

ONE LONDON DAY





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To Paul and Carole

Every kind of hunger . . .

PART I

FIVE DAYS IN LONDON



CHAPTER 1

Monday 30th July 2018

Mr Phipps was in the gym.

It wasn't one of the best. He had memberships in different parts of the city because he always liked to work out before a gig and all he'd heard about that so far was that it was in North London. So he knew good gyms from bad. This one wasn't *serious*, more an add-on to the squash club. Basic machines, one rack of free weights. Still, that meant it wasn't busy, not just after it opened at 7 a.m. No one there, so he could play the CD he'd brought – they still had a stereo, crappy old thing but one plus to the place. He didn't like wearing headphones. He liked to hear when a door opened.

Lenny Kravitz sang about an American woman. Mr Phipps checked his stance in the floor-length mirror and slowly raised the twenty-pounders towards his reflection. *One. Two . . .*

A phone rang. Playing 'Blue Rondo à la Turk'. The phone he'd bought last night didn't play tunes so this call wasn't the one he was waiting for. This call was Sharon. The Ex. Always up early.

"lo?"

‘Is that you?’

‘Since you called me, I suppose it must be.’

‘What? I can’t hear you. Can you turn that racket down?’

Racket. What she’d always called his music. He went to the stereo, lowered the volume. ‘Better?’

‘What time are you picking Meaghan up?’

‘Not sure. Afternoon.’

‘Can you be more specific? Malcolm and I need to go to IKEA and we don’t want to leave it late or the North Circular will be chocka.’

Chocka. IKEA. Malcolm. What had he ever seen in her? ‘No. I’m waiting to hear about work. Early afternoon, I’d say.’

‘Fine.’ The way she snapped it meant it wasn’t. ‘Early as you can, please.’

She hung up. He looked at the phone. He didn’t like minding Meaghan the same day he worked. But this gig, wherever it was, had come up sudden and he’d missed his day with his daughter for a gig the week before. He’d make it up to her, take her to the pictures, sit through some princess thing. Afterwards, over ice cream, he’d show her the hotel website in Mauritius. He’d promised to take her in February. Now she was five she could learn to snorkel. He’d cheer her on from the poolside. If the work kept coming this regularly, he’d upgrade them to business class. She’d like that. Took after her mum. Liked her luxury.

The door opened. He looked. A man came in. Ginger hair and beard, late thirties. No bag, and nothing in his hands. The man smiled, waved at the stereo. ‘Mind if I turn this up?’

‘Sure.’

Carrot Top went to the stereo, turned the knob. Not as loud as before. *Fuck*, thought Mr Phipps, *please don't let him be a talker.*

The man was nodding at the stereo. 'I know this. Bachman–Turner Overdrive.'

'Lenny Kravitz,' Mr Phipps replied, then rolled his eyes – he was the one continuing the conversation.

The man didn't see the eye roll. 'Oh yeah. Good, isn't he? Saw him in—'

Mr Phipps ignored the drone that followed. When he didn't reply, just picked up his weights again, Carrot Top licked his lips and went to the treadmill.

One, two, three, four . . .

His phone went again. Still not his new one. Another tune. 'Für Elise'. Paula.

He picked it up. 'lo?'

'Where are you?'

'Gym.'

'Noisy. Can you turn the music down?'

'Not really. Other people here.'

'I see.' There was a pause. 'You promised to call.'

It was said sulky. Mock miffed. Except recently he'd been finding it hard to tell how mock it was. 'Been busy.'

'I'm sure.' A miffed pause, then, 'You coming over?'

'Can't. Working.'

'After?'

'I've got Meaghan.'

'Come when you've dropped her back.'

'I'll see.'

‘Yes, well, why don’t you do that?’

She hung up. *Two in two minutes*, he thought. Posh birds hanging up on him. Why did he get involved with hoity-totty? He supposed it appealed to the lad in him. Their educated voices. Their expensive scents. And he appealed to them. A bit of rough, Sharon had called him soon after they’d first met. Funny, he didn’t think of himself as rough. He read, he worked out, he didn’t drink. Even listened to Beethoven sometimes. But he could put the voice on if he needed to, along with his white plumber’s overalls.

Another phone rang. Not the one in his hand, no tune. Dropping the one in the bag, he picked up the other. ‘lo?’ He spoke while crossing the gym, exiting.

‘Severin. Joseph.’

‘OK.’

‘54 Allingham Close, N3.’

‘OK.’

‘Know it?’

‘I’ll find it.’

‘The daughter leaves for school at eight-thirty. Wife takes the baby and goes for Mums and Babies Pilates at eight forty-five. So he’ll be alone.’

‘OK.’

‘There’s something else.’ A slight pause. ‘We need you to collect something from him first.’

Fuck. ‘Yeah?’

‘There’ll be a bonus.’

‘How much?’

He heard muffled voices, a hand half covering the other phone. ‘One thousand?’

He heard the question in it. Thought of upgrades to Mauritius. 'Two.'

'Mr—'

'Oi!'

'Sorry.' More muffled talk. 'Very well. It's the books. He's an accountant. Get the books from him. He'll know what you mean.'

'OK. Drop 'em where I collect?'

'No. We need to see you. Let us know when you've got them. We'll tell you where.'

Unusual. 'Anything else?'

'Mr.' He didn't need to interrupt him this time. The caller wasn't going to say his name. He continued. 'My colleague asks: will you take a cheque?'

He hung up on soft laughter. *Very funny, Posh Boy*, he thought.

He went to the toilets, broke the phone up, flushed the pieces down the bog. As he watched to see if any floated back up, he thought, Allingham *Close*? He hated closes. And cul-de-sacs. Only one way in and out.

There was a half-decent Italian caff opposite the Tesco on Ballards Lane, so he picked up a skinny decaf latte, then crossed to the shop. Put on his overalls in a toilet cubicle. They were new, but he'd dirtied them up, washed them a few times. Slipped a red baseball cap on and kept his head low for the CCTV until he got back into his Mazda, parked where there were no cameras on Nether Street. Drove the five minutes to Allingham Close, found a space facing the close's entrance about fifty yards past the house, getting there just

before eight-thirty, so he could watch the daughter leave.

She did, in a uniform, five minutes late and running. The wife followed ten minutes later. Not with a baby, as Posh Boy had said. With an infant, nearly two he looked. The kid wanted to walk but his mum was in a rush so she snatched him up and he started howling and kicking her. The terrible twos. Meaghan hadn't been so bad but even she'd had her moments. As the mum bent to strap the child into his seat, Mr Phipps noticed that she was pregnant. She was a big girl, but the bulge was prominent. When she climbed into her Sentra and drove off, he looked at the house again. Semi-detached but nice. Owned by the sort of people who would have full life insurance. Two kids and one on the way, she'd need it.

He finished his latte, got out of the car, opened the boot. His canvas tool bag was under some of Meaghan's rubbish – stuff he'd won for her at the May bank holiday funfair on the Heath. Two months and she still wouldn't let him chuck them. A giant stuffed alien. A white felt bear. Thank God they didn't do goldfish any more.

He pushed the shit aside, unzipped the duffel, reached beneath the pillow. He'd checked the Glock before he set out but he bent into the boot, checked it again. Round in the breech. Full mag. Putting it back under the pillow, he left the zipper open, picked up the bag, closed the boot, looked around. No one about. Pocketing his keys, he marched up to number 54, and rang the bell.

He heard Severin coming because he was talking loudly. Had they cocked up? Was there someone else? People in houses like this often employed Romanian or Albanian

cleaners. There were extra payments for bystanders – one fifth, usually, of the hit itself. He did 'em, but he didn't like it. The gig, the mark, he deserved it, but passers-by?

Then he heard words through the door, could tell they were being spoken loudly into a phone.

'No, please. Please, Lottie! I have to see you. Yeah, those as well, but I just really want to. I have to. Look, hang on, will you.'

The door opened. Mr Severin. Medium height, dark, Jewish, even had the cap thing. What was that called? He'd look it up, sort of thing that came up in crosswords. 'Morning, sir,' Mr Phipps began.

Severin held up a finger. 'Just a second.' He beckoned the man before him into the hall. Waved the phone at him, eyebrows raised, then turned away. 'Listen, I wanted to tell you—'

The man was speaking too softly to hear now. Mr Phipps went in. Always better but didn't often happen. Some rag, *Sunday Sport* or something, had called him 'the doorstep killer'. But they'd allotted about five gigs to him that had been down to others. Ridiculous. Besides, everyone killed on doorsteps if they could. It was like back in Helmand. Stand in the doorway. 'Shoot and scoot', they called it. Take out the bad guys, then crack on. All sorts of nasty things could be waiting inside.

He couldn't shoot and scoot today because of the collection. That's why the gun was in the bag not in his hand. He stepped inside, shut the door behind him.

Mr Severin was still murmuring into his phone, but the whine had gone, since now there was a bloke in overalls

standing in his hall. ‘Look, just ten minutes, OK? There’s . . . no, listen . . . there’s something I need to . . . yes, tonight. Not sure, I’ll call. OK. Thank you. No, really, I’m—’ He looked at Mr Phipps. ‘Um, gotta go. The plumber’s here. Yeah, I . . . well, you know. Me too.’ He hung up. ‘It’s the kitchen one.’ He gestured through a door at the end of the hall, to the back.

He’d had this once before, with another couple. Wife thought the husband had called the plumber or electrician. Husband thought the wife had. These houses, built forty-odd years ago, always something going wrong. ‘Would you mind showing me, sir?’

Severin had his thumb on his phone, about to make another call. He sighed. ‘Only one place for a kitchen sink, isn’t there?’ Still, he led the way past a telly lounge on the right into a long room with primrose walls. Cabinets and cookers this end, breakfast bar, a dining table and chairs the far end. French windows onto a long narrow garden. He crossed to the sink, which was full of half-scraped plates and some dirty pots.

‘Oh, look, sorry,’ Severin said, ‘Aurelia’s not in till ten. Could you just . . . shove ’em onto the side. I have to . . .’

He waved the phone, took a step back towards the hall. Mr Phipps let him get to the doorway. ‘Kneel down,’ he said.

Severin turned, blinked at him. ‘What did you say?’

‘Kneel the fuck down,’ he shouted, stepping closer and pointing the Glock.

‘Oh, Jesus. Please no, I—’

Severin dropped the phone and it bounced to Mr Phipps’s feet. He kicked it away, stepped forward and put the muzzle

to Severin's head. The man dropped hard, arms going wide, knuckles banging into the door frame. Mr Phipps followed him down, gun to head, and held out his other hand. It had a hessian bag in it. 'Put this on,' he said.

'I beg you, I—'

'Put it the fuck on,' he shouted, putting weight behind the muzzle.

Severin obeyed. But he kept talking, his words soon muffled by hemp. 'Look, don't do any . . . I can help. I know who sent you. The Shadows, right?'

The Shadows. Mr Phipps shook his head. Fucking public schoolboys with their comic books, their Marvel Universe superheroes. Or maybe it was their retro geekdom? His father had had a 45 by a band called The Shadows. The song title was . . . some American Indian tribe. Twangy guitar shit anyway. His youthful employers probably had it too, since vinyl was *so* now. He'd preferred it back in the day when he was employed by old toffs with dandruff on their collars and numbers for their department name.

'You have something we want,' he said softly, putting the gun back.

'What? I can't hear—'

He took the muzzle away, moved around behind Severin then barked, 'You have something we want.'

'I do. Yes. I do but they, they're . . .'

He could almost hear the man's mind whirling through the bag. He had to know this wasn't good. That perhaps all that was keeping him alive was the fact that he still had something to sell.

Severin continued. 'They're . . . not here, though.'

‘Don’t lie to me!’

‘I’m not, please. Please, don’t . . . They’re . . . they’re with a *friend*.’

When he’d been with 3 Para in Belfast, he’d learnt to listen for nuance. For emphasis. Even if the Mick was blubbering under sacking in that fucking stupid accent, he’d listen, he’d hear. He’d been good at it. Now he heard the way this man said ‘friend’. After a pause. He meant a woman. He meant a lover. He probably meant that girl he’d been blabbing to when he’d come to the door. What was it? Laura? Lorraine?

He believed Mr Severin. Civilians rarely lied in this sort of situation. The Shadows would know who she was. Or they would find out.

Mr Phipps moved around to where he’d started. He’d kept his finger off the trigger and along the frame the whole time. His first gig, he’d used a Smith & Wesson semi, took the safety off straight away and because he was a bit jumpy, the gun had gone off by mistake, took the fucker’s ear off. The noise was horrendous. The Glock’s safety was set into the trigger, one of the reasons he liked the gun. Now, he pressed it with the pad of his finger.

Maybe it was Severin’s low babbling, lost to hessian, but Mr Phipps hadn’t even heard the door. Just the voice. ‘Forgot my mat. Now Reuben’s decided he needs a poo. He—’

Mr Phipps looked at the wife at the front door. He saw what she was seeing: a man in white overalls and a no-logo red cap in the kitchen doorway with a gun in his hand, the man at his feet with the sack on his head in her husband’s suit. She wouldn’t believe what she was seeing, would look for some normal explanation; it’s what people did. So he had

a moment to think about it, before the screaming started.

There were those small payments – for collateral damage, as the Yanks said. He'd taken them, when he had to. But the kid in her arms, tears forgotten as he stared at the gun? It wasn't much fun, being an orphan. He knew.

He made up his mind. Pointed the Glock at them. Shouted, 'Down on the floor. Faces on the floor. Eyes shut. Now. Now!'

To her credit, she obeyed fast. The kid started yelling but she grabbed him and shoved his head into her armpit. Then Severin started shouting too. 'Vicky! Help me. Help! Help!'

Mr Phipps reached into his duffel and pulled out the pillow. He shoved it onto the man's head, and fired twice. When the body was on the ground, he dropped the pillow onto his chest and fired twice more. He'd always had a knack for keeping track of ejected casings. Found the four fast, pocketed them. Then he put the gun back in the duffel, picked it up and walked from the kitchen. As he passed the woman, her face still to the floor, her son trying to squirm out from under, he said, 'If you move, or open your eyes, I will kill the boy.'

He left the front door open. He hadn't touched anything inside except for the bag and the pillow, and you couldn't lift prints from cloth. The woman might lie there for a minute or two. A mother's instinct, he thought.

He drove carefully. Despite it being his trade, his pulse always accelerated after a gig. Last thing he needed was to be caught on a speed camera.

Down Hendon Lane, joined the North Circ, headed east. Morning rush but he was in no hurry. He flicked on Magic FM.

Couldn't believe it when the third song up was . . . 'Apache'.
Apache, that was it. Twangy guitar shit indeed.

Fucking Shadows, he thought, and laughed. Then spent from
Henlys Corner to the A11 trying to remember the *friend's*
name.

Laura? Lorraine?