

# Michael DOBBBS

## The Reluctant Hero

When dying is the easy option . . .

A person in a dark coat is walking away from the viewer down a long, narrow path. The path is flanked by a stone wall with a metal railing. In the distance, a church with a large dome and spire is visible through a thick mist or fog. The overall atmosphere is somber and mysterious.

# PART ONE

## The Friend

## PROLOGUE

Guilt. A relentless hunter. And no matter how hard Harry Jones ran, he couldn't escape. He'd turn a corner and there it would be, peering out from the shadows, or sometimes he'd catch a fleeting glimpse of a woman in a crowded street from the corner of his eye, and the whole thing would rush back at him.

Julia. His wife.

And his fault.

It had been a lifetime ago, yet it still felt as though it was yesterday when Zac Kravitz had breezed through town – except that wasn't entirely true, for Zac never breezed. He was Delta, US Special Forces, a man who moved around with about as much subtlety as a November gale full of snow heading off Lake Huron, where he was born.

Oh, but the man had his uses, and no one could doubt his commitment. They'd first met in the early nineties when Harry had been acting as an adviser to a Colombian government anti-drugs detachment, and Zac had tagged along as an observer. The mission had taken them into the mountains for a little search-and-destroy against the cartels. Sounded like fun, but someone had forgotten to remind the Colombian troops that sometimes it rains in the tropics. The weather had closed in, fouled up their extraction, and that had put all their lives on the line. For three days they'd been forced to play a game of blind man's buff with heavily armed drug-runners and a jungle full of fire ants. One of Zac's gadgets had saved the day – typical of Delta types, they loved their toys, and he'd brought along a prototype sat-nav system that had dragged them out of the rainforest mire. While in Harry's view the former college football player was the sort of guy who had spent his younger days throwing one too many tackles with his head, after Colombia he was welcome, any time.

Loyalty to his own. It's what kept a soldier motivated. So when Zac sent a message to tell Harry he was passing through England with his wife in tow and had a couple of days to spare, Harry suggested they all spend one of those days down on his boat in Dartmouth. Zac, his wife P.J., Harry. And Julia.

It was a twelve-metre yacht named *Guinevere* constructed almost entirely of wood, an old racing yacht with teak decks, its original petrol-fired engine, awesome maintenance bills and a pedigree stretching back nearly fifty years. Too much of a handful for most, but that had never bothered Harry. Zac was already pulling the tab off a beer as Julia cast off and *Guinevere* slipped out into the estuary, her sweet lines catching the eye as she headed into a gentle sou'westerly, the bow barely breaking the swell. There was no way Harry could know he'd already been 'pinged' by an Irish Republican active service unit. Provisionals, out for revenge.

Northern Ireland. It had been a peculiarly dirty war and in his SAS days Harry had got his hands grubby, clambering down into the gutter to play the game by the Provos' own rules at those times when Queen's Regulations ran out of ideas. Now it was payback time. Harry's past was catching up with him.

They sailed to Salcombe for their lunch, pie and pickle, carried by light winds, nothing above ten knots, returning as dusk was beginning to gather. By the time they reached the red marker of the Homestone buoy, the purple-green hues of the stones of Kingswear Castle at the mouth of the Dart had come into view. *Guinevere* was almost home. Harry was at the wheel, Zac up front winding in the Genoa sheets with P.J. standing at the bow, arched and pert like a Victorian figurehead silhouetted against the fading light. Julia was below, using the heads, while in front of them they could see the bustle of the harbour traffic as on all sides boats scurried to their berths. *Guinevere* was drawing close to the castle when a speedboat, a Sunseeker, cut across their bow, a little too close for comfort, but it was one of several craft in the vicinity and caused no more than momentary irritation to Harry; there was no shortage of dickheads on the river nowadays. These particular dickheads came back for another pass. As they did so, from out of the growing darkness, a rocket-propelled grenade hit *Guinevere* just above the waterline. It blew both sides out of the stern.

Harry knew nothing of what happened next. He was knocked unconscious and thrown clear of the cockpit, dislocating his shoulder. He was left helpless, oblivious, saved only by his life jacket. Zac, with all the fortune that had enabled him to survive the threats of Islamic revolution and irate husbands, found himself in the water. P.J. was close by, conscious and screaming, and soon other boats were circling, fellow sailors desperate to help those in peril. They plucked P.J. from the sea, while Zac helped others lever Harry onto the deck of a yacht, where he quickly began to stir. But of Julia there was no sign.

When, eventually, Harry opened his eyes and began to make sense of what was around him, he saw *Guinevere's* bow section pointing uncertainly towards the sky, swaying on a dark, oily swell. A dozen craft of varying sorts were circling, not daring to draw too close. When the grenade struck it had ignited the gas cylinders in the rear galley. The explosion had not only thrown Harry from the boat but also burst *Guinevere's* fuel tanks, which were now spewing thirty gallons of highly inflammable petrol. A lake of fire was forming around the boat, sending spirals of sooty smoke into the night sky. *Guinevere's* funeral pyre.

A hush fell across the scene as the onlookers watched her die. The wind had slackened and the lapping of the swell subsided, and from the centre of the burning lake they could hear a knocking sound. The kind of sound someone might make who was desperately trying to smash a way out.

Harry was still concussed, his thoughts scrambled, his shoulder screaming in pain, yet he fought off protective hands as he struggled to his feet.

'Julia!'

He screamed again, then again. The pounding from within the dying yacht seemed to increase.

She had been in the heads, protected from the blast by a main bulkhead and surrounded by stout wooden timbers. These had been her shelter, and would now provide her coffin.

As Harry cried out, Zac dragged his attention away from P.J., who was still coughing up water on the deck of their rescue boat. No one else moved; what could be done? *Guinevere* was surrounded by blazing fuel. Only the fact that she was slowly sinking kept her from burning, and she would be gone long before the flickering tongues of fire subsided.

To try the flames risked anyone's life and promised almost certain and serious harm, yet Zac accepted the gamble. He stood on the gunwale, filling his lungs with air, then he hit the water, diving as deep as he could beneath the fire. He needed to cross thirty, forty feet of burning sea before he came to *Guinevere*, and the next they saw of him he was clawing his way up the steeply angled deck and disappearing through the forward hatch. He took the fire with him, on his back, his shirt ablaze and so, it seemed, was his hair.

Inside, all was unremitted darkness, but guided by the sounds of the desperate knocking, he found the head. It was already three-quarters under water. The door was stuck tight, wedged by the solid iron stove that had been wrenched from its mooring in the main cabin. Normally it would have taken only a moment to shift it, but on a sinking boat, beneath the waterline, with the stench of his own burning flesh in his nostrils, it was a different matter. Yet Zac did it. He was Delta, never been beaten. *De Oppresso Liber* – Free the Oppressed. And Zac did just that, got them both out. Saved Julia.

So that Harry could be responsible for her death just six months later.

Ta'argistan, Central Asia. Population 9,763,402, if you believed the official statistics, which no one did. It was an inflated figure, dreamed up solely to extract maximum benefit from various credulous international aid agencies. This had once been the land of Joseph Stalin, an outpost of the Soviet empire before the Wall came down, and his spirit continued to haunt the streets. It still retained not only a fair scattering of ethnic Russians and their language but also much of their brutalist architecture and more than a few statues of Lenin.

Yet it was by no means a colourless place. It was a land of mountains, ravines and sweeping plateaus, of infinite skies and tumbling melt-water rivers that marked the route of the fabled Silk Road which had once linked the Orient with Europe and Africa. Before the Soviets, long before, this had been a land of nomadic horsemen, without frontiers, through which Scythians and Turks and marauding Huns had passed like weather fronts, and where Genghis Khan and his sons held sway. Now it boasted a President elected by a huge majority – if you believed those official statistics – and there were many in the international community who struggled to maintain the fiction of Ta'argistan's democratic underpinnings, because what it lacked in terms of natural resources it more than made up for in location. It was a most compelling piece of real estate, bordering on both Russia and China, Afghanistan, too, and nudging up against a host of other '-stans'. In truth it was a state that should never have existed, the by-product of the nineteenth-century mania for drawing lines on maps, a country brushed by Islam yet where the myths and fierce traditions of the mountain tribes still held sway, a place of

intrigues and competing ambitions, of clans and khans and, as one early Chinese general had suggested, a place of bones.

Ta'argistan also possessed one of the largest nuclear-waste dumps in the world, a series of huge shafts in the Celestial Mountains into which the Soviets had tipped everything from spent fuel rods to clapped-out X-ray machines. It was a country that had never properly digested its history. It stirred uneasily, waiting, like a lamb before the encroaching storm.



## CHAPTER ONE

‘Buck up there, darling!’

In response, Harry manufactured a smile in apology to his guest, then went back to staring out of the taxi window.

It was freezing in London, a night when the air grew sullen and felt almost solid. New Year’s Eve, that time for reminiscing. How he’d grown to hate it. A tune kept running through his head, one he’d picked up shortly before his Finals at Cambridge more than twenty years earlier. It was like a sea shanty, one he’d heard sung in mournful Irish tones as he was wandering along the Backs one stifling night in June, and it had stuck.

*‘So I called to the barman to pour me another,  
Me soul was fair bleeding for want of a wet,  
And the good resolutions I made to my mother,  
Are the good resolutions I drink to forget ...’*

He knew it was a nonsense, of course, he could never forget. Yet some memories didn’t even have the decency to fade, so there were nights when he took himself back to that riverbank in Cambridge and drank to a simpler life, trying to soak away the confusion that had crept in between the cracks. He hadn’t planned that this should be one of those nights, but things weren’t going much to plan any more.

*The Right Honourable Henry Marmaduke Maltravers-Jones, M.P., P.C., G.C. and Guest*, the formal invitation had said. The Guest, in the decorative form of Bernice, a sports marketing consultant, now sat beside him as the taxi drew close to their destination. Winfield House was the official residence of the US Ambassador to London, set in a dozen acres of parkland in the heart of the capital. It had been built by Barbara Hutton, that elegant yet troubled heiress to the Woolworths empire who had been in search of a retreat far away from the pressures of home; a dozen acres of land on the other side of the Atlantic that were patrolled by the Royal Parks Constabulary seemed to offer an ideal solution. The house hadn’t had an easy birth; the officials of the Crown Estate wanted Ms Hutton to use grey brick, she had insisted on red. Solid British bureaucracy versus the mobile might of American money. The dollar won, of course, and in 1937 Winfield House had risen, in defiant blushing tones, from the rich earth of Regent’s Park and was greeted by everyone as a splendid addition. The dream was not to last. Eight years, two failed marriages and a whole world war later, Ms Hutton had grown distracted, her mind and heart elsewhere, so she had offered the house to the US government. The lease changed hands for the sum of one dollar. The way the London housing market was headed, it might not fetch much more even now.

The taxi drew to a halt at the entrance gates. A US Marine resplendent in his high-collared dress blues bent to inspect the invitation card that was handed through the window. The



interior light glittered off the eagle and anchor insignia of his cap badge. 'Welcome, Mr Maltravers-Jones,' the young marine said, as a colleague in the sentry box confirmed Harry's name on a guest list. 'Happy New Year, sir!'

Harry winced. 'Yeah, you too,' he replied as the taxi passed into the tree-lined driveway that led to the main entrance.

'Why, Harry, darling, I knew you were quite a mouthful, but not a Maltravers-Jones,' Bernice said, giggling.

'Henry Marmaduke Maltravers-Jones,' he sighed in explanation. 'Hardly the last thing you want voters to see before they place their mark on a ballot paper, is it? Not when I'm supposed to be a man of the people.'

'It seems I scarcely know you,' she said coquettishly, trying to brush aside his dark mood. She stood six foot tall in her heels and was delightful company, both in and out of his bed, where she had visited frequently and increasingly regularly in the past four months, but even as she laughed in his ear and squeezed his thigh, Harry knew their relationship was over. He was still having difficulty explaining that one to himself, and only God knew how he'd manage to explain it to her. He couldn't find fault; Bernice had freckles, and fingers that could squeeze the most breathless sounds from a violin. She did much the same with Harry, too, yet inevitably she wanted more. Most women in their mid-thirties did. She wanted more than his bed, she wanted the man himself, and Harry was wealthy, exceptionally well connected, a soldier turned politician, with so many letters after his name she still hadn't worked out what they all meant, a man with grey eyes and a body that was remarkably well toned for someone in his forties. And, if it also carried a considerable number of searingly outspoken scars, it only added to his allure in her eyes. Oh, and he was unattached. The perfect package. She snuggled closer.

As they climbed from the taxi, waiting on the steps that led to the large double doors of the ambassador's residence was a short, stocky man dressed in livery with not a hair to be found on his polished black head. 'Evening, Mr Jones,' he declared, his words condensing in the cold air. His hand reached out. Most guests simply handed across their coats, Harry shook it warmly.

'How are things, Jimmy?'

'Can't complain,' the other man responded in a husky voice that carried an easy Southern lilt. 'Still got a job. Times like these, that's sure a blessing. And one that gets me to see all the fine ladies first. Evening, miss.'

'Take care, Bernice,' Harry warned as they were ushered inside, 'former Master Sergeant Jimmy Jackson was US Airborne.'

'Which means?'

'Not a man to mess with. Or take for granted.'

'And there was me thinking you liked me only 'cos I know how to mix a drink, Mr Jones.'

‘I guess there is that, too,’ Harry smiled, before turning back to Bernice. ‘Jimmy and I first met – what, twenty years ago? In the desert. I’d just dragged an Iraqi intelligence colonel from his bed, but it turned out he had lots of friends who took an instant dislike to me. Jimmy here took care of them. Came all the way to the outskirts of Baghdad to do it.’

‘Hell, when we first got that shout I thought it was just a pizza delivery,’ Jimmy responded.

‘That particularly deep voice he has, the one so many women find irresistible, is in fact the consequence of a bullet in the neck that Jimmy took that night. It was meant for me. Got himself a Purple Heart and a Silver Star for his troubles.’

‘Seem to remember you got yourself a few scratches, too.’

‘Did I?’

They were jousting, swapping shared memories, while Bernice was slowly beginning to understand the significance of some of the scars she had discovered on his body. ‘But ...’ she began to stammer in surprise. ‘It sounds dreadful.’

‘You try delivering pizza in downtown Miami. It ain’t so very different,’ Jimmy said, taking her coat.

The two men laughed, in the manner of old friends, but Bernice’s mind was still back in the desert, under fire. ‘It never leaves you, does it, the times you soldier-men have together?’

‘No, miss. And I’m sure glad of it. Why, what’d we have to think back on in our old age if we’d been – I don’t know. Bankers?’

She moved closer to Harry, squeezed his arm. ‘Harry Jones, there’s so much I don’t seem to know about you,’ she said softly. She made it sound like a challenge, one she was more than willing to take up. She didn’t see the flicker in his eye.

Jimmy Jackson was more than merely a doorman, he was the ambassador’s personal valet and knew how to deal with many kinds of situations, those that stretched from amusing an ageing duchess to diverting aggressive drunks, and that ability also enabled him to know when the time had come to extract himself. This was one of those moments. ‘You folks have a fine evening. I’ll see y’all later. Fix you that drink,’ he said, turning for the cloakroom.

‘You better,’ Harry replied. ‘Feeling I’m going to need it.’

The bolt slid back uneasily in its track. As the door swung open, Prisoner 7217, Extreme Punishment Wing, stirred, rubbing his eyes, struggling to focus. He rolled from his straw mattress, the only furniture in his stinking cell. It had been gnawed yet again by rats, but he took no notice. He had been here too long to care. He clambered to his knees.

It was many moments before he realized what was happening. It took time for everything nowadays, but that didn’t matter. Time was the only thing he had, yet it meant nothing. How long had he been here on the Punishment Wing? He had tried, in the early days, to keep track with scratchings on the mould-infested walls, but he’d been overcome by confusion after a

couple of months as the mould grew back, so he had stopped. After that, he lost his grip on most things.

A voice penetrated the fog of confusion. ‘Mr Mayor,’ it greeted, almost jovially.

That was right, he remembered now. He was the mayor, from one of the towns twenty miles south of the capital. How considerate of the visitor to remember. This voice, this new man, stood beneath the single bare bulb that lit the cell, and the yellow light seemed to strip him of all humanity, making his appearance pale and ethereal, like – an angel. Or a ghost, perhaps. He’d called him Mr Mayor, not 7217. The prisoner remembered his number more clearly than his name. So much had been lost along the way.

The angel seemed to have read his thoughts. ‘Mr Mayor,’ it repeated, ‘I wanted you to know that I am a man of my word.’

Had he met this pale-faced apparition before? the prisoner wondered. He couldn’t decide, every thought led to confusion. From the corner of his eye the prisoner saw something move, something dark, elusive, a rat, fleeing the disturbance. In the early days he had tried to block the holes in the damp stone walls with straw from the mattress and handfuls of hardened filth, but it had been pointless. There were too many holes, and just too many rats.

‘You remember? The promise I gave you, Mr Mayor?’ the angel continued.

Prisoner 7217 nodded fitfully, not meaning it. It had become his default response to anything they said.

‘I said you had no need to worry, that we would never execute a mayor.’

He looked up from all fours and nodded again, this time more purposefully. A memory came back, confirming what the angel had said. It was what had kept him going all this time.

The angel slowly pulled back the sleeve of his grey serge uniform and consulted his wristwatch. He smiled. ‘But in a few minutes, your term of office will be over. You will no longer be mayor.’

Yet again Prisoner 7217 nodded, his head drooping as he struggled with the weight of this new thought.

‘Happy New Year,’ the angel whispered. Then he turned and left.

In the great hallway of Winfield House, beneath crystal chandeliers that were reflected in huge gilt mirrors hanging on three sides, the ambassador waited with his wife to greet their guests.

‘Why, Harry Jones. Welcome back to our little home,’ he exclaimed, his face lighting up. No one but a truly wealthy man could have called Winfield House a little home and got away with it, but David Bracken was one of those few. He was a tall, ascetic man who had made several fortunes in the information-technology sector and spent much of it wisely, some of it on the recent presidential re-election campaign. The post to the Court of St James’s had been his reward. Yet Harry quickly noticed that despite the splendour of the surroundings there was a muted atmosphere to the occasion. In previous years Harry could recall encountering

many kinds of entertainments – a soprano from the New York Metropolitan Opera, rooms filled with life-sized Disney characters, an entire wall filled with tropical flowers. But now these flourishes were missing. And it was Californian chardonnay rather than champagne. The ambassador apologized. This was to be a modest affair, he explained, no extravagance, a subdued celebration to match the mood of such tight-fisted times. He always carried a little frown of concern around with him and had always been regarded as the serious type, which was considerably more than could be said of his wife. In many people's view she hadn't proved to be one of his better investments.

'Why, Harry,' Sonia Bracken exclaimed, stretching up to peck his cheek and revealing more than a modest mound of freckled flesh as her husband concentrated on greeting Bernice. 'I haven't seen you for such a long time.'

They both knew Harry had been avoiding her. The last time their paths had crossed, in an overheated seaside hotel during a political conference, she had made it abundantly clear how keen she was to do her bit for the Anglo-American alliance, and how willing she was to be both inventive and discreet about it. She'd muttered something about increasing the size of his majority. When Harry had declined her offer, she had taken umbrage, like any rejected woman, and now her eyes, once filled with lust, were as cold as uncut diamonds. 'I've missed you,' she lied, 'but what's this? Why, Harry,' she said, carrying out a close inspection, 'you have put on weight.'

Well, a couple of pounds, maybe, but that was none of her damned business. Anyway, he'd been busy – or, more accurately, distracted these past couple of months by ... by what he wasn't entirely sure. There seemed to be an emptiness that had crept into his life and neither his job, nor Bernice and certainly not the overflowing Sonia Bracken could fill it. Harry's eyes dropped, first to the remarkable creation at her neck that he suspected had come straight from a showcase at Tiffany's, then beyond, until they were loitering in the pink chasm between her over-sculpted breasts.

'At least it's all my own,' he whispered, moving on.

\*

Two guards dragged him from the cell. He stumbled, wasn't able to walk properly, couldn't lift his feet, he hadn't used his legs in so long. He was confused, and afraid.

As he passed the other cells, Prisoner 7217 forced his head up. Through the narrow bars of the doors he saw the faces of other prisoners, grey, like dirty chalk, their eyes flooded with pity, and with fear, fixed upon him as they watched their own futures being dragged past. Their cracked lips fell open but they uttered not a sound.

He'd heard that men often fouled themselves when they died violently. It was one of many whispers that scuttled around with the rats. He prayed it was not true. He had a deep, almost animalistic desire to stand tall, to make a good death of it, for his family, and particularly for his son, Daniyar. Yet as he stumbled once more he ridiculed his own stupidity. A good death?

What total shit! What in God's name was he thinking of? It wouldn't make any difference how he died, once he was dead.

As for his family, they would never know. His son was only five, wouldn't even be able to recall his father's life, let alone its end, a life that was nothing but a grain of wheat, blown by the passing wind.

Would there be pain? He'd often asked himself. Come to that, would there be anything at all? He wasn't much of a believer, couldn't pretend he expected to wake up in Paradise tended by several dozen virgins, but he could hope, always hope, force back the liquid that was laying siege to his bowels and find something solid to cling to. He stamped his feet on the stone floor in anger until he could feel pain, shouting at them to work. He wasn't going to be dragged any further. And as he levered himself upwards he gave a half-choked cry of triumph. Yes, it did matter how he died, not to anyone else but for himself. He was going to die as he hoped he had lived, cursing them all, defiant to the last.

He was scrabbling around inside his head, snatching at thoughts, images, grabbing at those things he knew for certain and which might give him something to lean on. He was aware of a long passage that lay ahead. The stones of the old walls were damp, uneven, the ancient light fittings casting lurid shadows that flickered darkly before him as he passed, then were gone, like life itself.

He made out a flight of stone steps at the end of the passage that led down to a wooden door built of ancient planks. The hinges swung open quietly as the door was drawn back, flooding the passage in front of him with unexpected brilliance. He blinked in the sudden rush of light; it was as though the gates of paradise were beckoning. He tried to laugh, find some comfort in the thought. Then, once again, he saw the pale features of the angel.

They both drank more than was good for them. While Jimmy Jackson served Napa chardonnay to most of the guests, he always seemed to have a crystal glass filled with some fine single-barrel bourbon on his tray when he passed Harry, which was often. And as Bernice grew relaxed, she let her own defences down, while failing to notice his.

'To the new year,' she said softly, raising her glass, her other hand snaking around his waist and pulling him closer. 'I hope it's going to be a very special one, Harry.'

'What way?'

'You and me.'

The words seemed to roll into one.

'You make it sound like ...' He struggled to find the right description, but she wasn't to be denied.

'Like Bonny and Clyde? Yes, and bubble and squeak, and—' She was about to say love and commitment, and wasn't it about time they got their stuff together, but something held her back. 'That's how I feel about us,' she whispered. Her eyes had filled with emotion, but as she

looked up into his, she realized she had made a most terrible mistake. It was as though she had taken a telescope expecting to see the stars and had discovered only the deepest, most intense black hole that sucked everything out of her night.

For a moment neither of them spoke. There was no point. She knew that words wouldn't change a thing. And even before he could squeeze out an apology she had broken away and disappeared in the direction of the powder room. It wasn't her fault. She wasn't to know that tomorrow would be the tenth anniversary of Julia's death.

Then Jimmy was at his side once more, his tray bearing yet another bourbon of quite exceptional proportions and his eyes full of understanding.

'How many tumblers of this stuff make you a social drinker, Jimmy?'

'Two, I guess.'

'And an alcoholic?'

'Three. And that's your third.'

'In which case, I'm already there and it makes damn-all difference. Geronimo, Jimmy,' Harry muttered as he emptied the glass in one. 'And room for another before you throw me out of here, I guess.'

It was over. Not just the evening but Bernice, their affair, another little chunk of his life. It was approaching midnight, no point in waiting, time to leave, there was nothing more for him here. And he was beginning to feel the effect of all the bourbon. He made his way to the washroom, which he was glad to see was empty. He took his time, relieved that he could be on his own at last, and was washing his hands when the door swung open. Harry didn't look up, not wanting to engage in small talk, concentrating on scrubbing his hands.

'Hello, Harry,' a voice said. 'So this is where you're hiding. I've been looking for you everywhere.'

Harry looked up to find the pale eyes of Hervé d'Arbois staring at him. He was a man close to seventy years of age, not tall but most elegantly presented. The hair was gently silver, the nose aquiline, the fingers long and elegant, giving the impression that they had never strayed far from a keyboard. The voice had a gentle Parisian veneer, like so much of the rest of him. The cufflinks were in the form of gold Crosses of Lorraine. Hervé d'Arbois was one of those ubiquitous Frenchmen who had been quietly running the country for the past hundred and fifty years, no matter what the colour of the government. His life represented a waltz through the corridors of privilege: the Sorbonne, two years at ENA – the École Nationale d'Administration in Strasbourg – balanced by national service in Algeria during the bitterest days of the war for independence. Later he'd served a term as a European Commissioner. D'Arbois had spent a lifetime seducing power. Harry had got to know him in Brussels where he discovered that a single phone call from d'Arbois could achieve in a matter of minutes what months of laying siege to the European Parliament could not. A most useful man, was Hervé, one to whom people listened. But not Harry, not tonight. The bourbon had kicked in, as

though it had a point to prove, and his temples were throbbing. He wasn't in much of a listening mood. Harry splashed water on his face from a running tap.

'It's simply that I believe you know him. At least, you *knew* him,' d'Arbois was saying as Harry at last emerged from the waterfall.

'Sorry, didn't catch that. Who?' Harry muttered as he headed in the direction of the hand-dryer. The noisy rush of hot air forced d'Arbois to wait until he was done.

'Zac. Zac Kravitz.'

Harry's heart began to race in alarm. It wasn't simply the alcohol.

'Harry, I am all but retired, a man of leisure, but I still hear many things. Old habits, you understand. And the word is that your friend has got himself into – as you say – a spot of bother. Rather a bleak spot, too.'

'But ... how? *Where?*' Harry demanded in confusion, the words echoing back accusingly from the tiled walls.

'Ta'argistan.'

Harry, his brain cells already battered, bruised a few more trying to recall where the place was.

'I'm not familiar with the detail,' the Frenchman continued, 'but it seems Mr Kravitz has been moving in the murky commercial underworld these past few years. Mercenary work, commercial intelligence, something of the kind. The sort of stuff that leaves dirt under the fingernails.' D'Arbois sighed, producing a brilliant white handkerchief and polishing his rimless spectacles with meticulous care.

'Zac, he ... sort of went AWOL. Hid himself away. I lost track,' Harry mumbled, partly in explanation but also in apology. He should have kept tabs on him, but it had all been so long ago, in another life. Even P.J. had upped and left him. 'He always was a bit of an awkward bugger.'

'Which is why it seems no one wants to help him. Not his government, certainly not his business associates.'

'But what the hell's he done?'

'I only pick up –' the Frenchman waved his glasses in a vague circular motion – 'whispers. Rumours. But he seems to have upset someone. Someone very important. His associates don't expect to see him again. It happens, you know, in a primitive place like Ta'argistan. Get yourself in trouble with the government there and – *poof!* – you disappear. I only mention it because I seem to remember that you were a friend of his, once.' He delayed delivering the final word, as though it made the matter of no importance.

Harry stared into the mirror. The antiseptic lighting seemed to have bleached all the colour from his face, yet at the same time highlighted the creases. How could it do both? he wondered in confusion. From beyond the door, at the outer limits of his storm-tossed senses, he could hear the crowd had grown suddenly still, and a clock was beginning to chime.

‘We should go and join them, Harry,’ d’Arbois said, and before Harry knew it he was gone. Through the part-open door there swept a tide of cheering as the clock struck midnight. He pushed a few stray strands of his hair into place and followed the Frenchman, but the other man had already disappeared, lost in the throng of celebration. As Harry scanned the room, he spotted Bernice. She was in the arms of a commercial counsellor from the Spanish Embassy. The energy of their enthusiasms suggested something more intense than an exchange of diplomatic courtesies. So, she was a survivor, nothing wrong with that. His fault, anyway. And she wouldn’t be needing a lift home. Harry stumbled for the door.

In his mind he was walking through a meadow. He was panting, filling his chest with barrels of cool mountain air that seared his lungs; he’d been racing with his elder brother, Chingiz. He’d won, his first time. He was growing, getting quicker, had taken Chingiz by surprise, a shortcut through a thicket of lucerne. The sharp blades had cut his bare feet, which now stung furiously, but it had been worth it to beat his brother. They had run from their home to the river that was gorged with spring melt water and which thundered down the valley, dragging brilliant pebbles and even large boulders with it. A profusion of flowers clogged the banks, forming a blanket beneath the blossoming rose-willows, whose branches bent towards the cascade of tumbling water. At last, winter had surrendered.

As he turned, in the distance he saw his grandmother, bearing a pitcher of sour milk and a headscarf bulging with bread. She had been the one who raised him, while his mother spent her days in the fields. Now she was drawing closer, beckoning to him.

He held it all together, kept his thoughts and fears from running amuck, even when they bound his hands behind him and kicked him up the rough wooden steps of the scaffold, right up to the moment they began mocking him. He heard them wagering money on whether he would be a ‘stiff-dick’ – one of those poor wretches who, at the bottom of the rope, somehow got an erection. As he heard their laughter he stumbled, fell, overwhelmed by disgust. How could they? They wouldn’t put a dog down like this!

He picked himself up and looked towards his destination at the top of the stairs. His eyes came to rest on the noose. It held him like a cobra’s eye. It seemed remarkably heavy to him. Rough twisted hemp. Almost an inch thick. With a double-tied knot. *Allah O Akbar! God is great! May He be merciful ...*

He began repeating the prayer as he made his way up the last few steps, trying with his words to shame the guards, and to drown out their mockery. God is great! But where was He?

They offered him a hood, but he declined, his eyes brimming with hatred. Why should he hide from them, help them sleep? And while he was shaking his head in contempt, they shackled his feet in irons, so that now he could do no more than shuffle inches at a time. Then one of the guards approached. He had the noose in his hand and was reaching out for him.



‘May God shit on your soul and on the memory of your mother!’ the prisoner spat, no longer able to contain his fear. What difference did it make if they beat him again, broke his bones? But they didn’t, not this time.

‘Yeah. You just tell him when you see him,’ the guard smirked through crooked teeth. ‘In about forty seconds,’ he added.

*Was it so close?*

The noose tightened around his neck, rough, scratching, its ferocious knot nestling behind his left ear. That’s where it would happen. About the second vertebra. Snap clean through his spinal cord, if they had got it right. Instant unconsciousness, he had been told. But how did anyone know? Then he would hang there, slowly strangling, even as the heart raced to respond. That’s when the priapism would happen. Unless, of course, these barbarians couldn’t even arrange an execution and his body fell too far, when the head would be wrenched completely off his body. *Allah O Akbar! Allah O Akbar! Allah O Akbar! Be merciful ...*

A patch of white stood out in the middle of the scaffold. The trapdoor.

He tried to imagine a field of fresh white tulips spreading in the early sun, but the illusion wouldn’t last. He couldn’t concentrate. Too many scuffed heel marks.

He could do no better than hobble now, swaying as he moved forward, inch by inch, his mind stuttering along with his feet.

*Allah O Akbar! For pity’s sake ...*

His voice rose as he prayed. He could feel his bladder screaming. And there, directly in front of him, was the angel once more, his smile like quicksand for the soul, beckoning him forward. He couldn’t think of a single reason why he should any longer do as he was told, but he did so anyway, afraid that if he stood still his bladder would betray him, yet even as he stepped forward, the noose seemed to slip around his neck, and was tightened, savagely. He could feel the knot pressing into his neck.

He began to struggle, but only inside. It was as though a wall was closing around him, blocking his view. Stand tall. See beyond it. To the meadow once more. *God is great! Stand tall!*

He stretched to the very tips of his toes, stretching to see if his beloved grandmother was still there, waiting. God rest her soul.

And there she was, so very close he felt as though he would be able to reach out and touch her, her weathered skin the colour of freshly turned earth, her smile like a new moon, wrinkling her face like a flood plain in spring. And tears in her eyes. Why tears?

He felt his footing slip, and for a moment he lost sight of her, the wall once more. *Stand tall! Stand tall!!!*

And there she was again.

It took Harry three attempts to get his key in the lock. Once inside, however, he proved more adroit at filling a glass. He was already so drunk that very little was making sense, nothing lined up properly; his thoughts were half-formed, his emotions wholly exaggerated.

Today was the day Julia had died, just six months after Zac Kravitz had dragged her from the sinking boat, Harry had led her off-piste and into the path of an avalanche. There had been no warning. One moment she was there, skiing almost within touching distance, then the mountain had moved.

Snatched away, just when they needed each other most. No, not so much needed – *wanted*. Since her escape from *Guinevere*'s clutches, life seemed to have taken on an added richness, as if every day must be lived to the full, in case it was her last. And Harry was at the centre of it all, with a look, a word, a scribbled message, a smile, and they had tumbled closer together. At least, that's the way he remembered it. Never had they made love so generously, or so frequently, and Julia had taken the lead. It was as if she was in her own race against time.

He hadn't realized how desperate she was to become pregnant, and hadn't even realized she had succeeded, not until the doctors in his Swiss hospital had told him. She may not have known herself. Harry had lost not only Julia, but their child.

There had been plenty to fill his life these past ten years – enough, in truth, to fill quite a number of lives. Plenty of women, too, even another brief marriage, but no one like Julia. And in the lonely reaches of this night, it seemed to hurt as much as it had done that first day when he had returned home from the Alps, entirely alone. Now he sat in the dark, with his drink and his coruscating guilt, as streetlights pointed sharp fingers of accusation at him through the half-drawn curtains. He began to mutter feebly, his tears washing the dribbles of whisky from around his lips, his voice like ripping sandpaper.

*'So I called to the barman to pour me another,  
Me soul was fair bleeding—'*

He choked on the words. Harry drank to forget. Yet no matter how hard he tried, it had all been stirred back into his life by two words.

Zac Kravitz.

Kravitz had never been a true friend, a soul mate, he had been too much of a head-banger for that. Impetuous. Sometimes arrogant. Harry sat and began ticking off all the reasons why Zac didn't matter to him any more. He owed him, of course, for Julia, but hidden somewhere deep inside was a voice that kept insinuating it would have been better if Julia had gone down with the boat. Harry would surely have found that easier to deal with than Switzerland. Then he wouldn't have felt it was all his fault.

Julia, in those last six months, had brought more light into his life than he had ever known. He owed Zac for that.

The American had been callous with his own wife, P.J. She'd eventually left him, but that wasn't so strange. Delta types often demanded too much, or too little, from those who loved

them: Harry knew the same might be said of him – would be by Bernice. So P.J. had left the scene, taking their three kids and the dog with her, and soon afterwards Zac had gone missing, deliberately hidden himself away, turned his back on everyone, his badly burned back. That's why he'd been forced to quit, honourably discharged, his career gone down in flames with *Guinevere*. Yet the same could have happened to anyone in Special Forces, at any time, and often did, because when you live on the edge there's always the danger you will fall. Harry would have done anything for Zac, and had tried, but he couldn't do a damned thing after Zac had taken himself off and hidden in the shadows. He was a man who knew how to cover his tracks.

Besides, it was all so very long ago. What the hell was the point? Harry cried, first in despair, then in anger at Zac for coming back to screw up his life. He fumbled for his glass, grabbed at it with both hands, only for it to fall, spilling the last of the whisky on the rug.

The bedside clock showed it was shortly after 4 a.m. Harry sat bolt upright in his bed, naked, and sweating profusely. He stared round in alarm. The bed beside him was cold, empty. Distant memories of his evening began creeping back. Yes, he'd screwed up again.

Fragments of the dream that had woken him began to return. He scrabbled for the elusive pieces, but the only thing he was able to see was Julia's face. Under the water – or was it melting ice? Fading. Sinking. Her lips forming one word.

Goodbye.

In fear and impotence Harry began pounding the empty pillows beside him. He'd have given his life to have again those last six months, and his soul to have had six months more. But as he hit the pillows, blindly, in rage, the anger was pushed aside by despair and remorse, which hurt even more. Harry grabbed the pillow and buried his head in it to hide his tears.

He lay still for many minutes, trying to find a route to safety through the war that had broken out within his mind. Somewhere outside, above the streets of Mayfair and in a night made endless day by wasted lights, seagulls who had swapped cliff face for roof tops bickered and pranced. It seemed as though they were mocking him, but it came nowhere close to how much Harry mocked himself. A man can spend a lifetime arguing about the balance between honour, duty, position, reputation, those things by which others measure him, but in the end it's what's inside that matters.

Harry sat up in bed once more. 'Fuck you, Zac,' he said quietly, before heading for the shower.