

One

Harry had sat in the restaurant for over an hour, bloating his empty stomach on grissini and cold Prosecco. It had gone eight and there was still no sign of her.

He'd borrowed a smart jacket for the evening and had gone to the trouble of ironing a shirt. Worse still, he'd even shaved a perfectly good three-day stubble and trimmed his unruly mop of blond hair, just short of the collar.

Harry was at the point of giving up on her when a young woman came rushing through the door. The only reason he recognised her was because she was wearing the same expensive white angora coat on the day they first met. Angela Linehan looked totally different as her dark hair had been cut short like a boy's with mock sideburns that flicked

upwards to her high cheekbones. It suited her and made her look younger than her thirty-two years.

He'd chosen a small Italian restaurant in Soho, a surviving relic of fifties' Little Italy. It was noisy and reeked of garlic, but he liked it. The windows had red and white gingham kitchen curtains and on every table was an empty Chianti bottle with a burning candle.

She held up a restraining hand to stop him standing and glided her willowy frame into the booth where he'd made a pile of crumbs on the table from the breadsticks. Harry hailed the waiter for another glass of Prosecco.

The flame of the candle softened her face and her bruised eye was hardly noticeable anymore under the heavy make-up. She looked demure in her plain black dress and smelt of a lemon grove.

'I was beginning to think you weren't coming,' he said.

'Sorry, I had to wait for him to leave the house first.'

'You okay?'

'Sure,' she said, knocking back the sparkling wine as soon as it arrived. She placed the glass on the table and attempted a smile, her small fine-boned hands locking fingers. She cast her eye around the restaurant and said, 'What a charming place you've found.'

'It's probably not what you're used to,' he replied, suspecting she was being polite.

'When you called, I thought you were ringing to turn me down. What changed your mind?'

'I was going to, but then the thought of you doing this on your own and screwing it up just took over.'

'So you do have a conscience?' A full smile.

He didn't reply and raised his glass to hers. 'Here's to your new life.' They finished off their drinks in silence.

She sat up with a straight back and pushed her empty glass aside, her gold bracelets jangling on her wrists like Jacob Marley's chains. 'Okay, so how much is this going to cost me?'

He knew he could take her for more than his usual asking fee because she was bringing along her young boy, something that didn't sit comfortably with him. Besides she looked as if she could afford it. 'Forty grand for you and your son.'

'I thought the passports would only come to ten.'

'That's right, the thirty on top is to keep you out of the reach of your husband.'

'You can guarantee that he won't ever get to me?'

'When I've finished with you, even I won't be able to find you.'

The conversation halted as the waiter took their orders for asparagus salad followed by osso bucco. They nodded to the waiter's suggestion of a bottle of Barolo and watched him disappear into the steamy kitchen.

'Is there a way you could speed all this up?' she asked.

'These things can't be rushed.'

'I'll double your fee if you do it in six weeks.'

Harry was taken aback by her offer. He kicked himself for not asking more from the start. Rich people had no real sense of noughts, they only haggled not to look stupid. With the money from this job, he could pay off Polecat, his losses on the tracks, buy a new car and swan around Goa. He hid his delight and asked with as much sincerity he could muster, 'Why the sudden urgency?'

She cast her eyes downwards at the tablecloth and told him she was pregnant. There was no way she was going to

have her husband's child. If he discovered she'd had an abortion she was as good as dead. She just wanted to do it and skip the UK before he found out.

He doubted the passports could be speeded up that quickly with Christmas around the corner and suggested that if they weren't ready in six weeks she could always have the abortion when she arrived in her new home. That was not an option, she told him flat, as she didn't want to deal with any complications in a foreign land. She repeated her offer that she would double his fees if she could run away after the New Year. He told her he would see what he could do.

'I presume you'll want cash?' she asked.

'You presume right.' He did a quick re-calculation based on her offer and said, 'Fifty grand up front - twenty for the passports and thirty to me as a down payment. You

give me the rest when I hand over the passports. Can you manage that?’

She nodded.

‘That’s not all; you’re going to need to give me a further three thou’ to load on a pre-paid credit card as you will have to kiss goodbye to your American Express for a while.’

He stopped talking as the waiter returned to pour the Barolo for him to sample. It tasted fine and the waiter filled their glasses before leaving again.

They each took a sip and placed their glasses down.

‘Everything you are planning from now on is filled with risk,’ he continued. ‘It starts here and now. And if you back out halfway through, I don’t do refunds.’

‘When do you want it?’

‘As soon as I can get hold of my contact for the passports. He’s going to want four sets of passport pictures

of you and your son, so that he has plenty of choice. Only use photo booths. Is that clear?’

She nodded.

The waiter returned with the asparagus salad and hovered for a moment before wishing them a perfunctory, ‘buon appetito’.

‘How did you get into this business?’ she asked, casually cleaning the fork with the corner of her napkin before taking her first bite.

Harry was tempted to say something sarcastic about the restaurant’s hygiene rating, but as she was paying for the meal he answered her question instead. ‘I used to work in the Met, spent much of my time tracking down missing persons, as well as criminals.’

‘Why did you leave?’

‘Got pushed out.’

'Because of your drinking?'

'Parker told you?'

'He warned me.'

He didn't respond, so she asked another question.

'Where did you go after the Met?'

'I set up on my own, working for credit companies, banks, insurers, solicitors, tracing agencies - anyone that pays me to track down someone. Usually they're debtors or gone-aways. There's an art in nailing them, particularly if they're rich.'

'So you know the type of men my husband will use to find me?'

'They'll be pretty much like me. As I told you when we first met, I know all the tricks that will be used and I'll teach you how to cover up your tracks.'

'You make it sound easy.'

'If you know what you're doing.'

Once he'd decided to take on a client, there was no point in frightening them until he saw the colour of their money. It wasn't running away to a strange land that they would find hard, but the mental endurance to spend the rest of their life in hiding, in constant fear of a knock on the door. It was a hell he vowed he'd never put himself through, no matter the circumstances.

'Mr Parker told me you have a high success rate in this sort of thing.'

'Only one of my clients has ever been tracked down and that was his fault for not sticking to my rules.'

'What happened to him?'

'McCaffity?' he shrugged. 'Fell from a block of flats in Santiago.'

She gasped, raising a hand to her throat. 'Was he pushed?'

'Well, if it was suicide, he forgot to open the window,' he said, drinking some wine and returning the glass to the table. 'He owed money to a betting syndicate in Korea. It usually boils down to money.'

'But my husband is a psychopath, Mr Bridger ...'

He insisted she called him by his first name.

'... Harry,' she corrected herself. 'This isn't about money. I can't live this way anymore and he's just not going to let me go. The threats to kill me if I take our son are real.'

'Your son,' he'd forgotten his name.

'Peter.'

'He's okay about leaving his father?'

She stared at him as if he hadn't been listening. 'What sort of question is that?'

'Well?'

'Peter wants to be with me. He's scared to death of his father. My husband is a terribly violent man.'

An old couple at the table opposite glanced across at her and then resumed eating the restaurant's speciality, the rack of lamb.

Lowering her voice, she continued. 'He'd pay any amount of money to find me.' Her eyes began to well and her voice started to tremble. 'No one can help; not the courts; the police - no one.' She raised the tips of her fingers to her eye. 'This isn't the only bruise on my body. I'm so tired of never healing properly.'

'Don't worry, he won't find you or your son.'

That was a promise he could live with because long-term survival was always possible for those who kept their wits about them. Over the years, he'd helped more than

forty people vanish, something that had become harder in the digital age. Everyone's details were just out there, ready to be found through open source intelligence gathering: where they live, their work place, their cars, telephone numbers, email addresses, browsing habits, purchases, and, even favourite haunts with pictures of friends and colleagues – courtesy of the social media.

'They found McCaffity, though,' she said, leaning towards him. Her violet eyes were large and were studying his face carefully as he composed a response.

'That's because he couldn't follow the simplest of instructions like getting rid of all the old information about him before quitting the UK. It's where they'll first start searching.'

'You mean, for me too?'

'Yes, for you too.'

She took a drink from her glass and concentrated hard on what he was going to say next.

‘The trouble with McCaffity was that he couldn’t grasp the concept of sending them on a wild goose chase with duff facts on his whereabouts, like leaving the utility or cable company a new bogus billing address and telephone number. He never paid off all his accounts before leaving the country, which was really asking for it. When he arrived in Santiago he forgot to set up a dummy company to pay all his accounts. Didn’t even bother with a PO Box for mail. McCaffity thought a fake passport was all that was needed to disappear forever.’

‘How long did they take to track him down?’

‘A few months. They got him in the end through a car rental company in Santiago. Broke the cardinal rule of never

hiring a vehicle in the same city where you live. He'd even used his old credit cards.'

When the time came, he'd go over all the rules with her which would keep her safe from anyone, unless she made a mistake. Over time she would become her own jailer, locking herself away from the world she knew.

'Any ideas where you want to live?' he asked.

'South America.'

'Good choice. You won't stand out so much there and there are some less regulated offshore banks that will make your finances a lot easier to handle.'

'Trouble is, I don't know anyone there.'

'Better still. No friends or family can know where you are. Just one call to your parents from abroad could be the end of you.'

'They died in a car crash with my younger brother.'

'So no close family?'

'None.'

'Are you on any of the social networking sites?'

'No. He forbade it because he didn't want me to have friends.'

'Have you thought how you're going to make a living?' he asked.

'I've got plenty of money.'

'You won't be able to work for a company. Public payrolls are too easily traceable.'

'My father left me well provided for. He made his fortune from timber in Myrtleford.'

'Myrtleford?'

'Victoria, Australia. It was where he was born. My mother was English.'

He suddenly had more questions to ask her about her past but it was not the moment.

She lifted her fork and held it at an angle, just above her plate. 'Mr Parker said you would know how to move my money?'

'Sure, I can recommend an offshore online account you could use when the time comes. How much are we talking about? Fifty, sixty, a hundred thou?'

'Ten million.'

Those noughts again. He wasn't expecting quite that many. No one he'd helped previously had that sort of cash. Her eyes were anxious for his reply.

'We're going to need a bigger bank,' he smiled.

She didn't.

'Don't worry, I know people who can look after you,' he continued. 'They'll help you put your funds into offshore

banks that make it impossible for anyone, including the cops, to follow.'

'This is the part that scares me the most as it will be the first place Nick will start looking.'

'I can assure you, that even with all your husband's contacts, no one will be able to follow the money to get to you. The people I know make a living protecting their client's assets from their enemies. Once I put you in touch with them, you'll be able to communicate directly through open source codes using military grade encryption.'

'I don't know anything about that.'

'They'll take care of all the technical stuff. Your calls and emails will all be encrypted.'

'Who are these people?'

'I'll let you know when we're at that stage.' Harry thought of a problem. 'Are you sure you can sort out your finances within six weeks?'

'I've been working on this for some while. Everything is liquid and ready to go.'

'That should make everything easier,' he said. 'You'll feel a lot better once you start making arrangements to wire out your money.'

While the waiter cleared their plates, Harry glanced out of the steamy window and saw black cabs sailing down the dark narrow street. A big man smoking a cigar was looking at two Japanese couples hunched over a map. He was barrel-chested and wearing a Crombie. He didn't appear to be doing anything on the street, apart from smoking. One of the tourists tried to catch the man's attention to ask directions, but his wife didn't like the look of him and pulled her

husband back. The man continued to puff lazy smoke into the freezing air, standing motionless between the shadows of the shops.

Harry looked back at her as she spoke.

'I can't believe this is really happening.'

'You'd better, because there's a lot still to do.'

The osso bucco arrived on a bed of polenta and Harry topped up the glasses. 'From now on you're only going to use a prepaid mobile to communicate with me,' he said, ignoring her cleaning another fork in her napkin. 'That's the first of the rules I'm going to give you tonight. The second is to change your phone every month.'

'But I have everything on my BlackBerry,' she said, placing the napkin back on her lap.

'Forget it. Just throw it away before you disappear from the UK. In your new life, you're going to have to get used to

having a regular turnover of pre-paid mobiles. You can't leave any traces of yourself. So no contract mobiles, no regular email accounts, no holding of any accounts of any kind that can lead to you. No-nothing.'

'I need my BlackBerry.'

'If you can't do this, give up now because it's going to get a lot tougher. Do you understand, you're giving up everything? Everyone you know - it's part of the deal. Maybe you still need more time thinking this over before I start setting things up.'

'You know I don't. I've been planning this too long to stop now. I'll throw my BlackBerry in the Thames tonight, if it makes you happy. I'll do everything you say. But what if I need to see you urgently?'

'Best not. You can always call me.'

'I don't even have an address for you.'

‘That’s because I’m superstitious about clients knowing where I live.’

The man he’d seen outside in the street was standing by their table, his coat buttoned, his eyes focused on her. He looked a lot bigger, now that he was a foot away. His hair was shaved to the scalp and his complexion was as pink as the tender four-week-old lamb the old couple were eating opposite. Both arms hung at his sides, and his knuckles glistened with gold Sovereign rings. He stood there stiff with respect, the ceiling spotlight X-raying his two enormous ears. ‘Is everything all right, Mrs Linehan?’ he asked, in a husky voice.

‘I thought I told you to wait outside,’ she said, her tone dismissive.

He remained still like a statue while another sentence was making its way from his head to his mouth.

Angela Linehan turned to Harry and introduced him to Tucker. Harry forced a half-smile at the flappy-eared man.

‘It’s just that Mr Linehan rang me and wanted to know where you were,’ said Tucker finally, paying not the slightest attention to Harry.

‘What did you tell him?’

‘Like you told me. You’d gone to the gym.’

‘Why don’t you fetch my coat,’ she said, handing him a cloakroom ticket. ‘I won’t be long.’

Harry waited for Tucker to leave, and then looked at her for an explanation. But she just continued with her meal, taking unhurried bites from her fork. She returned his stare with a gentle smile, totally unaware of the commotion brewing inside him.

He'd lost his appetite and surrendered his knife and fork on the plate. When she'd finished her last mouthful, he said, 'What's going on?'

'I can't stay for dessert,' she replied, 'but we've discussed everything. Haven't we?'

'Hold on,' he said, raising his hand to stop her going any further. 'Who's he?' he asked, nodding in the direction of Tucker.

'He drives Nick and when he's not driving Nick, he drives me.'

Harry shook his head in disbelief. 'What's he doing here?'

'There's nothing for you to get so upset about.' She began to get ready to leave the table.

'Where do you think you're going?' he asked. 'We're not finished yet.'

'What do you mean?' She settled firmly back into her chair.

'Only my clients get to see my face. No one else.'

'Tucker barely noticed you - he's got a memory like a goldfish.' She stopped smiling when he didn't laugh, and her face began to darken. 'You're not changing your mind?'

'I can't go through with it now.'

'What do you mean? I really need your help, Harry - so stop being silly about this.' Her voice had become desperate.

'You should have thought it through before getting him to drive you over.'

'I can't leave the house unless Tucker takes me. Why do you think I was so late? He was so insistent on driving me here.'

‘So when we met the previous week, Tucker came along too?’

She didn’t reply.

‘Great,’ he huffed. ‘That’s precisely why this whole thing won’t work. You’re not up to it.’

‘But I am, Harry. I really am. Tucker isn’t going to say anything. I promise.’

‘How can you be so sure? He works for your husband, doesn’t he?’

‘Because I know he won’t.’

‘Give me one good reason why?’

She lowered her voice and said, ‘Because he’ll do anything for me.’

‘Maybe you should get him to sort out your husband then.’

'He's not bright enough for that. Why do you think I need your help?'

'He's seen me now and that's that.' Harry got up to leave. 'You're going to have to find someone else.'

'Is it the money?'

He didn't stop to reply.