from Elli, unconsciously adding weight to Lorrena's pep attempts, or perhaps they *had* spoken together: 'Work and focus on a new project could be just the thing to lift you out of this slump.' The final clincher had come from Mike: 'If you don't snap out of it soon, Sam, I swear you're gonna lose yet another good thing in your life you won't easily replace: Lorrena.'

Crowd roar and applause distracted Sam for a moment. That night's Patriots game was on a large-screen TV at the far end of the bar. A group at the pool table also looked up briefly at the on-screen action.

'We'll be there next week,' Mike commented.

'Yeah, looking forward to it.' Sam forced a smile, trying to show enthusiasm for the upcoming get-together with Mike's old Boston pals at the Gillette stadium.

They were at Vaccarelli's, their favourite local watering hole for the past few years, a roadhouse bar just outside of Canastota on the 365 to Syracuse. Where Sam and Mike sat it was all Tiffany lamps, oak panelling and secluded booths: the saloon end for more private, sedate conversation.

Mike dragged his attention from the screen and looked back at Sam. ‘Anything more from your saviour SWAT man?’

‘Nah, nothing much. Only spoken to him a couple of times since he sent my computer and those last pages back.’ Washington had taken both away to check and sent them back ten days later. Nothing traceable had been left on his computer, everything already wiped clean, as Sam had feared.

Sam struggled to keep the worry from showing on his face. ‘I think, like everyone else, he’s mainly been checking that I was OK. Once he felt settled that I wasn’t going to do anything rash and jump off a tall building, the calls stopped.’

Most of the early calls had in fact come from Sam. A secure-line number Washington had left him. ‘You won’t be able to speak to me directly on it, but leave a message and I’ll always get back to you within forty-eight hours.’ And, true to his word, Washington always had, and he’d become Sam rather than Mr Tynnan after a couple of calls. But Sam couldn’t help thinking about what happened in the interim, imagining a team of CIA spooks running his voice through all sorts of stress analysis programmes, with Washington probing before he phoned back: ‘What sort of state is he in? How best should I handle it?’

Mike nodded thoughtfully as he topped up their beers from the pitcher.

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‘Possibly best if he doesn’t call any more. One sign at least that it’s all finally over.’

‘Yeah, suppose so,’ Sam agreed as he sipped at his beer. He’d shared his dilemma with Mike Kiernan probably more than anyone else; partly because, as a fellow writer, Mike might relate stronger to losing a manuscript that had consumed his life for eighteen months. Not that they were anything like in the same league when it came to their careers. Mike Kiernan’s crime thrillers were regularly in the *NYT* top ten, whereas Sam was just a contender.

Mike had also built up a reputation as one of America’s ‘earthier’ crime writers; one who actually knew first hand the mean streets of South Boston and the characters he was writing about.

They’d first met twelve years ago at a Bouchercon writer’s convention in Monterey. At the time Sam had still been living in his native UK, but when five years later Kate’s acting career took off, with a Broadway break that precipitated their move from London, Mike had been the main reason they’d settled in Oneida: they’d have a friend there. Mike had enthused about the area’s plus points: good schools, great community spirit, and, most importantly, one of America’s lowest crime rates. Mike himself had moved there three years before from his native Boston when a friend’s teenage son had been shot in a mugging gone wrong. ‘I made the move primarily thinking of my kids. And I daresay

you might feel the same about Ashley.’

They’d become good friends over the years, closer still by default of the split with Kate – and more drinking and drowning-sorrows time together – and they shared the same sly, caustic sense of humour, ‘*Once I got you to shake off that shy, British reserve,*’ Mike had jibed.

‘*Oh, fuck off.*’

‘*See. It’s gone already.*’

Mike took a longer slug of his beer, sighing faintly as he set the glass back down. ‘So how’s it going with the new book? More into the rhythm yet?’

‘Yeah.’ Sam shrugged. ‘You know what beginnings are like, always the worst part, and this one’s doubly difficult because—’ Sam broke off. He always found himself tiptoeing around the minefield of what had happened. ‘Well, while it might not have the same short-term gain as *The Prophecy*, the long-term prospects could be great. *If I hit the formula right.*’

Mike nodded with an understanding smile. ‘I think Elli’s given good advice.’ Sam had gone into more detail the last time they’d met about his plans to revive a popular main character, Toby Wesley, from a past book to develop a series. ‘It’s the right move.’

‘Let’s hope so.’

Mike glanced absently towards the on-screen game before returning to Sam.

‘And no thoughts about *The Prophecy* any more?’

Trying to piece it all back together again?’

Sam snorted lightly. ‘Seems that’s the main thing everyone’s interested in these days.’ Washington had asked him the same on their last couple of conversations.

‘Yeah, but this is *me*, Sam.’ Mike held Sam’s gaze. They’d picked and probed at the subject before, but never whether that door was firmly, once and for all closed: it was too painful. ‘I more than anyone else understand what it’s been like for you losing that manuscript. Especially having seen what you put into it.’

Sam nodded numbly, recalling Mike’s words at the outset: ‘Must be like losing your left leg, your best friend, and having your soul ripped out and nailed to the fridge door – *all* at the same time!’ Mike had mentioned reading about H.G. Wells losing a manuscript on a train, and couldn’t imagine how he’d ever come to terms with that.

Sam eased out a slow breath. ‘At first I just didn’t know if or how I’d be able to make it out of that grey tunnel. All those days drinking, hiding away from the world, trying to blot out what happened and feeling sorry for myself. But I was only thinking about what I lost, not what I *almost* lost. And when I finally focused on that, how close to death I’d come – never being able to see Ashley – *nothing* is worth that.’ Sam took a hasty slug of beer, feeling his eyes moisten with

the memory. ‘And once the inclination had gone, the rest was easy. Because even if I *had* wanted to, it was always going to be a hell of a mountain climb – maybe an impossible one – to piece back together and write *The Prophecy* again.’

Mike nodded slowly. ‘In a strange sweet-and-sour way, that’s good to hear.’ Mike lightly gripped Sam’s forearm across the table, and Sam swore he could see a faint glistening in Mike’s eyes too; or maybe it was just the soft, rose-tinted lighting of the saloon section. ‘Because it’s good to have you *fully* back, my friend.’

They left the bar almost an hour later, their banter freer – perhaps because they’d put to bed the last of Sam’s ghosts hanging between them these past months. And because for the first time Sam had fully opened up on how he felt about losing *The Prophecy*, he felt freer too within himself, as if a weight had been lifted. He found himself humming along to the radio on the two-mile drive back home, and was still faintly humming as he shut his car door and heard the jangling of the house phone.

He ran the last short stretch: key in the front door, then five manic, stretched paces to grab the receiver. Lorrena was no doubt already in bed. He was breathless as he picked up, heart pounding from the rush. Then his heartbeat raised another notch as he heard the voice at the other end: *Washington!*

‘We’ve been able to pick up something that we

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couldn't get from your computer – because, as you know, that had been wiped clean. It took a while for your service provider to get back to us with a list, but on that – sent just ten minutes after you emailed Roschler – there was one last email, with attachment, sent to an IPA in Bahrain. So there's still a copy of *The Prophecy* out there somewhere, Sam – *if* we're able to trace it.'

ANTALYA, TURKEY.

The Ashna Mosque in Antalya, Turkey, was not regarded as one of Islam's most beautiful and coveted mosques. And what beauty it did possess was not easily admired because the city had encroached so closely around it, leaving only narrow cypress tree-lined paths each side separating it from the surrounding three-storey grey stone buildings.

But it was nevertheless one of Islam's earliest-built mosques, built in the reign of Sultan Keykubat in the thirteenth century, preceding Istanbul's Blue Mosque by three hundred years, and its fluted minaret spearing high above Antalya's rooftops – considered its most impressive feature – was first to catch the dawn sun as it broke the horizon.

That caught-breath moment between night and dawn. The four men observing the mosque from across

the road, tucked in the recessed shadows of an alleyway, also held their breath in that instant, timing.

There was only one guard for the whole building and only two weak spotlights on each flank, but it was the brighter, two thousand watt security lights which presented the main problem. Motion activated, they'd switch on like stage spotlights heralding the main act as he paced the mosque's perimeter. Three minutes in front, then a steady pacing around the building – the back took thirty-six to thirty-eight seconds, they'd timed it – before he reappeared the other side.

They needed to move in and set the explosives as he approached the back – otherwise he'd see them moving away as he reappeared the other side. The problem was that the brighter security lights flicking on behind him might make his head turn; unless, that is, their brightness was dissipated and merged with the rising sun.

Their leader held one hand up expectantly as he measured that rising light: the guard was just coming to the end of his three minutes in front; would they have to wait until his next circuit, or could they move in now?

He watched the guard start pacing, fourteen measured strides before he turned and started down the flank of the building – but still the man stayed his hand, uncertain, the light was still too weak.

He lifted his eyes to the sky and saw the first

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orange dapples tingeing some cloud wisps – the guard was already halfway down the side, he'd have to decide quickly. But then a second later the sun touched the minaret, spilling golden light down the mosque front. He waited a moment more, counting the guard's paces, then gave the signal.

Two of his men ran across, half-crouching, low and silent.

Meanwhile the third man had his rifle trained on the guard's back, watching through his telescopic sights for his head turning, picking up any movement behind him. If the guard did, then he'd switch on the red tracer and a split-second later three 9mm bullets would follow that path. But he hoped not to have to; that would partly defeat their aim.

The front security lights flicked on. His finger tensed on the trigger, watching for even a millimetre of movement or reaction – but the guard kept pacing steadily, only four paces to go now down the side.

The two men were already by the main columns either side of the mosque entrance, starting to attach the C4.

Then they were gone again from rifleman's side vision as he focused back through his sights. Tense, heart-pounding seconds as the guard turned – rifleman fearing that he might catch the brighter light in his side vision – before he was finally gone from view. With a faint sigh, rifleman's trigger finger relaxed.

The group's leader and rifleman watched intently as the two men set the C4 and connected its detonators, anxious that they'd finish and get clear before the guard emerged from the other side. The leader checked his watch as they finally scampered away: thirty-two seconds since the guard had gone from view.

The four ran at full pelt along the alley towards their car parked in the first cross street, and hardly had the last car door slammed when the explosion boomed from a block away, causing a flurry of birds to alight from the surrounding rooftops. Their car's revving lost in the reverberations of the explosion, they drove off.

Sam watched the rising dawn light play on Lorrena's back.

Her braided dark-chestnut hair coiling halfway down, the soft down of wheat-gold hair in a neat line from the nape of her neck to the small of her back – contrasting against her rich olive skin – a few faint freckles across her shoulders, the gentle fall of her breathing through half-pouted lips as she slept.

He'd noticed these features before, but never in quite the same detail as now in these frozen dawn moments. Perhaps because there'd been some snow overnight and the reflected light was brighter than normal. Or perhaps because now, recalling Mike's warning about how he'd have lost her if he hadn't shaken himself out of his slump, he was appreciating how much she

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meant to him; how he wouldn't have been able to cope without her – with or without dramas over Kate and Ashley or *The Prophecy*; how good she was for him; how much he truly, desperately loved her.

They'd first met on one of his regular visits to Albany Library. He was looking through books on Egypt and Syria, and she was right next to him, two books already tucked under one arm and a take-out coffee in that hand, the other reaching at full stretch to the top shelf. And as the book she'd been teasing out slipped from her grasp, she jerked to catch it, spilling half her coffee over Sam.

Red-faced, she'd apologised and insisted on buying him a coffee. 'I've got to get another one for myself in any case.' He'd declined, but when he looked at her fully for the first time and saw how beautiful she was, he'd found himself nodding, 'OK.'

One coffee became two, and over an hour spun by in which time they'd swapped stories and half their lives. She was a receptionist at a medical centre in Utica, and she was enlivened to hear that he was a writer, yet without either the open-mouthed gawping or the trite put-downs – 'Can you actually make money at that?' – which he sometimes got. She got the balance right and seemed genuinely interested in the process.

Lorrena was at Albany Library to get some books on southern Italy because in a few days she was flying off to see her father there for two weeks. Both her

parents were originally from Taranto, settling first in Brooklyn when they emigrated, then later Syracuse, where she was born. But when her mother died her father had gone back to Taranto, where he still had some family. Sam said that he came to Albany Library practically every other week. 'Research. Except for the occasional book I can't get there and I have to go to Boston or New York.'

As they were sipping the last of their coffees, he was still getting up the courage to ask to see her again when she did it for him. 'We must do this again. It's been fun.' She clasped his hand gently across the table; a touch that promised much more, sent a tingle through him. He said he'd like that, and she scribbled down her number on a paper napkin. 'I'll be back from Italy early next month. Give me a call then.'

She was tanned and smiling when she returned and looked even more beautiful. They saw each other three times that first week back and halfway through the second week became lovers. Things moved quickly after that and less than a month later she was moving in with him to live.

That was how it had begun.

And practically every day since, he'd feared losing her. Perhaps because of her beauty, perhaps because, at twenty-six, she was eleven years younger than him, or maybe a combination of these things and his still-lingering feeling of inadequacy since Kate had left him;

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the sense that he just wasn't good enough.

But what had made their relationship grow so strongly in the fifteen months since that day at the library, had been her tender insight and understanding, as if they'd known each other years.

She'd been the most remarkable emotional bolster to lift him out of his pit of gloom after losing *The Prophecy*, had rocked and soothed and comforted him more times than he dared count – until that day when Mike had warned that he risked losing her if he didn't snap out of it. 'You've already plumbed her emotional well, tapped her dry. Nobody can keep doing that day in, day out. You're lucky to have her, Sam – but you're pushing that luck right now.'

And then that fear was back squarely in his lap: the sense that she was too good for him – too young, too beautiful, too caring and understanding – or that he simply wasn't good enough for her.

Almost lost her.

Sam felt himself gently trembling with that realisation as he reached out and touched her, tracing one finger lazily down her spine. He kissed her gently in the small of her back and she stirred.

Perching on one elbow, she blinked slowly a couple of times as she focused on him.

'You OK?'

'Yeah, fine. Woke up early, so I thought I'd just admire the view.'

She smiled lazily. 'You were restless last night too.'
'I know.'

She reached out and gently clasped his hand. 'Don't worry. I'm sure he'll call soon. It probably takes time to track down something like that, and it's only been a couple of days.'

He closed his eyes for a second and slowly nodded. *So caring, understanding.* Only two days, but it had felt like a lifetime. Just when he'd finally managed to push it all away and get his life back on track, it was back to haunt him again. He wished now that Washington hadn't phoned. Raised his hopes again, only to leave him hanging. And as much as Lorrena was there, as before, reaching out a hand in solace, he was aware that he was starting to burden her again.

'Suppose you're right. I shouldn't worry so, torture myself.' He shrugged. 'Already done that once, got the T-shirt.'

She squeezed his hand once more in reassurance, but he could tell that she wasn't convinced.

That was the other thing she was good at: telling whether or not he was lying.

'Seven-two-four.'

'Cairo?'

'Eight-six-one.'

'Jeddah?'

'Five-four-eight.'

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Adel tapped the data into his computer as his team called out the past four days' 'message activity' for each of their assigned areas.

The news of the Ashna Mosque bombing three hours beforehand had whipped Adel's office into a frenzy: phone lines burning to Turkey and the Middle East, frantic keyboard tapping as his team sifted through using the keywords Ashna or Antalya. Every message, seemingly innocent or otherwise, was under the microscope; because certainly whoever was behind it wouldn't use overt words like 'bomb'. Even phrases such as 'plans for' would be too obvious. Usually it was hidden in innocuous, casual conversation: 'Does your father still go to the Antalya Mosque? I hear the best sermons are by Imam Sadettin.' Look up the date for Sadettin's sermons, and the last one would coincide with the bombing.

With a last flurry of key taps, Adel looked at the results, then hooked his jacket from his chair and dialled out on his cellphone as he announced to the flurry of activity in his wake, 'I'll be gone an hour or so.'

To the voice answering as he stepped into the lift, Adel said simply, 'Place four.'

'What, *now*?'

'Yes. I'm heading there as I speak.'

'OK.' Resigned exhalation. 'I'll see you there.'

Adel closed his eyes and tried to relax as his taxi

sped through the London streets, the frantic key-tapping of the operations room still playing in his head.

Their arranged meeting place was a riverside pub in Southwark, The Anchor. It was one of six pre-designated rendezvous – in this case a rambling tourist pub – away from London’s main Arab stomping grounds of Queensway, West Kensington or Knightsbridge. They could lose themselves amongst the tourist throng and hopefully not be noticed; at least, not by anyone who’d attach any significance. It wasn’t so much of an issue for Adel, but his contact, Fahim Omari, was well known in London’s Arab community.

Adel ordered a Perrier for himself and a Campari and soda for Omari and took a terrace table with a view over the river and St Paul’s. He had only taken the first couple of sips of his Perrier when Omari appeared.

At six-two, Adel stood a full head above Omari as they embraced.

‘The rush, I am presuming, is because of the news from Antalya?’ Omari asked, once they had sat down.

Adel nodded with a tight-lipped grimace. ‘Any noises which might have reached you?’

‘No. Nothing that might tie into that, at least.’ Omari took a sip of his drink. ‘Target like that, might just be Kurdish separatists.’

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‘Certainly one of the stronger options. But I also wanted to check sources – in case it might be something more ominous.’

‘If there’s another in the coming weeks or months, also in Turkey – then you’ll know pretty much for sure.’ Omari shrugged. ‘That is, if there *is* another one.’

Adel looked out at the view. A weak sun had broken from behind cloud cover, reflecting off the river and the dome of St Paul’s beyond. But both he and Omari were aware of the flip side: if there was another mosque bombing and it wasn’t in Turkey, or indeed Iraq – where it could also be put down to internal sectarianism – then they were looking at something entirely different and more worrying.

Omari took a fresh breath. ‘Any claims of responsibility yet?’

‘No. You know how it works. They go for the publicity jugular first – put it out on the Internet or through Al Jazeera. We’re usually the last to know.’

Omari nodded thoughtfully.

The two of them went back a while – in fact, to twelve years before Adel’s birth. Omari and his father had been old clients of Adel’s father, a marble and stone merchant from Dumyat, Egypt. In 1958, at the age of nineteen when his father died, Omari took over his father’s burgeoning Cairo construction company, which included a sizeable land portfolio. Omari’s

father had survived the 1952 land reform, but the 1961 act was another matter, and worse still there were accusations that his father had circumvented the 1952 reforms through fraud and bribery; Omari was quietly informed that if the case went against him, which looked likely it would, his company assets and land would be confiscated. ‘Quietly’, because those telling him also conveniently had a few contacts, lawyers and ministers allied to Nasser’s regime, who would be willing to buy everything from him before that calamity occurred. At half price. Half was better than nothing; Omari took his half-wealth and, with a chain of properties between Lancaster Gate and Queensway which had rocketed in value since he’d bought them in the Sixties, had many times over made up for what he lost in Egypt.

Omari was one of the most stylish men Adel knew, even though much of it was from a bygone age: the Mahawat he now slid out of an elongated silver cigarette case was straight out of *Casablanca*; his subtle-toned grey or beige-check sports jackets contrasted against navy or maroon polo necks, as if he’d lifted Steve McQueen’s wardrobe from *The Thomas Crown Affair* and hadn’t bothered to update it since. No need: on Omari it worked. Now in his late sixties, Omari still cut a dashing figure at London’s clubs and casinos.

Westernised on the outside – but by reputation hard-core Islam on the inside – Omari had been a

good friend of Arafat's, regularly courted the more outspoken imams, and was a heavy patron of two of Palestine's more suspect 'charities'. Adel had seen Omari's name appear more than a few times in MI5 files as a terrorist-financing suspect. But there was a good reason, one known to only a handful, why Adel knew he could stake all on Omari being a reliable source of information.

Adel focused back on an earlier comment. 'You said "nothing that might tie into *that*". Why, was there something else?'

Omari lit the Mahawat, blew out the first plume of smoke. As always, outwardly assured and in control. But Adel caught a flicker of unease in Omari's eyes.

'I didn't want to say anything – not until I was sure.' Omari stroked his chin. 'Because while it looks unlikely Abu Khalish was involved in the Turkey bombing, I've heard that he might be planning another "spectacular". This time in northern Italy.'

'Which town?'

'That's the problem. I haven't been able to pin it down beyond that – it could be Turin, Milan, Genoa... Bologna. Indeed, I don't know for sure if it *will* go ahead.' Omari shrugged. 'Which is why I hadn't yet said anything – until I knew.'

Abu Khalish. With little heard from Bin Laden for five years, Khalish had over the past four years firmly taken over the 'terrorist king' mantle. The

first ‘spectacular’ had been three trains bombed in Amsterdam: eighty-one killed; then two trams in central Vienna: thirty-eight killed, including bystanders and passing shoppers; a similar attack in Copenhagen: Danish Intelligence, PET, had intervened at the eleventh hour, six dead. And the last attack, three metro trains in Paris, had also been partly thwarted by French Intelligence and GIGN. One bomber was shot dead as he tried to set off his device, another escaped and was never found. Then it had all thankfully gone quiet for eight months. But Adel should have known Khalish would try again, especially after having been thwarted in Paris.

‘Through his normal cells in Italy?’ Adel queried.

Omari nodded, and took a sharp draw of his Mahawat.

‘When?’

‘Again, not yet pinned down enough to be certain. Could be only days or a week from now, could be as much as a month. But not longer than that.’

Adel closed his eyes as he slowly exhaled, as if the weight of the information had pushed the air from him. When they’d first rendezvoused at this pub, Omari, who considered himself something of a history buff, commented that there used to be a plague pit behind the pub, and it was also where Samuel Pepys made the first recorded entry of viewing the Fire of London. *Plague and fire*. Almost four hundred years

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ago, but with the likes of Bin Laden and Abu Khalish bent on destruction, it hardly seemed as if anything had changed since that age.

They exchanged pleasantries about their respective friends and family while they finished their drinks, then embraced again as they parted.

CHAPTER FOUR

ALBANY, NY STATE.

Decatur Island, Lopez Island, then Shaw and San Juan, finally Orcas, sailing anticlockwise, east-west.

Sam knew the sequence pretty much off by heart from his previous book, but it was the position of the outlying islands like Sucia and Patos he wanted to get clear.

Rights of Passage, published five years ago, had been Sam's most successful book to date. Toby Wesley, a quarter-Japanese – the rest Anglo-Irish – detective covering the Pacific Northwest San Juan Islands. There were scores of New York, Boston, Philly, Miami and San Francisco detective novels, but the

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San Juans were rarely done. Possibly because there wasn't much serious crime there. But when there was, the impact was immense. A murder didn't just hit the immediate family, it became a seismic community event – whereas in a big city it was often little more than another stat and a few column inches. Sam had played those small community shock waves like a Stradivarius, pumped them for every ounce of pathos and handkerchief wringing, and now the game plan was more of the same again, to build on that success in a series.

Sam could see the good sense in Elli's advice, and now – treading some of that same ground with those old characters, researching the San Juans again at the library – Sam also felt a part of himself shift to five years ago; as if the gap in between had been hardly any time. Or, better still, hadn't happened at all.

Washington had finally phoned again the night before.

'It all hit a dead-end I'm afraid, Sam. Whoever picked it up paid cash at an Internet café in Bahrain and used a false name to set up a hotmail account. They'd put it on disk and disappeared within minutes. Our chances of tracking down where that copy has gone now are slim to none. So sorry, Sam. How are you coping?'

It was the first time Washington had asked it, and Sam had to think for a second.

‘Getting into a new book now. Probably the best thing to push it all away, put it behind me.’ He didn’t mention that he’d barely written two sentences in the five days since Washington’s first call about the Bahrain IPA. Five more days of his life trashed.

‘I understand. Well, if there’s anything you need from me, Sam, don’t hesitate. You know where to reach me.’

But his words had one of those reverse-play goodbye rings to it: *don’t call me again unless it’s really important.*

Sam closed his eyes for a second as he sipped at his coffee. *Routine.* Yeah, that was the best way to forget it all: the library at Albany and picking up books on the San Juan Islands, going back to a theme from five years ago that would hopefully fade out events in between – and maybe subconsciously that had been a side tactic of Elli’s, Sam thought ruefully. A leisurely walk through Albany’s Washington or Lincoln Park, sometimes stopping to rest for a bit, then finally coffee or lunch at Ramona’s, where he’d make notes from what he’d picked up at the library.

But the problem was that part of it hopscotched. Five years ago, Kate and Ashley had still been with him; and sitting in Lincoln Park half an hour back, he’d suddenly had a flashback to playing there with Ashley as a toddler, his high-pitched giggling as he

chased a ball piercing Sam's heart, so clear again now in his head that it felt like yesterday. And apart from the last couple of visits to Albany Library, every time he'd been there over the past eighteen months he'd been researching *The Prophecy*.

Oh, God. Was this what it was like when your mind finally snapped? Sam steadied his grip on his cup as he sipped, but kept his eyes open now, didn't trust what images might assault him; just hoped the brightness of the day beyond the café window and the people milling on Lark Street would—

Sam jerked, some of his coffee spilling as a face suddenly leapt out from amongst the street scene of passers-by. He focused more intently.

The man across the far side of the road turned away, offering only a part profile as he talked with another man while walking along. It was harder to tell for sure from that angle.

For only a couple of seconds, as the man had glanced at something across the road a few yards to Sam's left, his face had almost matched the image indelibly etched on Sam's brain: that warped leer beyond the gun barrel as the trigger struck empty chambers! *Almost.* Still Sam wasn't sure, and as he realised in panic that they were moving out of view, he hastily slapped a few coins on the table and signalled to the waitress. He hustled out and started following.

They were forty yards ahead on the opposite side.

The second man was shorter and fatter with a heavy paunch, also Arabic or Mediterranean-looking, and had short, dark, curly hair and a cheroot moustache. He seemed to be doing most of the talking, with the occasional effusive arm movement.

Sam prayed that his sidekick, *gunman*, would turn again, so that he could know for sure – but not too much. Despite the distance and other people on the pavement and the passing traffic, Sam was aware that if gunman fixed on him directly, he'd probably recognise him. The game would be up.

They stopped at that point, the arm movements becoming more elaborate. A half turn from gunman as he contemplated what was being said – but still not enough! And suddenly the madness of it all hit Sam. *He'd seen the man shot, his corpse zipped into a body bag.* It couldn't possibly be him, it was simply someone who looked like him. Was this the final stage of your mind crumbling: projecting your assailant's face on everyone who looked even remotely like him?

But as the two men started moving again, Sam, almost mechanically, continued to follow them. Just a chance that it might be him. He'd felt almost certain with that first front-on glance his way. One more look like that and he'd know.

Gunman half turned again, talking now. Then – the movement so quick and fleeting, Sam had trouble

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taking stock – he swivelled his head Sam’s way and past him, taking in the oncoming traffic as the two men stepped into the road.

For a second Sam’s heart leapt. Had gunman picked him up in his side vision and was heading across to confront him? But then he saw the door release lights flashing on a dark blue Toyota Highlander just ahead of them.

They got in, gunman in the driver’s seat, looking round at the traffic as he edged out.

Sam turned as well, looking in the same direction; the Highlander’s glass was faintly tinted, he couldn’t pick out much. He desperately needed a cab otherwise he’d lose them. But there were none in sight.

The Highlander waited for two cars to pass, then pulled out.

Still no cabs. Sam became frantic. He was losing them!

But when the Highlander was sixty yards away, a cab finally turned from the next side street.

Sam waved it down and leapt in. ‘Follow that car! The dark-blue Toyota SUV four cars ahead.’

The driver grinned over his shoulder as he started moving.

‘You’re kidding, right? This ain’t New York, this is upstate.’

‘Deadly serious. And not too close – I don’t want them to know they’re being followed.’

‘OK. But they start doing any crazy speedin’, I ain’t keeping up.’

They didn’t speed. They kept at a steady thirty to forty miles per hour practically all the way out of town, until they reached a sedate residential area – trimmed lawns, cherry trees and maples, though most of the houses were modest, forty-year-old, aluminium-sided A-frames.

Sam asked the cab driver to ease back. With less traffic, they’d be more conspicuous. But at one point, Sam feared they’d lost them: turning into a street eighty yards behind the Highlander, he could no longer see it ahead. They coasted along. It wasn’t visible looking up the first side street, either – but halfway towards the next turn-off, Sam spotted the car in a driveway. Gunman had his key in the front door of the house and his friend was behind him with a briefcase. They paid the cab little attention – stocky-cheroot giving them only a passing glance as the door opened – but still Sam signalled the cabby on a full hundred yards before asking him to stop.

Sam felt suddenly open, vulnerable as the cab left. There were no other people or passing traffic to distract from or partly shield him. Stark reminder that if it *was* gunman and he spotted Sam, the gun chamber this time would no doubt be full.

But having come this far, he couldn’t just leave without knowing for sure; just one front-on glance

THE PROPHECY

from gunman through a window should do it. He'd just have to make doubly sure to keep concealed, out of sight, as he played spy.

Sam closed his eyes for a second to steel himself, then started back towards the house.