

FREE OPENING CHAPTER OF THE LAST MESSENGER

Prologue

Kandahar, Afghanistan. August 20th 1998

No one saw the bright light pierce the sky.

He remembered his daughter's smiling face looking back, her veil floating on the evening breeze; the same pink veil her mother had worn on their wedding day. A vision of happiness as she disappeared into the house to prepare for the first night with her husband. He would never forget that last second before his life changed. The last moment before the missile disintegrated his home and destroyed the people he loved.

It took less than five seconds.

The blast threw him off his feet and when the smoke cleared there was nothing left but devastation. His love had turned to hate. He was on his knees clawing at the rubble with his bare hands. Voices around him were shouting but he could not hear. All he could find was a small piece of the wedding veil, embroidered with flowers by his grandmother. A veil to be passed down the generations.

Not anymore.

No longer a symbol of love. In the man's mind, the veil represented his reason to hate America.

It had been a good day. A day of celebration. A proud moment when a father sees his daughter marry. The ceremony had been held late because of the heat, stopping for evening prayer before food was served – lamb with rice and tomatoes. His guests sat on tables laid out in the open, with covers for shade. There was no music because the Taliban forbade it, but nothing would dampen the high spirits of his guests. They fired Kalashnikovs into the sky and peeled oranges for the young groom, making jokes about his prowess in the bedroom. They hoisted him high and fired their guns again. Collateral damage, the Americans called it, but this man called it murder.

Vienna, Austria. May 15th 2004

I can't hide for ever.

The Schonbrunn Palace gardens is a good place to hand over the truth. I'm standing at the foot of the Gloriette arches, admiring Maria Theresa's symbol of Hapsburg imperial power. I'm here because I want to stand up against the power of the state, lifting my head above the parapet, waiting for it to be shot off. I'm here to provide answers for the falling man. The

nameless person plunging to his death from the North Tower. I watch the dusk descending on the palace below and see thousands of people melt into the vast Baroque landscape. I think of the two thousand that died on that day. Why was I not one of them?

Unless I do this, I have no life.

Lost in thought, I don't notice a man approach until I hear his voice. He is speaking English in a heavy German accent.

'Do you know there are thirty-two sculptures in the Great Parterre?'

The question seems out of context because the man's eyes are peering upwards and not taking in the French gardens where the sculptures reside. But this is the question I want to hear. His call sign.

'I want to see the Goddess Angerona,' I reply.

'Ah yes. I know...the goddess of anger and fear.'

'Some say the goddess of silence.'

We walk down the hill. The nearest person must be thirty metres away. It feels safe.

'Do you have the recording?' the German man says, gesturing to a carrier bag he is holding with the palace image printed on the paper. I nod and drop a disk into the bag.

The German man is looking around, pensive, as if he expects something to happen. He speaks again, his eyes darting from left to right. 'Why don't you go to the US and give evidence? Why all this cloak and dagger stuff?'

'I have my reasons,' I reply. 'When you hear the contents of the disk, I hope you'll understand.'

But the man doesn't want to listen to the disk. Something is wrong.

Other men come from nowhere. It's over in seconds. A gun digs into my ribs. I'm being frogmarched to the exit. Four of them surround me. I wince with pain as my arm is twisted round my back. It's all been too easy. The German man from the embassy has disappeared. I don't know whether he has got the disk or handed to my captors. At least they know I'm not bluffing.

'Don't say a word,' one of the men shouts with an American accent. East Coast I think. 'If you do, we'll kill you anyway.'

It takes several minutes to reach the road; time to think about options. But there are none. Don't scream, don't struggle, let them take you, most of all do nothing and wait. The familiar voice of the woman I love rings in my head, issuing instructions. I'll do anything for her. Even allow myself to be taken by the CIA. I was naive to expect that Langley would allow my evidence to be heard by the 9/11 Commission. I just had to try.

Reaching the entrance to the gardens, a black BMW 7 series screeches to a halt, the door opening before it stops. Two of the men disappear into the crowded street and the others bundle me into the car. It drives at speed around the Ringstrasse before turning into the cobbled streets of the old city.

The rescue team hit the BMW as they enter a small square. A Fiat Punto jams on its brakes crossing the path of the BMW, too late to avoid a collision and causing the BMW to smash into its side door. Another Punto rams the rear wing, pushing the BMW like a sandwich further into the wreckage of the leading car.

‘What the fuck!’ the driver of the BMW screams, swinging into reverse, the tyres burning smoke onto the cobbles. The car’s superior horsepower pushes the Punto until it is wedged fast into a doorway. The cars are not going anywhere. Four men emerge from the Fiats, scarves over their mouths, their AK’s firing warning shots into the windows and tyres of the BMW. My captors don’t seem ready to return fire. They know they are dealing with professionals. A hand pulls me out of the car.

One of the braver CIA men fires his Glock. The bullet is wide of the mark but bounces off the wall into one of the rescuer’s arm. It’s only a scratch but I can see the man is angry. As the injured man lifts his gun, one of the others pushes the barrel away.

There are few bystanders about in the square but I’m aware of their screams. It takes no more than two minutes and I’m in another car heading out of Vienna.

Chapter One

London. July 7th 2005

It wasn’t the first time Richard Helford had seen fear in a man’s eyes in the moments before death. In Iraq, he had been alert to the danger, but he didn’t expect to face it on the Piccadilly Line.

A young man had got on at Kings Cross – a bearded West Indian. He’d caught Richard’s eye because of the backpack, which took more than its fair share of the limited space. Now they were no more than three or four metres apart. The man looked unsettled, nervous, fidgeting with his pockets even though people were pressed against him. No one else seemed to notice, or perhaps they did notice, but held back. Richard stared, experiencing the same feeling he had when he approached the men in Basra with their broken-down car, alone on an empty dusty road.

It couldn’t be.

He tried to tell himself he was being paranoid, but the memory of the suicide bomb wouldn’t go away. He tried to shut it out, turning to avoid the man’s eyes. As the Mind the Doors signal sounded, he leaned forward, bending his neck to avoid the curve of the door. It closed, catching a coat and preventing the train from leaving. The doors slid open again before slamming closed once more. The train seemed to cough as it started moving forward into the darkness.

He saw the blinding flash before he heard the explosion.

An ear-splitting bang lifting the train off the rails. A stream of orange flame came rushing down the side of the carriage, fighting to break free, nowhere to go but up against the roof of the tunnel. The force threw Richard against the ceiling, making him crack his head on a handrail. A gust of hot air littered with glass shards flew through the carriage like a jagged hailstorm, puncturing everything it touched. Then the carriage shuddered and with a violent jolt Richard was flung forward, crashing against the people around him.

Then darkness. Horrible darkness, mixed with smoke and dust and screams. His head spinning, feeling nothing. Choking smoke engulfing him, burning his lungs until he could barely breathe. For a moment, he thought he was back on the streets of Basra, covered in rubble, body parts strewn across a filthy street and a mother with a child standing frozen to the spot.

His eyes opened. Something soft lay on top of him. A woman; her perfume lingering through the acrid smell of smoke and dust. His head was buried in her chest and his hand touched her face.

'Oh shit,' Richard cried, struggling to move. Somehow he managed to pull himself free. As the smoke cleared a little, he could see the woman's charred face covered in blood. The screams were distant, just like those he heard from the woman in Basra; her baby splattered with spots of blood and flesh from the bomber. His ears were ringing and his mouth was dry with the smoke. He blinked, trying to focus, but every time he closed his eyes the horror of Basra invaded his mind. The smell of cordite burning his nostrils, brown smoke spiralling upwards. He no longer knew where he was. Reaching out, he took hold of the woman's arm, trying to help her stand, but it was no longer attached to her body. He dropped the arm, recoiling; his chest tightening with panic. She was dead, he could see that now, the way her head lolled on one side. She must have saved his life by taking the full force of the blast.

Everything seemed to move in slow motion. He could hear the driver shouting above the screams, telling people not to panic, that he would get them out. The train's emergency lights barely penetrated the smoke, but somehow Richard managed to crawl forward over the bodies.

'Just stay calm,' Richard shouted an order to himself. Nobody else was listening. His voice sounded muffled. In the blur of smoke, he gasped for air and his throat felt like he'd swallowed splinters of glass. There were dark, hazy shapes in the gloom. A strange smell invaded the carriage. A pungent awful scent of roasting flesh, just like when they burnt the cows on his uncle's farm to avoid foot and mouth disease.

Just like the smell of death in Iraq.

He remembered the body parts strewn everywhere across the street, but most of all he remembered the little girl, a discarded doll, arms twisted in unreal ways, her body mutilated beyond recognition. The memory seemed to blot out the reality of here and now; a disbelief that it was happening again. The past was merging with the present, and still creating a vision of hell.

A man was calling for help, only a few feet from where the bomb had detonated. His voice seemed to rise above the screams. It held a note of familiarity which demanded Richard's attention. It was fortunate that the man was on Richard's side of the carriage because it would have been impossible to get across to him; the train was almost split in two. One of the man's arms had gone and his legs were trapped. Glass and metal protruded from his gut and blood

was pumping from his arm. Richard knew a tourniquet was useless as there was no stump to tie it round and the loss of blood was too great. He took off his jacket and tried to stem the flow. It was like pushing a rag up a leaking pipe – no use.

'We'll get you out,' Richard whispered.

The man looked no more than thirty and was Middle Eastern in appearance. A gash in his cheek had folded back the skin and the artery below had severed. Tears mingled with the blood, cleansing the black soot that covered his face. His eyes begged Richard to do something, but there was nothing he could do. He took hold of the man's unharmed hand and felt something in his grip. Leaning closer, he could see his lips moving.

'It's you,' he said.

Richard said nothing, unsure how to respond.

The man's one good arm shook as he tried to raise it nearer to Richard. His lips were quivering as he attempted to speak. Richard leaned closer. 'I'm here...' He coughed and blood seeped from his mouth. 'You...' He paused again, fighting for breath. 'T...Tell Amira I love her and give her this,' he spluttered and more blood pumped from the severed artery in his cheek. 'Sh...She's my wife.'

'Of course I will,' Richard replied, struggling not to look away. He could feel the man's blood on his own cheek and felt repulsed at the pitiful sight of the wrecked body before him.

'What's your name?' Richard knelt forward, once more putting his ear close to the man's lips.

'Masood.'

'Hello, Masood, I'm Richard.'

A flicker of a smile crossed Masood's lips. 'I know,' he said.

'What do you know?'

'You.'

'Me.?'

'It means lucky...My name...lucky.'

Richard smiled back, appalled by his own helplessness. He took hold of Masood's wrist and felt his pulse fade to death.

The driver shouted again. 'I can't raise Line Control, I'll open the emergency door at the front of the train and lower a ladder down so you can get on the track. You'll be able to get out then and walk to Russell Square.'

All Richard could see was the driver in silhouette, issuing instructions.

'You can get out now,' the driver shouted. 'I've lowered the ladder. When you get down, don't touch the track, whatever you do. It may be live.' But Richard wasn't going anywhere.

It seemed like ages before the paramedics arrived. 'You're too late,' he sobbed. They checked for Masood's heartbeat, but finding nothing, quickly moved on. Richard's hand still clutched Masood, whose fingers were locked around the object Richard had promised to take to his wife. Slowly, he prised open the dead man's vice-like grip. It was still too dark to see, but he felt something small and metallic. Without looking, he put it in his pocket and turned away.

'You should go now,' a medic said, taking hold of his arm. Richard instinctively nodded, allowing himself to be guided towards the steps from the carriage down onto the track. Faint lights from Russell Square beckoned in the distance, a blur through the gloom. A smell that made him retch. He could hardly see anything, but a few people walking in front of him guided his way. When he reached the open and blinked at the daylight, London air had never smelt so sweet. Sirens were blaring and lights flashed. A blanket was thrown over his shoulders.

'We need to get you cleaned up,' the man who led him out of the tunnel said. 'You're covered in blood.'

'But none of it's my own,' said Richard. 'Why is none of it mine?'

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