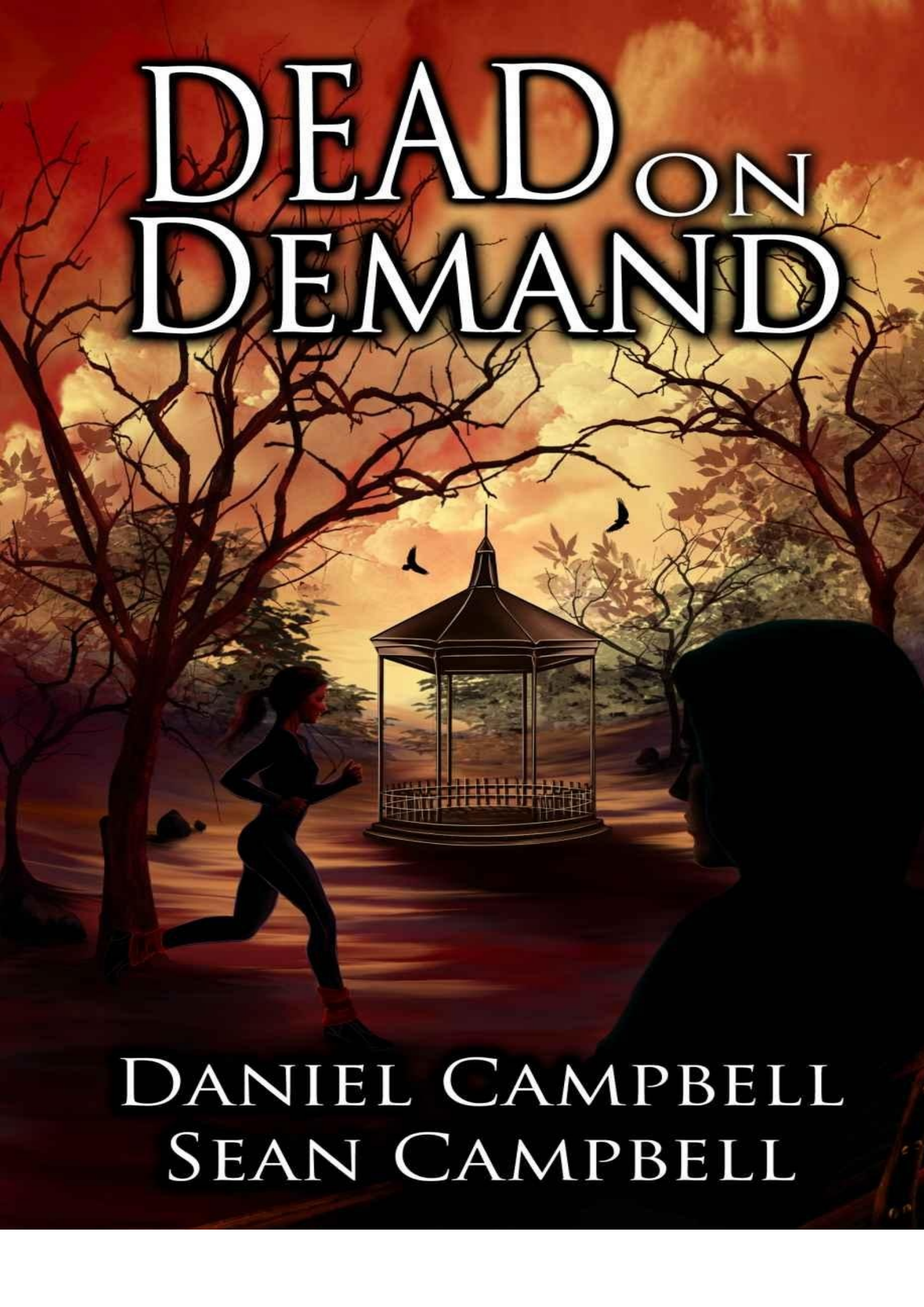


DEAD ON DEMAND



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3rd Edition

CHAPTER 1: FALLING APART

Edwin cursed. The lawyers were at it again.

Virtually every week since he had become the editor at *The Impartial* newspaper, Edwin had been served with ominous-looking legal forms delivered in innocuous manila envelopes. The court logo visible through the plastic window was the giveaway which set his heart racing. This time was no exception. As Edwin fumbled with the envelope his pulse quickened, and his head began to throb.

Although stressful, such lawsuits were the responsibility of the paper's in-house legal team, who bore responsibility for defending the paper, or settling out of court.

It usually came down to money. Sensational stories sold papers, and profit demanded skirting the line between accuracy and attention-grabbing half-truths.

But today was different. The lawsuit wasn't addressed to *The Impartial*, but to Edwin Murphy. This time, it was personal.

Edwin's hands shook as the papers fell to the desk, and his eyes burned as he skimmed the document. Once he realised why he had been served, Edwin didn't hesitate. He hit the intercom buzzer, leant in towards the fuzzy microphone and said: 'Betty, cancel my morning appointments.'

With a sigh, he switched off his laptop and mobile phone, and then reached for a bottle of brandy which he kept hidden in the bottom drawer of his desk.

He should have seen it coming. His marriage had not been a happy one for a long time. It was fine during their first few years together back in Cambridge. Then, on her twenty-fourth birthday, Eleanor had confessed that she wanted to start a family. Edwin didn't feel ready yet. He thought that they were too young to be tied down. He committed the cardinal sin of saying so.

She said she understood his need for time, but in his mind that time was measured in years rather than months. Before long, Eleanor became frustrated and angry.

In true alpha-male fashion, Edwin did what every red-blooded man confronted with an angry woman does: he hid.

He spent his nights at the office, and convinced himself that he was doing it for both of them. 'I've got to earn enough for two now,' he had declared as his days began to start earlier, and finish later.

Edwin shook his head sadly, and looked around the office which had become his refuge. There were no tumblers in the office, so he upended the dregs of a coffee mug onto his ficus, and set the mug back down on his desk before pouring a generous tot.

He drank the amber liquid in one, setting his lips aflame. Brandy wasn't his tippable of choice, but on this occasion it seemed fitting. It had been a brandy his father-in-law offered when Edwin asked for Eleanor's hand in marriage. He poured himself another tot, then raised his glass to the empty office, mocking toast to the demise of his marriage.

After several drinks, Edwin reached for the envelope again. His eyes struggled to focus as he read the reason that Eleanor had cited for the divorce: irreconcilable differences, which was as vague as if only a legal document could be.

But Edwin knew what it meant. Their marriage had been on the rocks ever since they'd tried to start a family. They'd pretended, postured and tried to convince themselves otherwise but they'd never recovered from the death of their son, Drew.

It wasn't as if Edwin hadn't made an effort. Before Drew had been born, Edwin had taken early paternity leave to decorate the nursery. It was late September at the time, and a chill had begun to rattle through their Belgravia townhouse.

The townhouse was a fix-me-up. It was safe, and it was in one of London's priciest residential areas, but the interior was a shambles.

The room Eleanor chose for the nursery was on the top floor, right across the hall from the master

bedroom. It was far too cold for a child. Something had to be done before young Drew arrived, and no expense was spared in making it a nursery fit for a king.

With Edwin's determined supervision, it came together in no time. He added a new stud wall and stuffed the gap with insulating foam, and painted it a vibrant mix of green and blue. The color scheme had been recommended as soothing by Eleanor's best friend, a child psychologist. Edwin couldn't see what was so special about it, but if it kept the peace it was worth the cost of two tins of Dulux.

It was October 30th when Eleanor felt the fateful contractions during a family dinner. The food was abandoned, and Edwin rushed her straight to Barkantine Birth Centre at St Bartholomew's Hospital. On arrival, it became apparent that something was wrong.

Eleanor had abnormally high blood pressure, and was rushed into an emergency caesarean section but it was too late. The baby was a breech birth, and Drew was born with his umbilical cord wrapped tight around his neck.

Soon after, Eleanor sank into a deep depression which didn't lift until she fell pregnant again four years later. They stayed together – united in grief at first, and later by the arrival of baby Chelsea. But something had changed, and they drifted apart.

Edwin rested his head on one hand, and lazily flicked through the paperwork with the other. There were pages and pages of legalese which he skimmed before reaching the final document: a financial summary detailing the assets they had to divide up. Their entire marriage had been reduced to a series of valuations. Shares, account balances, even his book collection had been appraised. Underneath the assets were a series of red numbers indicating debts to be taken off.

Edwin clucked at the total printed in bold at the bottom of the page. The sum total of their wealth was dismal, all things considered. They had great jobs. They owned their home. To the outside world they were the picture-perfect professional couple.

But fate hadn't been kind to their finances. They'd invested heavily in shares, mostly banks and Fortune 500 companies. 'It's the right thing to do,' Eleanor's father had said. 'Look after the pennies and the pounds will look after themselves'

But what went up had to come down. In late 2007 the bottom fell out of the market.

At first it seemed to be confined to the French bank *La Société*, but it quickly became apparent that the bad debt had been spread throughout the global banking system. Edwin swirled his brandy around absentmindedly as he remembered reporting on the bank collapses with glee. He never thought that mortgages in far-off countries would ever affect his little empire. But they did. In a few short months the Murphys' allegedly prudent investment into banks and big blue chip companies saw almost two-thirds wiped off the family books in a little over a year.

While the losses were only on paper until they needed to sell, the shortfall left the Murphy family in precarious circumstances. They had foregone a repayment mortgage in favour of an interest-only mortgage and the crash wiped out their ability to repay the capital.

Eleanor blamed her husband for losing thousands, and a succession of arguments ensued. Plates were thrown, insults slung and Edwin spent many nights on the sofa.

They tried spending time apart. Eleanor began to spend every other weekend with her parents at Sandbanks. When that failed to improve things, a trial separation led to Edwin moving out of the townhouse and into a one-bedroom flat in Angel. Soon they were seeing other people, or at least Eleanor was.

Edwin threw himself into his work with a vengeance, spending up to fourteen hours a day in the office. Even on a Sunday, Edwin could be found at his desk tapping away at his laptop, proofreading, cutting, and expounding his own views in the Sunday editor's column.

In retrospect the divorce was inevitable. Edwin sighed, scribbled a note to his secretary to find the

best divorce solicitors she could and resolved to take the rest of the day off.

The following Monday was a beautifully clear morning. The previous weekend's mist had settled further north and for once Edwin's small apartment felt bright and happy as the light splayed across the kitchen worktop, making the metallic sink dance.

Edwin woke early that morning. He had an eight o'clock meeting with the American owner of *The Impartial*, Derek Wood, and Mr Wood did not like to be kept waiting. Edwin wolfed down a small slice of toast with no butter. He could risk nothing more fancy than that, otherwise his queasy stomach might betray him. As he showered, Edwin ran over the numbers in his mind once more. He could massage the stats only so far. Today was the day he would have to finally come clean and let Mr Wood know that the ad revenues were down for the third successive quarter.

Resolving to be blunt but honest, Edwin patted himself dry and then donned his favourite suit. It was a three-piece in dark navy wool, with a wide pin. Eleanor used to call it his power suit. He carefully donned a matching tie, straightened it using the tiny mirror above the bathroom sink, then pronounced himself respectable and left the flat to flag down a taxi.

On the North Bank of the River Thames, a wall of tall and imposing buildings crowded the skyline stretching from the City all the way to Westminster and beyond.

In the City of London, colloquially known as the Square Mile, office blocks clawed skywards. Men in suits, working mostly in big banks and for insurance companies, could be seen scurrying around behind the windows. Many were clutching coffees, trying to revive vacant stares with an injection of caffeine.

To the west, the skyline changed. St Paul's Cathedral interrupted the office buildings, its iconic domed peak towering three hundred and sixty-five feet above the tourists below.

Further west still were some of London's most prestigious addresses, among which lay *The Impartial's* head office at One-Sixty-Three Fleet Street. Few tourists ventured into the area, but it was as busy as any other.

The Impartial was in the heart of legal London, a stone's throw from the Royal Courts of Justice. Although many newspapers had been priced out of the area, *The Impartial* was still based on the same site which it had always occupied, a minute away from the Thames.

The original building was long gone, destroyed by a bomb in the Second World War. But *The Impartial* has risen from the ashes inside a new building, clad in glass and steel.

Staying in Fleet Street cost the owner of *The Impartial*, Derek Wood, more than a pretty penny, but it was worth every cent of his investment. On a clear day, Wood could see ten, maybe even twelve miles from the roof terrace. More importantly, London could see him. The bankers might have been masters of the universe, but it was Derek who decided who made the news.

In the top-floor conference room, only a French door away from Wood's private terrace, a secretary laid out a breakfast of fresh fruit and bagels. A pot of freshly brewed coffee sat on a warming plate waiting to be poured.

Wood always began his mornings with a bagel and a coffee: black, no sugar. He did not believe in tea, and as such it was never served at the meetings he arranged, which greatly annoyed *The Impartial's* editor-in-chief, Edwin Murphy. Wood considered that a bonus.

Wood's personal assistant, a simpering young man fresh from Oxford, laid out a selection of newspapers at the head of the table and hovered awkwardly as Wood scanned through the headlines. Wood always indulged in this ritual. He simply had to know what the other papers were up to. Three short sharp knocks announced Edwin's arrival.

Wood glanced at his watch, nodded appreciatively at Edwin's punctual appearance and then ~~gestured lazily at a leather chair and carried on reading. When he was finished reading the last page~~ he lowered the broadsheet and gazed at Edwin over the dark rims of his designer glasses.

Wood watched Edwin sit and then help himself to a glass of water. Edwin took a quick sip to moisten his lips, and said: 'Good morning, sir. I trust you are well.'

Wood nodded for Edwin to get on with the month's presentation, tapping his watch impatiently. 'Our total readership remained steady this month. We shipped 3.06 million copies per day on the weekdays, and almost 4.7 million for the Sunday edition. This is a 0.12% increase on last month.'

'Good. Revenue is up then. By how much?'

'Well... we forecast retail income at the rate of £2.2 million net per quarter, but our quarterly revenue generated was £2.1 million. This was under-forecast due to some write-downs on bad debt.'

'How does advertising revenue stack up against the same quarter last year?'

Edwin avoided meeting his boss's gaze, and braced himself for the inevitable tongue-lashing that would follow the rest of his report.

'Despite that, sir, our advertising revenues have fallen due to...'

'How much?' Wood interrupted him.

'Well, sir, due to harsh market conditions...'

Wood's eyes narrowed suspiciously. 'The numbers, Murphy, *now*.'

'62%, year on year.'

Mr Wood was an experienced businessman and knew that he had to roll with the punches but most executive could keep their cool when being told that their investment, previously showing a healthy profit, was suddenly a money pit. He exploded in a fit of rage.

'*What?*' Wood roared, spit flying towards Edwin, who ducked instinctively. 'Why the hell am I only hearing about this now? It should have been brought to my attention months ago!'

Edwin cowered, his eyes downcast, afraid to even look at his boss.

'Answer me!'

'Well... sir... it's been a very... ahem, difficult trading environment. It was not my fault that...'

'Not your fault?' Wood mocked; his tone was suddenly cold, his eyes blazing with a fire Edwin had never seen before.

'No, sir. It was Palmer in advertising. He was the one who...'

'Who does Palmer work for?'

'That would be me, sir.'

'Then it's on your shoulders. You're finished here, Murphy.' Wood pressed a discreet button underneath the desk, summoning security. Two burly gentlemen appeared as if by magic in the doorway.

'See Mr Murphy out please, gentlemen. Then get me Palmer.'

As Wood turned his chair away, Edwin found himself flanked by the security team. He tried to shrug them off.

'I'll show myself out,' he declared, trying to keep some dignity.

'We have our orders, Mr Murphy.' Each guard placed a hand underneath one of Edwin's arms, practically hauling him out of the conference room, and then they led him towards his office.

Edwin obstinately took his time packing the meagre belongings that he had amassed in the office, neatly stacking a few photo frames inside a cardboard box. He chucked one of the firm's industrial staplers into the box for good measure.

Security turned a blind eye to the stationery theft, and allowed Edwin to shuffle into the lift without further indignity. He was soon standing outside the building he had called home for the last five years.

while morning traffic zigzagged by without a care in the world.

As he stood outside the building, a vagrant tugged at his elbow.

'Spare some change, mister?'

Edwin bit back a rude reply, but his mistake was looking down at the elderly man sitting on the pavement. He had a tuft of matted grey hair, and was sitting on a stack of old copies of *The Impartialist* with a skeletal greyhound resting next to him.

Against his better judgement, Edwin thrust a hand into his jacket pocket, and pulled out his wallet. The beggar could barely believe his luck when Edwin shoved a fistful of notes into his hand.

Before the vagrant could say thank you, Edwin flagged down a taxi and asked for the nearest bar that would be serving alcohol at quarter to nine in the morning.

It was nearing eleven o'clock when the barman in Finnigan's Wake finally decided Edwin had probably had enough.

'Hey, pal, how about you order some food?'

'Two more shots. Now.' Edwin upended his wallet, and thrust a fistful of notes at the barman. Food was the last thing Edwin wanted.

'No more booze unless you order some food first.'

'Alright. What have you got?' Edwin slurred. He tried to squint at the menu chalked up on the wall but the text refused to stay in focus.

'How about a burger and fries?'

'All right, and a beer.' As Edwin spoke, another patron cracked a grin and rolled his eyes at the bartender.

The bartender looked at Edwin disapprovingly but reluctantly moved to pour him a pint of London Pride. At least he had moved on from the whiskey.

'Say, pal, what's so bad that you're drinking alone on a Monday morning?'

Edwin, drunk and in no mood to talk, gave a dismissive shrug and finished the beer in one before demanding another.

The bartender grew wary; it was his licence on the line.

'One more, if you let me call someone for you, or call you a taxi.'

'Deal.'

In the Murphy residence in Belgravia, a gorgeous mid-terrace townhouse opposite the Portuguese embassy, Chelsea Murphy was off school sick. She had a mild flu, but Eleanor was not one to take chances. She wrapped up her baby girl in blankets, put her on the sofa and spent the morning hovering around checking that she had enough to drink, and zealously monitoring her temperature. Eleanor knew she would never cope if there were ever a real illness in the family.

'Mummy, why do you keep asking me if I like New York?' Chelsea asked in between brown moppings.

'Well, how would you like to see what it's like to live somewhere new? Didn't you like our weekend shopping there?'

'Yes, Mummy, but all my friends are here!' Chelsea protested.

'You'll make new friends, darling. Mummy has been offered a job over there and without Daddy around, Mummy needs to work. It'll just be us girls in a sparkling city of lights. Won't that be wonderful, baby?'

By half past midday, Finnigan's Wake was heaving with the lunch crowd. The barman decided that Edwin might put off the regular diners and shifted him to a booth in the back when he was joined by his brother-in-law, Mark.

Mark was always the first to agree to a session in the pub, and ever the Wyvern, he soon filled the booth with beers. The fries from Edwin's lunch lay abandoned as the pair got down to the serious business of drinking.

Sometime during his third beer with Mark, Edwin's phone rang. He normally hated answering withheld numbers but his mood was vitriolic and he wanted nothing more than to verbally unload on some unsuspecting telesales person.

'Edwin J Murphy speaking.' Edwin held the phone at arm's length, and giggled as he put on a plummy accent.

'Good afternoon, Mr Murphy, this is Caroline Flack from Huntingdon Fox and Associates. Last week, your secretary retained me on your behalf. I contacted your wife's solicitors. She has given me notice that she intends to leave the country. Are you available to discuss your legal position?'

'My position? I'm glad she's leaving. Good riddance,' Edwin spat, not realising the repercussions of his wife's leaving.

'She intends to take Chelsea to New York with her,' the solicitor said hesitantly.

'Stop her. I don't care how, just do it.'

'Mr Murphy, it may be... difficult to find proper grounds to challenge her.'

An anguished moan escaped from the drunken man as he threw his phone against the wall, watching it shatter into dozens of pieces.

'That *bitch*. I wish she was dead!'

Mark arched an eyebrow, and said after a slightly-too-long pause: 'Hey, that's my sister you're talking about. I think it's time to cut you off.'

The next morning, Edwin's head felt like a pneumatic drill had been placed at his temple and set to maximum. He tried to sit up but the effort proved to be in vain. As his eyes slid into focus Edwin realised he was on Mark's sofa.

Mark was splayed across the opposite armchair. Both men were wearing the same clothes as the day (and night) before.

'Water,' Edwin hoarsely demanded of his host.

With a thud Mark tossed a bottle towards him. It landed on Edwin's stomach with a thud. Edwin groaned in pain.

'That's not water,' he complained, always grumpy in the mornings anyway, but even more so with the hangover from hell.

'It's all you're getting unless you want to get up,' Mark replied with a grin, safe in the knowledge that Edwin was going nowhere fast.

Edwin, ungrateful, twisted the top off the bottle of Lucozade and drained the whole bottle into his parched mouth, a few drops missing and dribbling down his cheek to rest on his collar.

Mark slowly stretched out, picked up the television remote between his toes, and then kicked the remote up and caught it left-handed.

'Got any preferences?' he asked, flipping on both the television and the surround-sound system that his sister had bought him the previous Christmas.

'Anything but Jeremy Kyle.'

Mark smirked, and changed the channel to ITV.

'I hate you, you know that.' With that declaration Edwin turned over and went back to sleep.

Edwin's hangover persisted late into the day, and his head was still throbbing as he entered the premises of Huntingdon Fox for his four o'clock meeting. Edwin was vaguely aware of the opulence of the law firm's Grosvenor address. He wondered how much of the four hundred pounds per hour fee he was being billed for would be spent maintaining the extravagant decor. The anteroom he was shown could be described as no less than opulent, and the coffee was clearly not instant. He was soon square face-to-face with his lawyer. He hadn't chosen her, but his former secretary had assured him she was the best available, and Betty had never led him astray. A pang of loneliness struck Edwin as he realised just how much he had taken Betty's comforting presence for granted.

'Hello,' Edwin croaked. His head pounded as he read the golden nameplate on the lawyer's desk, *Mrs Caroline Flack MA (Hons) (Cantab) LL.M (Londis)*.

'Mr Murphy, I asked you here today to discuss your estranged wife. Have you been in contact with her?'

Edwin shook his head, and his lawyer continued her spiel.

'Eleanor has notified us she intends to move to New York to pursue work with a law firm there. She obviously intends to take Chelsea with her. She can do this without your permission, although we can file for what is known as a "First Steps Order" to prevent her. We would need to show the court good reason to prevent her doing so.'

'OK. Do it.'

'This would involve our demonstrating the move is out of malice, or that the move would prevent you from the contact you are entitled to. However, Eleanor's solicitor has confirmed in writing that she would cover the costs of flying Chelsea back to the UK each year over the holidays to see you. It is unlikely that any court will issue such an order on the evidence we have available to us. The court's primary concern is for Chelsea, and Eleanor's proposal may well be sufficient to demonstrate that the best place for her is in New York.'

'So there's no point contesting it?'

'We can contest it, but you would probably not gain anything.' Mrs Flack paused for a moment to sip some water before continuing.

'The other reason I wanted to talk to you is to discuss disposition of your assets in the divorce. Eleanor has cited both irreconcilable differences and unreasonable behaviour as grounds.'

'She thinks I work too much.'

'We could file a cross petition, but again this would require substantial grounds such as her unreasonable behaviour or adultery.'

'So I'm screwed.' It was a statement, not a question. The lawyer didn't deny it.

'Fine!' Edwin snarled. He almost added 'I'll deal with her myself' but thought better of it. The lawyer carried on for a few more minutes, but Edwin tuned her out. By the time he emerged back into the Grosvenor, sunlight was fading fast.

Edwin thumped a fist on his makeshift desk in anger, causing his mug to leap into the air. It landed on the kitchen floor, cracked and spilt the last drops of coffee onto the laminate. Edwin ignored the mess, rested his hands on the edge of the laptop and typed furiously.

Access Denied flashed across his screen in a blinking bold type. The website he was trying to visit was hidden from the public. It wasn't like visiting any old website. It wasn't listed on Google.

This was a darknet site, part of the no-man's-land that few ever ventured onto. Edwin had first found it when he was an undergraduate doing his journalism degree, and writing up the story of a lifetime: a hidden marketplace for accessing illegal goods and services. Drugs, pornography and much more could be bought anonymously, for a price.

The technology wasn't illegal. The United States government had created it for espionage, valuing the ability to send and receive anonymous messages. It had only been a matter of time before the technology had been co-opted by criminals.

Edwin was never allowed to publish the article. The editor of the university paper had glanced at it and immediately vetoed publication as not being in the public interest. With hindsight, it was probably the right decision. The ability to access a web of criminal activity could prove deadly in the wrong hands.

Edwin entered the right logon credentials, and the laptop beeped three times to indicate a successful connection. Edwin had taken every precaution possible. He had not connected directly to the darknet but used a series of proxy computers. The effect was like a daisy chain – it was impossible to see where the link began and ended.

Edwin clicked to create a message, enabling a virtual drop box for replies.

Even with his many precautions he was still cautious about what to type.

'Problem solver needed. One problem to fix. Final solution required. Pay negotiable.'

Edwin reread his message. He wasn't sure it would get his intentions across but hopefully it would pique some interest somewhere.

CHAPTER 2: RED SPOT

When his son was born, Yosef Gershwin had paced back and forth frantically.

'Cigarette to calm your nerves, bud?' another of the expectant fathers had asked.

'Thanks, but I'm on the patch.' Yosef slid his sleeve up to reveal a nicotine patch attached.

'Wise. How about a cup of coffee then?'

Yosef smiled. He was about to ask if the man had anything stronger when a nurse called out his name to take him through to the recovery room. It was the proudest day of Yosef's life, seeing his son for the first time. He was tiny, and hairless, but he was beautiful.

A year later, Yosef was back in a similar waiting room, but for a much less joyous occasion. Little baby Zachariah was nestled in his broad arms, swaddled in a blanket. The boy yawned, a tremendous effort in his condition.

Just as he was debating calling his wife yet again to let her know they were still waiting, a nurse appeared and led him through to the consultant.

He sat, this time in a much comfier chair, and surveyed the consultant's office. It was leaps and bounds ahead of the waiting room, but still in keeping with the hospital's apparent minimalism.

'I'll be straight to the point. The blood test we conducted shows Zachariah has a deficiency of beta-hexosaminidase. This is an enzyme that breaks down fatty acids in the brain known as ganglioside. The condition is more commonly known as Tay-Sachs disease.'

'What does it mean? More importantly, how do we fix it?'

'Zachariah's nerves will become progressively distended. He will lose the ability to see and hear. He may be unable to move any muscles, which will necessitate the use of a feeding tube. His seizures will become more violent, and Zachariah will be prone to recurring infections. I'm sorry, Yosef, but there is no cure.'

'Why him? What did he do to deserve this?' Yosef was no longer talking to his consultant, but pleading with God for his son.

'I'm afraid it's quite common in the Jewish population. Is your wife also Jewish?'

'What? No, she's not. She's from Slovakia.'

'No Jewish blood at all on her side of the family?'

'Not as far as I know. Are you sure the diagnosis is even right?'

'I'm afraid so. The blood test is straightforward. I only ask as, while the Jewish population have an incidence of around 1 in 3000, it's closer to 1 in 40000 in the general population.'

'Would it happen again if we had another child?'

'It's possible. The gene that causes the problem is recessive. Both parents have to be carriers, and this gives any child of their union a 1 in 4 chance of having Tay-Sachs. Even if they don't have Tay-Sachs it's likely that they would be a carrier.'

'So what happens now?' Yosef asked.

'Well, we will medicate for the convulsions, and monitor Zachariah twice a month to see how his condition progresses. If he needs a tube to keep his airways open then we will address it when the problem arises. If you have any concerns call me, or bring him in straight away. We'll also put you in touch with a support group for other Tay-Sachs parents here in London.'

'Thank you, Doctor.'

Edwin checked his darknet account. Nothing: his subtlety had gone unappreciated. He shrugged and pulled his keyboard closer. He ran the same routine precautions as before, concealing his whereabouts using proxies. Again, he took the time to spoof his MAC address, concealing the physical identity of

the laptop. This time, he was sure, the messages simply could not be traced back to him. He typed out a new message, deleting the old one as he did so. The time for being coy was over, and Edwin chose to be completely forthright in his new message. 'Contractor needed to eliminate nuisance. Target is mid-thirties. London based job. Contact for further details.' Satisfied, Edwin hit enter and the message floated into cyberspace for all to see.

This time a response came back quickly. In stilted English, the reply informed Edwin that a clean hit could be performed for the fee of £50,000. Payment would be in cash via a drop-box location, and Edwin would never see the killer.

Edwin began to mull it over before he realised how absurd his plan was. While he might be able to scrounge together the cash, it would be child's play for the police to put two and two together. The husband is always the police's first suspect, and with Edwin as the sole beneficiary of Eleanor's rather generous life insurance policy, the police would go over his finances with a fine tooth comb. A £50,000 deficit would stick out like a sore thumb, and Edwin would end up in prison before he could even say "It wasn't me."

Then the insurance company would never pay out, and Edwin would lose Chelsea to the foster care system. It simply wasn't viable. Edwin would have to find another way.

Yosef felt the tension of being a carer flood from his shoulder as he listened to Natan talk. Natan was the leader of the only Tay-Sachs support group in London. Natan had lost a daughter to the disease, but still ran the close-knit group. He had welcomed Yosef warmly the first time he'd walked in, embracing him and baby Zachariah as members of their community.

Natan spoke in a slow, sombre voice that contrasted sharply with his jovial features. He glanced around the room as he spoke, making eye contact with each group member in turn. Natan's grief was stark and raw, but somehow Yosef found his voice comforting and familiar. Yosef let his mind, and his eyes, wander. He looked around the hall, which had been donated by the Islington Synagogue for their use every other Thursday. It was a small gesture but without it the support group would not exist.

A small cry escaped from Zach's pram as he woke, bringing Yosef's attention back into the moment. He apologised for the disturbance, and picked the boy up gingerly to try and calm him down.

Zach's decline had been swift. He had seemed to grow normally for several months, and Yosef almost believed that the diagnosis had been wrong. Sadly, the set of tests confirmed his worst fears. Zach was suffering from the usual signs of Tay-Sachs. Not long after that, partial paralysis began to set in, and Zachariah became disabled before he had learned to walk.

The cherry-red bright spots in his eyes had been the red flag. Yosef knew his boy would be unlikely to make it past four years of age. The others in the group were further along that awful road. Even now, one woman, Maya, was making her first appearance in the group in months. Maya's daughter had suffered infection after infection, and had been in hospital for over a year.

Yosef squirmed in his seat, imagining Zachariah suffering that same agony, unable to speak or swallow, and barely able to breathe unassisted. Yosef's sense of calm dissipated as he realised once again just how hopeless it was being the carer for a terminal child.

Guilt clutched at Yosef's heart. He had brought this little boy into the world, and it was because of his Jewish ancestry that the boy suffered. He bowed his head in prayer, and made a silent vow that he would not prolong the boy's agony.

CHAPTER 3: THE PLAN

Life had been quiet for Edwin since leaving *The Impartial*. With no job to go to, no work to do, and no child to look after he had found himself at a bit of a loose end. For the first few days Edwin had drifted. He had allowed himself to sleep in, to watch daytime TV and to avoid physical exertion generally. He had begun to fall into a stupor. The wakeup call came in an unusual form for Edwin. It was when he realised that he could hum the theme tunes to the major morning television shows that he started to appreciate that, job or no job, he needed some sort of daily routine.

He set his alarm for six o'clock sharp, the time he used to get up for work at *The Impartial*. He forced himself to get dressed, as if he was going to work, but instead spent his mornings at the gym. Edwin didn't consider himself unfit, but he certainly had a slight paunch that had not been there when he was at university. He resolved to get back into trim during his time out from work, which he described to friends as a "career hiatus".

Once he had finished in the gym Edwin's daily routine was to take his laptop and abuse the free WiFi in the British Library to hunt for jobs. It was an auspicious setting that helped Edwin to focus, and he was soon fielding phone calls from recruitment consultants, agents and human resources departments. The loss of work at *The Impartial* was a blot on his résumé but he was still an exceptionally strong candidate. With a first-class undergraduate degree as well as his MBA, many doors were still open to him.

It was scant surprise therefore that within a week Edwin had secured a telephone interview with a business periodical in Vancouver. It was a slightly different role to editing *The Impartial* but Edwin was up for a new challenge and he soon wowed the director for human resources in the telephone interview. She was so impressed with his work ethic that he received an invitation to an in-person interview to take place in one week's time.

Edwin liked to do his thinking when it was particularly quiet. He had always found that late in the evening was a particularly productive time for him. As the witching hour approached, the number of distractions decreased exponentially. His phone remained mute, and his social media accounts were of little interest while everyone else was asleep.

Edwin pondered on his problems. A new job might ease the cash flow, but his wife was claiming virtually all their liquid assets and an on-going payment to maintain the lifestyle to which she had become accustomed. After adding in sale fees for the house, child support and the chance of being out of work for a while, Edwin realised that claiming on Eleanor's life insurance policy might be the only way out. He laughed as he realised that the insurance had effectively become a bounty payment for his murder.

The cold mirth echoed around the room, and Edwin clapped his hand over his mouth. He couldn't risk waking the neighbours.

The best thing about the quiet of the night was that it allowed Edwin to make connections in his mind that never seemed to occur to him during daylight hours. It was almost as if his neurons kept working hours that were the direct antithesis of Edwin's waking hours.

Whether it was the silence, or a by-product of his raw desire to carve out a plan, Edwin's brain began to map out a plan to eliminate his wife. He had been on the right track with using the darknet. It was sufficiently anonymous to fox the Metropolitan Police, and it seemed to work. It had, after all, already led him to a contact who appeared to be an assassin.

'What if...?' Edwin whispered. He grabbed a pen and began to scribble on his notepad, a mouse mat between the layers to prevent any indentations left on the paper underneath.

The darknet was an ideal form of communication for finding anonymous contacts, but paying someone to kill Eleanor would require Edwin to renounce his anonymity in making the payment. Spending money would also leave a trail that even the Met could follow successfully right to him.

In order for it to work Edwin would need to exchange not goods or money, but services. One hit for another, a murder swap.

It was ideal, as neither person would need to identify themselves, only their victims. They would also have absolutely no connection to each other's victims, and thus no motive. Why would the police ever find them?

Edwin stretched out languorously as a yawn escaped him. It was getting late, but Edwin still had a new advert to post on the darknet before he would allow himself to sleep.

CHAPTER 4: WORKING GIRL

North London's downmarket Caledonian Road area had always been known for being a place which certain desires could be satiated, at a price. It wasn't completely rundown, but the London housing boom had forced those on the fringe to live in the most affordable places they could find, and Caledonian Road was still relatively affordable, which attracted the undesirable elements of society.

A central London location was essential for Vanhi. Her tiny flat was rented through a shell company, one of a myriad of properties used by her pimp to sell sex.

While prostitution has never been criminalised, solicitation is and always has been illegal. It didn't stop some working girls, who could often be found near roundabouts touting for business from passing cars.

But Vanhi was smatter than that. She advertised online, finding punters in places the law couldn't reach. Business was brisk.

For a city of over seven and a half million people, it was remarkable how lonely many men were. Sex always sold well and it always would. In a city where it was bad form to smile at another commuter on the subway the market thrived.

Vanhi lay splayed out on the four-posted bed, a reluctant participant pretending to be enthralled by the rolls of fat oozing off of the middle-aged man on top of her. Sweat poured off his body, and Vanhi wrinkled her nose as the smell overcame her.

She didn't know the man's name, and she didn't care to. Every time he touched her, she recoiled. But there was no other way.

Her customer didn't notice her pained wince as he mounted her. She closed her eyes as the man came to rest on top of her, and then forced her legs apart.

She tried to let her mind drift, to pretend she was somewhere else, anywhere else. Reality bit back as the man thrust himself inside her, violating every inch of her as his carnal urges took over.

Less than two minutes later, the man grunted as he finished. Vanhi fought the urge to run straight to the shower. A small moan escaped her, one of desperation, but the client smiled as if he had won the lottery.

The big man tossed a few notes on the bed-stand, then slowly got dressed before heading for the door. She closed her eyes as he dressed, willing him to leave quickly.

'Thanks, babe. Same time next week.'

She rolled over and clutched at her illicit haul. It wouldn't go far. She dashed to the shower and ran the hot tap. It was only when searing hot water scalded her that she came back down to reality.

When she was finally satisfied that she had finished her post-punter ritual, she dashed out of the shower to clear away the day's mess. It would only be a couple of hours before Jaison made it back from his cleaning job.

She hastily painted her face to hide her day's activities from her beau, and then pulled out a credit card and a small bag of cocaine. One more hit wouldn't hurt. She just needed to forget.

Edwin shifted in his airplane seat, trying not to elbow the woman next to him. His legs were always a problem when flying. They were simply too long. On a previous flight he had fallen asleep with his legs in the aisle and tripped up an air hostess who tried to shuffle by without waking him, and that was only a short-haul flight.

This time, he'd coughed up for premium economy, and asked to be put in the front row, next to the emergency exit. The airlines didn't mind. They needed someone able to open the door in the event of an emergency, and Edwin gained a few extra inches of legroom in return. The airline still refused

confirm that seat until he'd checked in.

He had grudgingly forked out for a travel cushion at Heathrow. He hated wasting money but it was a nine-hour flight, and another £10 made little difference when the bill for the flight had been £1183.

Edwin needn't have worried. He was soon snoozing in his seat, his Kindle tucked under his arm as the 747 soared majestically across the Atlantic.

An automated voice rudely woke him as the plane began the approach to Vancouver International.

'Please remain in your seats with your seatbelts fastened while the pilot begins our final descent. Please keep your seatbelt fastened until the plane has come to a complete stop, and the seatbelt signs have been turned off. Thank you for flying British Airways.'

Vanhi yelled out in pain, or she would have if she had not been gagged and bound. She struggled against her bonds, nylon rope cutting into her wrists and drawing blood.

She screamed again as he approached her. His pockmarked face leered down at her with blue eyes shot through with crimson. He tugged at her hair, pulling her face to within inches of his, parading his power over her. She screamed again, feeling more helpless than ever before. As she screamed he became visibly aroused, advancing on her with a knife in one hand. He held the knife to her throat and slid his hands between her legs.

Vanhi screamed and woke with a start. She was sweating profusely. The dream *again*. She glanced bleary-eyed at the clock. It read 2:32 a.m. She cursed under her breath, careful not to disturb Jaiso and then swung her legs out of bed, before tiptoeing to the kitchen in search of cocaine.

There was none to be found. She searched her purse and found it empty. There wasn't even enough money to buy more, not that it would be easy to score a hit at half two in the morning anyway.

This had to end somehow. It was either her or him.

She pulled a serrated knife from the rack by the sink and placed it above her left wrist. One clean, simple swipe lengthways along the arm and her nightmare would be over.

Just as she was about to use the blade, Vanhi noticed her laptop had a small green LED flashing to indicate a new message had been posted on the darknet site she frequented.

At first, she thought it might be a new punter. She often found clients online, and using an anonymous service avoided being arrested for solicitation. She could find a dealer on there too, or willing to post her drugs to an anonymous PO box. Meeting up meant losing that anonymity, but with careful screening, it was possible to avoid problems.

The message didn't seem to be from a punter or a dealer. It was curiously titled 'You solve my problem, and I'll solve yours.'

The grammar was too perfect for it to be just another druggie looking to score, so Vanhi opened the thread. No author's name was listed, only the message and a time stamp, 1:08 a.m. GMT. Vanhi flicked the scroll wheel to show the body of the message.

'Help me eliminate my problem, and I'll eliminate yours.'

A small text box invited anonymous replies. Vanhi smiled. This was the opportunity she had been waiting for. If she was reading this right she could make sure *that* man never hurt anyone else as long as he had hurt her, and do it without ever even having to look at his pockmarked face ever again. First she had to make sure the message was what she thought it was. She typed cautiously, praying that the other person wasn't a prankster, or worse, the police.

'Seems like a fair swap. What is your problem?'

CHAPTER 5: OH, CANADA!

If Edwin hadn't been a Londoner for most of his adult life he would have found Vancouver to be both imposing and impressive in equal measure. The skyline resembled many of the other major cities Edwin had visited. Vast office blocks rose dozens of storeys above the waterline, with beautiful bridges such as the Granville Street Bridge in the north and the remarkably well-lit Lions Gate Bridge breaking up the seaways. It was a most beautiful city, with a vibrant metropolitan community, and a strong economy. It would be an ideal place to live and work for a newly single bachelor looking for a fresh start.

The interview was to take place in downtown Vancouver at 5433 West Georgia Street. It was a swanky address, but having lived and worked in the most exorbitantly expensive parts of London Edwin was not one to be intimidated by a postcode.

He was, however, impressed with the building. His office on Fleet Street had been opulent with incredible views, but the home of the Canadian Business Press Co eclipsed even that office. With over thirty floors, including a central atrium complete with indoor waterfall and a glass elevator, the building was a powerhouse.

Upon arrival Edwin was quickly escorted into the elevator by a businesslike secretary who had plainly been chosen on merit rather than her looks. The ride gave Edwin the opportunity to watch the laid-back attitude the Canadians took to their work. While the foyer at *The Impartial* was a veritable circus, CBC Co had a relaxed atmosphere. Colleagues could be seen chatting over the water cooler and strolling casually among the indoor fauna. It was a culture shock, but a pleasant one.

Equally shocking was the proliferation of proper etiquette. Everywhere Edwin went he was greeted warmly and with a politeness that to an Englishman would seem unnatural, perhaps even false. False was not, however. There genuinely was a strong culture of being respectful and observing social boundaries.

There was no waiting room for Edwin to sit in and muster his thoughts before the interview. He was led straight into a series of psychometric tests. His brain strained as he fought to recall rules of grammar, and how to solve equations by integration. He was nearing a migraine when the secretary reappeared.

'Time is up, Mr Murphy. If you'd care to follow me, please.' Her tone was pleasant but firm.

Edwin was then led into his first-ever panel interview. A dozen individuals were arrayed down the length of a large, expensive, oak conference table. The secretary gestured for him to sit in the so-called chair on the opposing side and left the room without further ado.

Edwin had noticed a coat rack by the door on the way in. He took his time removing his jacket and hanging it neatly before tucking his briefcase under the table and sitting before the waiting CBC executives.

'Good afternoon, Mr Murphy,' the central member of the panel said. He was a youngish man, and judging by the ill-fitting suit he was not truly an executive. Edwin replied with the usual courtesy and his eyes scanned the faces of those watching him. On the far left sat an older gentleman. His attire was nondescript: a simple white cotton shirt and black trousers. This would have been completely unmemorable had there not been a distinct pattern on his wrist, a void where his tan should have continued. Edwin deduced that the man customarily wore a large watch, probably a diver's watch. From the watch's absence it was clear that the man was concealing his wealth. He was probably someone important, but was trying to conceal who he was.

Edwin began to study the rest of the panel when the young man spoke again.

'Mr Murphy,' he began.

'Please, call me Edwin,' Edwin interrupted him.

The younger man frowned at the interruption and began the interview in earnest.

'If you were a dinosaur, what kind of a dinosaur would you be?'

Edwin almost burst out laughing. It was an absurd question, the sort used only by headhunters and human resources personnel.

It was the sort of question that is asked not to find out the answer, but to test how the candidate responds to the unexpected, to test how fast they think on their feet.

Edwin knew this and chose to ignore it entirely.

'I'm sure you have a number of quips ready no matter which of the common answers I give. I expect you're hoping I'll say *tyrannosaurus rex*. The truth of it is I am not a dinosaur. They are, after all, extinct.' Edwin turned to face the man on the left who was missing his watch.

'Forgive me for being blunt, sir, but I would prefer to deal with those in charge of hiring rather than some spotty-nosed kid.' Edwin flicked his hand at the human resources representative.

The man looked taken aback for a moment, then grinned a wide toothy smile.

'How'd you figure out who I am, son?' he asked

'Putting the important people on the end of the panel is a classic. The lackey chairs from the center and distracts from the real panel. He asks frankly absurd questions, and you watch how I respond. That, and your tan line is a dead giveaway.'

The CEO guffawed.

'That'll be all, thanks, Tony.'

The younger man rose and left in silence, with three of his colleagues following him. Once they had closed the door the CEO introduced himself properly.

'I'm Barry Robbins, CEO here at CBC. To my left is our in-house counsel, our CFO and our deputy editor, Andy Hodgson. We've seen your work, and you spoke to Andy on the phone. We invited you here today to see if we liked the cut of your jib, and whether we think you'd fit in here in Vancouver. We're delighted to say you do fit in.'

Back at the Downtown Vancouver Hilton, Edwin practically fell into bed.

It had been a long day. They had most certainly liked him, but he had realised the interview was virtually a formality when they agreed to fly him halfway around the world for a face-to-face interview. It was nearly 7 p.m. Pacific time when he finally got to check his darknet message. Vancouver lags eight hours behind London so it was no surprise to see the new message indicated by a flash as soon as he logged on.

'*Seems like a fair swap. What is your problem?*' he read.

Did she understand what he was proposing? Was she an undercover cop? Did it make a difference even if she was? He was, after all, anonymous.

Edwin pecked out a reply, typing with just two fingers. He 'd become too reliant on Betty's touchtyping.

'*A woman. I need her gone.*' He hit send, and his message zoomed around the globe in cyberspace, bouncing off relays in Singapore, California, Newfoundland and even Kenya before it reached Vanhi back in London.

Vanhi studied the reply. She had not figured that a woman would be the other person's target. Perhaps she had been too rash in responding to the message. But then Vanhi wondered if it even really mattered if her victim was a man or a woman. As long as she didn't have to see *him* ever again, it would be worth it.

'*Get me a picture.*' She typed. '*How and when?*'

A few minutes later, Vanhi had a mini biography on Eleanor. She knew that Eleanor took a run a quarter to eight each morning for a circuit around Belgravia, and she had a clear image of Eleanor with her bobbed auburn hair. She knew she had a week to pull off the kill, she just didn't know how to do it yet.

Edwin was a cautious man. He was not one to take risks that could be mitigated. Rather than providing a mere alibi, Edwin wanted to make his visit to Vancouver look genuine. He was a bona fide prospective citizen, so it was only natural to take some time to explore Vancouver. He'd booked a week in Canada, and he was in no rush to get back to London and his drab new apartment. There was no work to return to, and it looked like his choice to take a few days' break would provide the perfect alibi.

While Edwin was not much of a sports fan, a friend had recommended checking out the BC Sports Hall of Fame and its attached museum. Hockey is a national pastime in Canada, and if Edwin were to become a Canadian he would certainly need to know some background on the sport, even if he didn't fancy actually playing it. It was too violent for Edwin really; he had experienced his share of violence as a tight head prop on the school rugby team back at Harrow.

Edwin gladly paid the cover charge, and even picked up a gaudy souvenir t-shirt. He was every bit the tourist, studiously reading every plaque and memorising the names on various medals and trophies on display. He wasn't really interested but his years at *The Impartial* had imparted in him a thirst for knowledge, and the sports records allowed him to quench that thirst. Satiated, he moved on to the exhibits he was really fascinated by. One chronicled the life of Terry Fox, a cancer sufferer who ran a cross-country across Canada, traversing 3,339 miles in just 143 days. The exhibit was aptly named the Marathon of Hope. If Edwin had still been an editor he would have loved to see such a great human interest piece cross his desk.

Still, Terry Fox's story was not the most inspirational. That honour fell to a Paralympian who trekked 40,000 km through thirty-four countries on four continents in a wheelchair to raise awareness of spinal cord injuries. It was at BC Place Stadium that Rick Hansen made his triumphant return to Vancouver, cheered by the crowds in the packed stadium.

Feeling newly invigorated, Edwin left the Sports museum in search of lunch.

The syringe was ready. Vanhi had primed it with cocaine mixed with ethanol and put in a new hypodermic needle. Once injected, the coke would take around fifteen seconds to begin to take effect.

Eleanor's running route took her through Battersea Park on a circuitous route around the boating lake and then back across the Thames to Belgravia. The park was perfect. It was large, with plenty of places to hide. Getting away unseen would be easy.

Vanhi could simply stab Eleanor, then go. She didn't even need to wait for her to die. The cocaine would induce respiratory and cardiac arrest. As long as no medical treatment was administered within a few minutes, Eleanor would die and it would be almost impossible to trace. Vanhi knew that all she had to do was remove Eleanor's keys, the only personal possessions she took with her when she went for her daily run, and the police would find it difficult to identify the body.

Vanhi had to avoid the CCTV in the area. In the west the superintendent's office would provide some coverage, while at the east end of the park the Pump House and the park toilets were both monitored. Fortunately Eleanor was not prone to sticking to the busy pedestrian paths, preferring the freedom of a cross-country run. Her return loop would take her past Fountain Lake in the north-west of the park. Vanhi would pretend to sit and enjoy the view while doing her make-up. In reality she would be using the mirror in her make-up case to watch what was going on behind her as well as monitoring everything in front of her. Vanhi had a week to carry out the hit, so she would sit on the

same bench each morning waiting for Eleanor to jog past, and only carry out the hit if the coast was clear. If anyone was nearby and likely to render medical assistance, or worse, see what happened, she would abort and wait for the next day to try again.

It had been a fantastic break. Edwin had imbibed the culture of Vancouver, playing tourist as well as enjoying the hotel's pool facilities. He could see himself living in Vancouver permanently. It was a beautiful city with plenty of amenities, and the people were as friendly and polite as the stereotypes suggested. Edwin found himself reluctant to leave, and it was with a heavy heart that he left his hotel suite to head back to London's squalor. Edwin wondered if the hit had occurred yet. He had deliberately left his mobile back in London, and had not left his hotel contact details with anyone. There was no one for him to leave them to. His work friends were no more, as was his marriage, and he had long since neglected his university compatriots.

Getting through airport security was painless, though Edwin made sure to keep his belt on as he went through the metal detectors. He wanted to be remembered, just in case.

The flight was equally uneventful. He made a pass at one of the air hostesses, but was shot down in a delightfully polite manner.

Edwin spent most of the nine hours fifteen minutes working out how to minimise the chances of the police catching him. He would have to go to her funeral of course. It would be noticed if he didn't. He might even have to give a eulogy. At the least he'd have to look after Chelsea through the service and the wake.

He'd also have to be careful with the insurance. Fortunately it was an older policy taken out just after he and Eleanor married, so it wouldn't flag any suspicion for being recent. He would have to leave it in a drawer for a while; he mustn't be seen as too eager to claim, otherwise the police would never stop pursuing him. Edwin would simply have to play the aggrieved husband. They were having some troubles, but who wasn't? He and Eleanor had argued before, and they'd always worked it out. He was hopeful that this time would have been no different. He would move back into the townhouse of course; it simply wouldn't do to uproot Chelsea after all she had been through.

Edwin dropped off to sleep over Greenland as these thoughts gambolled through his brain. A slight smile was painted on his aristocratic features.

CHAPTER 6: JOGGING IS MURDER

Vanhi knew London was a hotbed for closed circuit television. Years of prostitution and drugs had taught her to avoid the bright lights of touristville, and to hide in a crowd when she could.

She was still reluctant to be caught on CCTV on the tube network. Her apartment was above a cheap shop in Caledonian Road. She could walk to Battersea Park, but it was almost six miles going straight there, and Vanhi wanted to take a more circumspect route.

Vanhi's route took her on foot to Camden Town tube station. It was on the Northern line, the busiest commuter line on the underground. Vanhi knew she could easily be lost among the foot traffic. She took a train south to Stockwell before doubling back to Oval. To any observer it would look like she had simply missed her stop and gone one station too far.

In reality it let Vanhi know she was not being followed. She didn't expect to be, but few paranoid criminals ever wound up in prison.

From there it was less than half an hour on foot to Battersea Park. As she made her way there Vanhi observed a discernible lack of CCTV near the disused Battersea power station, as well as noticing that New Convent Garden Market was bustling with business, even at this early hour.

By half-past seven she was seated on a bench overlooking Fountain Lake. She sat with a paperback for a while, occasionally glancing at her mobile phone.

The mobile, like the paperback, had been bought just for the occasion. It was an old phone, and wouldn't attract any attention. The SIM card was a pay-as-you-go edition bought in a corner shop. She could have got one for free online, but this way she remained anonymous. She didn't need the phone to communicate, but by pretending to be sending text messages she could while away time without anyone becoming suspicious. Who would look at just another Londoner attached to their mobile?

Vanhi had taken this route several times before, and she now knew Eleanor's jogging route well. She had taken a varied wardrobe not to be noticed on the first three attempts, but each time, Eleanor was absorbed in her run. She probably noticed little beyond the music on her iPod.

For the first few attempts there had been bystanders around when Eleanor jogged by. On the first day an elderly lady sat next to Vanhi on the bench and nattered on about her grandchildren. Vanhi learnt to put her handbag by her side to occupy the whole bench.

The second day another jogger had been with Eleanor. Whether it was planned or not, Vanhi didn't know. The scant information she had been provided with didn't cover jogging partners. On the third day a homeless man had been harassing Eleanor for money, and he wasn't going to give up without a fight. He had clearly missed the fact that Eleanor was running with no bag, no pockets and only her door key around her neck.

On the fourth try, Eleanor appeared like clockwork. She came jogging up from the south of the park towards the north-western exit. Vanhi's pulse began to race as Eleanor neared her, faster than even on the previous days. Her hands trembled. This time no one was about, she was sure of it.

Now that it came down to the wire Vanhi realised that she couldn't get Eleanor while she was running, and it was unlikely that she would just stop in front of her.

As Eleanor was about to jog on by, Vanhi called out to her in a loud voice, as she knew from experience that Eleanor's iPod would be set to quite a high volume.

'Excuse me, darling, but your shoelace is undone,' she purred in an affected southern drawl.

Eleanor smiled and glanced downwards at her trainers. As she frowned at the obvious lie Vanhi struck, thrusting the needle into her jugular and plunging the syringe down in one movement.

Eleanor moved to strike out at her attacker but she stumbled. A huge dose of cocaine, hundreds of pounds' worth, coursed through her veins. Her heart began to hammer in her ribcage. She was already breathing hard from the continuous jog, and it did not take long for the arrhythmia to set in as her

heart rate soared. She tried to scream, but her lungs were burning from a lack of oxygen. Spots appeared before her eyes as she realised her attacker was dumping her on the bench. Where was someone, anyone, when she needed a passerby? She heard a crack as her consciousness failed her. Her key had been torn from her neck.

Vanhi used her sleeve to pull the key off the chain. It was a cheap chain, the kind that could be bought in a hardware store rather than something more decorative. Vanhi flung the key into the lake, watching for a split second to make sure it sank before power-walking towards the south-east of the park. A run would garner attention, and a swift walk would not. She tucked the chain in her pocket to dispose of later, and escaped onto Queenstown Road.

Minutes later she was lost among the crowd at New Covent Garden Market. Vanhi was in no rush to hurry back lest she draw attention to herself. She grabbed a burger at the market, and as she put the wrapper in the bin she slipped the chain and the spent needle in too. She resolved to walk home even though it was quite a trek. As she did so she practically whistled, thinking of the favour she was due to receive in return.

The body was discovered about ten minutes later. An ambulance was quickly called and Eleanor rushed to the Royal London Hospital. The paramedics tried in vain to resuscitate her, but she was too far gone. They suspected drugs, but nothing they tried worked. Eleanor was pronounced dead on arrival, the latest Jane Bloggs in the city of London as she was carrying no ID.

The hospital could not issue a death certificate. Suspected drugs deaths had to be referred to the City of London Coroner's Office as 'violent or unnatural'. Instead the attending doctor completed what is known as a Formal Notice. This would normally be given to the next of kin, but as the deceased was a Jane Bloggs this was not possible, and the doctor was not entirely sure of the procedure. He settled for keeping the notice on file until it was needed.

Eleanor was soon ferried out of the hospital morgue and onto the coroner's slab. The registrar could not register her death, both because of her anonymity and because the coroner had not yet decided how to classify the death.

A post-mortem was then conducted by the coroner. This wasn't always done, but the coroner deemed it prudent to investigate in the circumstances. It was, in fact, a young coroner's assistant who performed the autopsy.

Before the autopsy the body was photographed by a pathology tech. Detailed notes were taken of the body's position ('splayed, no sign of bleeding'), the clothes worn ('expensive, designer sportswear') and then various samples were taken including fibres from Eleanor's clothes, scraping from under Eleanor's nails, as well as hair and skin cell samples.

After the clothes were removed an ultraviolet light was used to highlight anything not noticeable to the naked eye. It was here that the assistant coroner noticed the puncture wound to the neck. He scraped around the wound in case any residue remained, then took a number of close-up photographs to measure the extent of the puncture. It was clearly caused by a sharp-pointed object such as a needle.

Satisfied that all the recoverable evidence to be had was recorded in his log the coroner moved on to the internal examination. A rubber body block was placed in the small of Jane Bloggs' back, pushing her chest up higher to expose it to the coroner's waiting knife. Her lifeless arms fell limply by her side as the coroner cut a Y incision from her shoulders, meeting at the sternum. Heavy-duty shears were then used to force the incisions apart, exposing the chest cavity and the organs within.

He was then passed a wicked-looking scalpel by his tech. This was used to slice open the pericardial sack, a fibrous layer that surrounds the heart. A blood sample was then taken from the exposed pulmonary veins, which would be used for toxicological analysis. Satisfied there were no visible blood

clots the coroner then removed the heart. Next to be removed were the lungs, and finally the rest of the organs. These would then be weighed.

It was pretty clear from a cursory examination what had happened however, and that was that James Bloggs has suffered a heart attack. This was borne out by the paramedic's suspicion that drugs were involved. Toxicology would confirm this in 3-5 days, but the coroner didn't care. It was now a police case.

Heathrow posed no problems on Edwin's return. He had half-expected to be met at the gate by the police. Maybe the hit hadn't been carried out yet. He decided to test it by texting his ex-wife when he got home. 'Eleanor, I'm back from my job interview. Can I take Chelsea to the movies next weekend? She can stay over here after.' Edwin figured that if he had no response he could assume the hit had probably taken place. It also seemed to him to be a perfectly legitimate text for a father to send. His flat looked just as messy as when he had left it. The sink still had plates piled high. At this rate it might be simpler just to chuck the plates and buy new ones. His washing still lay on the floor in a heap in the corner. His appearance mattered less and less each passing day; who was there to try and impress now?

One thing had changed however. His laptop was flashing the indicator message when he turned it on. This meant Edwin had received a darknet message. It was from Vanhi, detailing the target he was supposed to hit. '*White male, six foot two, lives in Brixton, name of Emanuel Richard.* Edwin recalled aloud. A grainy picture was attached. The picture showed a hand holding up a photo of a man, presumably Emanuel. The person holding the photo couldn't be seen, but in the background, Edwin could see a neon sign. Edwin concentrated on his target.

Emanuel was distinctive-looking, with grey hair beginning to appear around the temples giving him an air of salt-and-pepper sophistication. Both frown and smile lines were evident on his face despite the low resolution, and his lips were curled in a thin smile. He had pockmarked skin, and water-brown eyes, which stopped him from being handsome.

Edwin felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. Taking this guy out wouldn't be as easy as the whole plan had seemed on paper. He didn't know if he could really do it. Edwin felt his world close in. If he did kill Emanuel, he might leave behind some evidence; even the tiniest part of himself could get him convicted using DNA.

He could just walk away, couldn't he? He mused on this for one happy moment before realising that if he didn't deliver, the other person could easily put two and two together to work out who he was. If they went to the police with what they knew – that he was abroad to provide an alibi – then the police would work it out. Even if the cops couldn't prove it, he would still wind up in the dock.

He still had breathing room for now – he had no confirmation the hit had gone ahead. Perhaps he could even call it all off before it was too late.

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