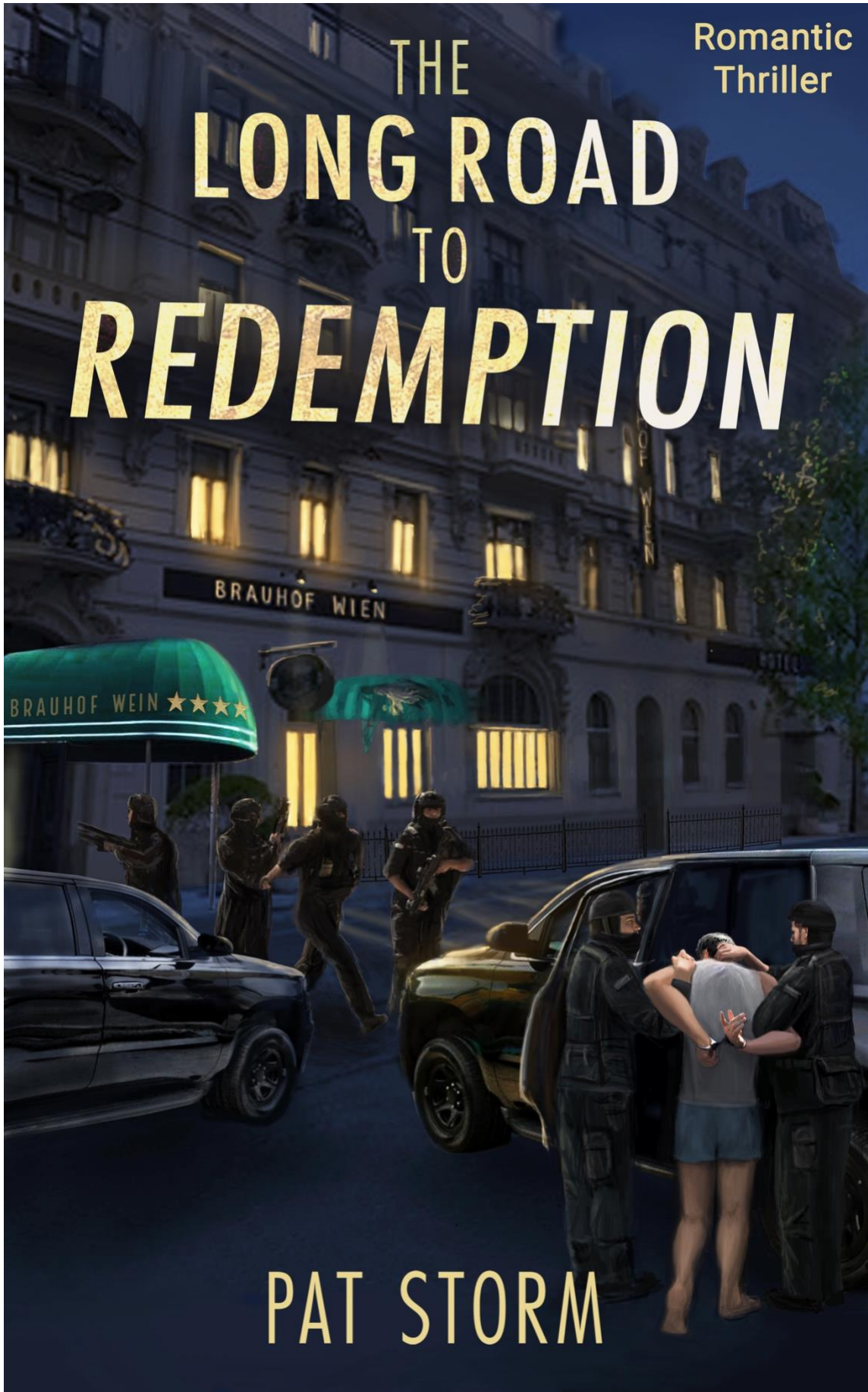


Romantic
Thriller

THE LONG ROAD TO REDEMPTION



PAT STORM

CHAPTER 1: CHRISTINA

The bedroom voiles of the top executive suite, on the fifth floor, flap in the wind as the balcony door has been clipped open. Two naked, sleeping lovers lie oblivious to the sound of car tyres on the wet Vienna side street.

Patiently awaiting their master on Dorak's bedside table sit a gun, a half-finished bottle of malt whisky, a framed old black and white family photo and a clip of money.

Christina's long black hair splays across the pillow. Her eyes are resting behind her eye lids and her curvaceous figure moves ever so slightly with her breathing. She is in a blissful sleep, the sleep we all crave, the deep sleep one gets from an immensely satisfying encounter with your lover.

The suite is trendy with copper fittings, dark colours throughout and shiny black and white tiles in the bathroom set in a herringbone pattern. The fawn-coloured duvet is lying discarded on the floor. The satin sheets covering the spent lovers are the type you spend one night in and make a mental note never to sleep in them again.

Dorak awakes and swings his legs to the floor. He lifts his legs towards his chest and in one smooth motion rocks back, so he is now sitting up on his side of the bed, which is manoeuvre that his chiropractor has taught him. His mouth is dry, with an itch in the back of his throat and his groin feels so light as if it is not present. All remnants from the love making activities that evening. He pours a straight whisky, gargles, and then swallows the fifteen-year malt in one gulp.

He is a strong man from his gym workouts and his past cage fighting hobby. He is sporting an olive skin that may have seen a few sunray lamps during the Russian winter months. His natural wide smile, cheerful persona, square jaw line and hazel brown eyes make him a magnet for women. His well-kept short hair style further indicates that this is a man who clearly looks after himself.

He picks up the family photo taken before the rest of his family died and raises his empty glass to toast them. He kisses the photo and then places it back reverently. He turns to admire Christina's curves, accentuated as she sleeps on her side. He strokes Christina's back ever so gently and leans over to smell the sweet scent of her neck.

A wide smile hits Dorak's face as the evening's activities come flooding back to him, *'If I die now, I will die a happy man'*. Before he can get aroused again, the sound of rain on the outside balcony brings him back to reality. He notices that the lower part of the voiles are wet

as they, from time to time, get sucked out into the heavy rain and return, admonished, damp from their brief outing.

A thought shoots through his frontal cortex, *'I must rethink my exit strategy from Vadim and his security team.'* He knows escaping Vadim's clutches will mean the death of one of them for countless people have been killed by Vadim's orders who have done far less than he has.

Outside two cars coast quietly to the front door of the five-storey hotel. Their wipers swipe away the relentless rain, like a teacher dismissing their class. The green canopies, one over the entrance stretching out across the pavement and another above a ground floor window, announce in gold letters that it is the four-gold star 'Hotel Brauhof Wien'.

Four men jump out from the two cars, all in their mid-thirties, wearing black helmets over their black balaclavas, black fatigues, and body armour. Only a small circle of their upper cheeks, nose and eyes are exposed. They murmur to each other in a Russian accent and have every appearance of being part of a highly organised team of ex-military men who are now guns for hire.

The two drivers have remained in their cars with their near silent engines running as they don't expect their wait will be very long.

Dorak suddenly becomes alert as the nicotine and whisky revitalise his brain. His head turns slowly from side to side, and he has a mild sense of nausea, the sour taste of bile, *'Did I miss something in my escape plan?'*

"Christina, wake up," says Dorak as he kisses her around her forehead, cheeks and pulling down the sheet to lightly kiss her exposed buttock.

"My darling, you are incredible, I am so much in love with you."

"I hope the love you feel is not just because you are empty."

"That's unfair."

Laughing, Christina adds, "You were quite good yourself. You'll make the woman you settle down with very happy."

As she pulls herself up in bed her near six-foot frame emerges. Her height was the very reason why she went to Moscow in the first place for what turned out to be a fake modelling job. Even without make-up, her Romanian natural beauty would turn the head of even the

most distracted man. Her heavy dark eyebrows are sculpted to perfection and set off her large soulful brown eyes that snare the very being of the person they are looking at.

“You know you make me whole. Until I met you, there was something missing.”

“Yes, having great sex with this!” exclaims Christina, pulling the sheet off to reveal her naked body.

Dorak sits on the bed and smiles as he strokes, so gently, Christina’s torso. “Very funny, yet so true. Don’t forget you will need to delete your Facebook and WhatsApp accounts tonight?”

“Surely we are safe in Vienna.”

“Have you been in touch with anyone?”

“I needed to contact my family they -”

“How?”

“Only an email yesterday to my sister soon after we arrived.”

“What did you say?” Dorak asks raising his voice.

“That I had escaped from Russia with a friend and to meet us here, tomorrow morning.”

“Christina, Oh Christina”-he brings his hands to his face to hide his anguish-“we must leave the hotel tonight. Vadim’s security may already know the address of this hotel.” Dorak walks to his clothes that were abandoned on the chair.

“Sorry”-she pauses as she studies Dorak pained expression-“I’m so sorry, I wasn’t thinking straight.” A dark cloud descends upon Christina and a negative thought is on automatic replay, *‘What have I done? I am so stupid.’*

The ringleader enters the lobby before the receptionist could shut off the automatic front doors. The ringleader walks quickly around the unattended front desk and enters the small office, which is dominated by a large screen showing images from a dozen cameras. The ringleader waves his gun, a Udav pistol with a silencer, indicating to the cowering receptionist under the office desk to stand. He towers over the 1.7 metre receptionist and is ex-Spetsnaz, the Russian special forces. He has reached the rare age of 40, an age many of his colleagues never made. He sees killing people as an inconvenience, like you might feel about killing a fly while at dinner. *‘Can I be bothered to get up, maybe not, or maybe so.’*

The scared Polish receptionist has been trained for many eventualities except for this one. To add insult to injury, he is on an unpaid trial period. He can hear the indifference in the ringleader's voice and knows better than to panic so he maintains eye contact and remains outwardly calm. His badge, worn proudly on his uniform, informs everyone that he is called 'Henri'.

"Henri, how do you want this to play out? There are two options. You tell us the room number where these two are"-as the ringleader taps on photos of Dorak and Christina-"and show me where you keep your surveillance recorder, or I shoot you in both kneecaps and shoulders to get the information."

"They are in the executive suite on the top floor. The CTV recording equipment is over there," stammers Henri, pointing.

Henri turns off the hotel's surveillance system and the large screens go dead.

"I can see, Henri, that you are a sensible man. Lock the hotel's entrances. Lock all other lifts. Bring the master keys as I want you to open their door and their safe.

Are there any other staff we may bump into?"

"The only person is in the kitchen on room service. Please do not harm her." Henri who is sporting some designer stubble and lightly moussed hair that he had spent five minutes getting it just so right is worried. Henri is in love, very much in love, with Andrea who is working the room service shift this very evening.

"That, Henri, will depend on your cooperation."

The intruders and the reluctant Henri head to the only working lift and Henri uses his key to access the fifth floor without any chance of guests witnessing or being embroiled in the invasion.

Nothing is said on the short ride to the fifth floor. Henri has only one guilty thought, *'I really don't have a choice, I don't'*.

As the lift doors open the ringleader places his hand on Henri's shoulder.

"Now Henri, so far so good. You will walk down the corridor as if you are delivering something and wander past their door. You will then quietly track back and place this"-he hands Henri a small piece of adhesive tape-"over the spy hole and give us a thumbs-up when this is done."

The ringleader shows his thumbs-up signal.

“You will stay, with the access card ready to enter the lock as we run up. When I drop my arm, you will open the lock and fling the door open. Is that clear?”

Henri just nods.

“You stay by the door as we will want you to open the safe.”

Henri nods. His grey eyes reflect the stress he is under and are crystal clear. He intuitively knows, if he survives the night, he will no longer hold off proposing to Andrea. Four years of happiness is more than enough to ensure him that marriage will not ruin their contented world.

“Any warning to the guests and you and your friend in the kitchen are kaput. Is that understood?”

Henri nods as he sets off purposely down the red carpeted corridor.

Back in the apartment Dorak’s short-lived contentment has gone. He is furious with himself and his incompetence, he knows their safety has been compromised by a lack of attention to detail.

“Christina, please tell me what contact you have made since we left the apartment in Moscow?”

She starts to cry.

“I am so sorry Dorak. I did not think. I also sent a couple of texts from your phone.”

“Don’t cry my love. I should have swapped my sim card when we landed. We had better get packed and aim to clear out of here within 30 minutes.”

Behind their apartment door a scared Henri walks down the corridor silently and fixes the tape on the eye hole. Only muffled sounds can be heard from the inhabitants inside. He gives the signal. The ringleader uses a mirror held low to the ground to watch Henri’s performance from the sanctuary of the open lift.

“Check your body armour, put on your eye goggles, tighten all helmets. We must take him alive. He will be armed.”

The leader tightens his helmet strap and adjusts his eye goggles, “I will be behind you with the syringes and will take care of the woman. Is everybody ready?”

“Da (Yes).”

“Da.”

“Da.”

The leader nods to the two intruders who run towards the door as if they are floating over the carpet. Not a sound. The ringleader’s hand goes down and Henri opens the door as the leading two intruders rush through the door.

Dorak, now in his boxer shorts and singlet, hears the slight click of the door unlocking and sees the door slam against the wall. He lurches to grab his gun.

Four intruders burst through the door. Dorak manages one shot into the body armour before the first two intruders hit him and they all fall to the ground.

Christina, who is taking clothes out of the wardrobe, turns. Her hands and arms go limp, dropping the clothes. She does not utter a scream but instead, runs naked to the balcony. The window voiles momentarily distract her but then she sees the balcony table and chairs and quickly decides to use the chair as a stepping board to her freedom and death.

She jumps, her last act as a lover, her last act as a woman. Christina gives no more than a muffled scream as she wants to deny the Russians that satisfaction and some thuds trace her journey down to the inevitable impact. Christina was never going back to Russia, never going back to the brutal torture that would have followed, she had predetermined her action months ago.

One intruder goes to the balcony and staring over the rail sees her lying on the basement patio, “We won’t be needing to take her back to Russia.”

The intruders roughly handcuff Dorak’s hands behind his back. He is processing what he has just heard. His future life is now of no consequence. Struggling has no purpose anymore. He makes a promise, “*Christina, they will never get the gold.*”

The ringleader kneels by Dorak and sinisterly whispers, “Someone wants to speak to you.”

He shows Dorak the screen of his iPhone. A close-up of Vadim’s round face beams from the iPhone.

“You stupid bastard. It took us all of twenty-four hours to find you. I have organised someone to make your last few hours memorable.”

“Fuck-off”, replies Dorak, spitting at the phone.

While this distraction is happening, the leader injects lorazepam into Dorak’s neck who, after a brief struggle, passes out.

“We lost the woman. She jumped to her death.”

“That does not surprise me, she was always a brave one. Leave her body where it fell. It will send a message to my other girls.”

“We will be in Emmersdorf within an hour. I would be happy to get the information you want from him.”

“Stick to what you are good at. I have Amer arriving. His work is a masterpiece in pain.”

CHAPTER 2: VADIM

Amer is already dressed for work. His dark blue overalls are covering his customary black polo neck jumper and black trousers, a colour that does not show blood, an unfortunate but necessary by-product of his profession.

His satnav has already indicated the winding route ahead which is bliss to Amer. He is listening to his favourite track, 'Ode to Joy' from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, and is singing at the top of his voice. Not just any recording, but the recording from 'A Clockwork Orange,' his favourite film.

Amer rendition could win a prize at a karaoke competition although not fool a voice coach.

Oh friends, friends not these sounds.
Let us sing something more pleasant,
more full of gladness.

Joy, Joy, thou source of light immortal,
Daughter of Elysium,
Touched with fire, to the portal
of thy radiant shrine we come.

As the second verse starts, Amer visualizes the torture of his parents' killers. In his mind, he hears their screams matching the grandeur of Beethoven's choral and a smile breaks across his face, *'Oh, what bliss that will be.'*

He has spent his summers hunting for the militia that were involved in that warm summer evening massacre. He personally extracted other names of soldiers in that platoon. Once he had checked the names against his database their role was over. Of course, Amer could not allow them to live, and he assumed, they knew that.

For ten years, Amer who now had their photos, offered a substantial reward, in certain circles, for their whereabouts. Alas, no one had seen the four men.

The road side is heavily forested, and the bends are so tight they come with a health warning. As he successfully navigates a tight bend at 50 KPH more than the recommended speed, there in front of him is a twelve-pointer stag in the middle of the road dazzled by his lights. Amer turns the high beam off and slows down to an eventual halt. The stag is rooted to the road. *'Maybe he is enjoying the warmth from the road'*, thinks Amer, whereas in reality, the stag is immobilised until his night vision eyes can adjust.

He immediately turns down the music and for a few moments. Amer just smiles, savouring the moment of connectiveness with a beautiful animal. He has loved animals all his life. In fact, he relates to them more than humans, for humans have scarred his very soul. The deck of cards he had been dealt with had left him associating with the runts of the pack.

“You better get going big boy,” says Amer as he claps his hands above his head and does a mock charge. There is an immediate response and Amer smiles and thinks, ‘*That stag will live for another night at least*’. Amer has never hunted game, they are too beautiful, too exquisite to be hunted for pleasure and the pot. He laughs to himself thinking what opportunity the next trigger-happy driver has missed, for it is not uncommon around these parts for hunters to carry a loaded rifle, illegally in their boot.

He turns into the lane leading to his place of work this evening and turns off the engine. Amer puts his earphones in his pocket so he can finish the track while setting up his tools for his night’s work.

The two-hundred-year-old one storey stone farmhouse is incarcerated by a tall brick perimeter wall. The farmhouse, located just outside Emmersdorf on the northern border of Austria, has no nearby neighbours.

Amer shows his ID to the guard at the gate, who has recently arrived from Vienna. As he enters, the pebbles give off that crunchy sound of a new laid or seldom used driveway. Amer waits patiently for his car to be searched, a necessary formality in the business circles he frequents.

Another member of the extraction team strides purposefully out to meet Amer and stares defiantly at him, “You better be chertovski khorosho (fucking good). We have tried for an hour.”

“Tried what?” showing his annoyance.

“To get the information.”

“You fuck-wits. This could take hours now.”

Amer turns and starts to unload his toolbox. He knows not to continue with the conversation as it will be a waste of time. Amer’s handsomely chiselled chin, sparkling light blue eyes and classic hair style would make him a popular man with the ladies if that was his interest. It is not. His Asperger’s disorder makes him almost immune to the attention of anybody. He saunters, shaking his head in disgust, towards the farmhouse.

As he enters the large sparse kitchen pulling his toolbox, he meets the ringleader of the extraction team, sitting at the big farm table busy on his computer. The ringleader, who is wearing a black T shirt that matches his army fatigue trousers, does not bother to look up.

“I understand you know where everything is. Your man is down below.”

“Amer,” offers his hand, but the ringleader carries on with his computer game.

Amer shakes his head and raises the offered hand into a middle finger salute to the ringleader’s back.

Amer wheels his tiered toolbox over the large uneven and chipped flagstones to the narrow cellar doorway. He dismantles it and carries it down the tight stairs in two trips, remembering the way from his last job here, three months ago.

Amer enters the near empty, stone walled cellar. It is so deep in the ground that no windows are possible. The smell of disinfectant tries but fails to mask the musty smell so common in cellars that are hidden from the tentacles of any fresh breeze. His trained eye can still see the dark stains of blood on the chair that sits expectantly in the middle of the room. The leather straps, stretched from past vigorous struggles, tell their own story.

The blood-stained chair has company, a small table and a small ceiling mounted TV screen with a camera mounted on it. The room is poorly lit, by one large light bulb, although two spotlights pointing at the chair are ready for showtime.

Another Russian guard enters.

“We will bring him in shortly.”

“In 15 minutes, no sooner, ” says Amer not looking up.

Amer simply nods and sets about organising the room to suit his method of working. He repositions the table by the nearby wall and takes out a Post-It sticker from his toolbox and writes, ‘RING GARAGE’.

“Make sure he is conscious. Instruct your mates if you ever touch one of my projects again, I swear I will fuck your pumpkin.”

‘Only a Bosnian would appreciate that insult,’ thought Amer with a smile.

“Anytime, anyplace, you Serbs are all mouth,” quips the Russian with a smirk.

“I am a Bosnian, you moron,” responds Amer.

To be left as the sole survivor of your family is bad enough but it was the many other dark events that have left Amer as damaged goods, corrupted by evil. His past is always ready to haunt him especially in the early hours of the morning with events he could never share. Amer's best defence was to ensure nobody got close to him. His smile only lighting up when he is with his cars and his equipment; for they never let him down. Maybe that is a bit harsh because he loves singing opera and gains immense pleasure when he has been successful with an information extraction.

To assert that Amer is meticulous about his work is to state the obvious. Some who saw his preparation might label him anal. His German three tier toolbox is a masterclass in order. The three layers are held clipped onto each other.

Amer opens the lid of the top steel toolbox which has gas hydraulic strut supports to keep it open. There are multiple drawers containing his tools of his trade. He puts his earphones in and listens to the remaining minutes of the Beethoven's Ninth recording. He starts picking up his first tool and he hears in his mind a scream from a past torture when using that tool, on queue with the music. He picks another and a different memory floods back and the scream is equally well timed, this continues until all the tools he plans to use tonight are on the table.

He polishes and repositions each tool in the order of use. Each tool is spaced out, precisely three centimetres from each other, as if he was a butler laying the dinner setting in a stately home.

Amer places the chair so it is precisely in front of the camera and TV screen and refreshes the marks on the floor where the four legs should be.

You could say Amer not only liked his job, but he also loved it. He like Alex, the main protagonist in 'Clockwork Orange', has a love of violence. He sees himself, as a conductor and composer of a symphony of pain, long ago exceeding the skill level of his Albanian mentor. He starts each assignment by a mind exercise where he convinces himself that the person in front of him is one of the intruders that killed his parents and brother. He starts feeling the hatred well up in his body. It works for the session, but he knows like the time before, and time before that, he will be troubled for weeks afterwards by the pleasure he felt administering the pain.

He looks up at the sticker, thinks of his beloved Porsche Boxster Spyder, smiles and makes the call.

"Greetings Amer."

“I am wondering whether I could pick up the Spyder tonight instead of tomorrow?” Amer delivers this request in a slow precise way.

“That could work.”

“How are you going on the modifications?”

“I cannot, for the life of me, think why you would need all this James Bond stuff in a car you hardly use.”

“I have some Russian clients you would never want to meet. What does the car weigh now?”

“It is only 150 kilos heavier, and the weight balance is still 50:50 over both axles.”

“Did the booster get fitted?”

“Of course. Your acceleration will be phenomenal so you should try it out on the track first to get the hang of the power surge.”

“I can collect the Spyder after midnight.”

“Send me 15,000 Euros and the car will be ready in the lock-up garage. Use the same access code as before.”

“Great.”

The red lights on the ceiling mounted TV screen flashes and Vadim’s round face fills the screen. He is a big fat man, his 110 kilos on his just over six-foot frame make him an imposing figure. He would look older than his approaching sixtieth birthday but for his dyed black hair.

He is already in his silk pyjamas, respectably covered by a crimson-coloured dressing gown, lying splayed out on his large cream coloured leather sofa in a palatial Moscow apartment. He is spooning his favourite caviar into his mouth and then washing it down with a shot of neat vodka. The task is made more difficult as one of his cats is perched, asleep on his right thigh, and Vadim does not want to disturb his favourite companion.

Vadim has been betrayed by many people. His wife had an affair and he had her killed in a road accident with her lover. He had survived two attempts on his life, all assisted from the inside.

But this betrayal was the worst. Vadim had liked Dorak, more than any of his previous bodyguards. Dorak had shown bravery, commitment, and loyalty and so the breach in trust really hurt. He had not seen it coming. The gold was one thing but taking Christina was like

losing one of his precious cats. It demanded to be avenged. To Vadim, domination is more than a game, it is his main reason for existing.

“Amer, this torture session must be slow and painful. I have all the time in the world and this bastard stole my gold, my black book and my favourite girl.”

“What information do you want first?”

“The gold. You must keep him alive until we have found it.”

Amer stares at the camera and nods.

“Is the chair in the correct position for your viewing, Mr Chernov?”

“Perfect as always. Text me when you are ready to start.”

With that Vadim stands up, finishes off his vodka and shifts out of picture. Flashbacks of Amer’s last successful information extraction come flooding back and a smile slowly materialises across Vadim’s wide fat face. His single most pleasurable thought crosses his frontal cortex, *‘Another bastard that tried to cross me is about to regret that he was born’*.

Two guards bring in Dorak, battered, naked, bloody, soaking wet, and semi unconscious. They drag him across the floor and strap him to the chair. One guard deliberately nudges the chair away from its marks. Dorak is unfortunately awake, his limp hands and arms, and his transfixed gaze focuses on a spot on the wall. His jaw hangs loose as does his longevity.

Amer glares at the Russian guard, who has moved his chair, and mutters, “I cannot wait to take you on, you fucking moron.”

“Anytime, anyplace, any weapon. You will not last ten minutes, like the last Bosnian I killed.”

“One day our knives will do the talking,” responds Amer as he feels the itch in his right hand, that itch that has meant death to so many.

“That day cannot come soon enough.”

The guard then spits on the floor in the general direction of Amer.

Amer repositions the chair and sends a text to Vadim. The TV screen flickers to life. He touches the victim gently on the shoulder, his trademark start, and feels the sudden nervous flinch.

Vadim, salivating at the prospect of the night’s entertainment, appears smiling on the screen.

“Dorak, can you hear me Dorak? I am drinking my Kors Vodka to celebrate this auspicious evening. Your last memories on this planet will be filled with regret that you ever saw me. Mine will be delight.”

A confused look shoots momentarily across Amer’s face.

Dorak is conscious enough to realise he will be dead soon. He wants to die so he can join Christina. But he must find a way to die without giving up the location of Vadim's money. To ward off the pain he dwells on happier times. One of his happiest moments in his life was listening to his mother sing. He starts humming a lullaby that is barely audible. Amer, recognising the tune positions his ear closer to Dorak’s mouth.

“Nini, sine, spavaj sine (*Hush son, sleep son*)
San te prevario (*Sleep is eluding you*)
Beša ti se, beša ti se (*Your cradle, your cradle*)
Na moru kovala” (*Was forged out at sea*)

Amer joins in on the chorus and second verse.

“Kovala je, kovala je (*It was forged, forged*)
Do tri kujundžije (*By three blacksmiths*)

Jedni kuju, jedni kuju (*One is carving, carving*)
Drugi pozlaćuju (*Another is gold plating*)
Treći nose, treći nose (*Another is carrying, is carrying*)
Od zlata jabuku” (*A golden apple*)

Amer and Dorak have a long lingering look into each other’s eyes. The last time they saw each other comes flashing back into Amer’s mind, like a comet on its return orbit.

Outskirts of Srebrenica 1992

Five groups of four militia from the Serb Volunteer Guard, in oak leaf patterned camouflaged uniforms, are crossing fields to surround a small hamlet on the outskirts of Srebrenica. It is an early summer’s evening. The clouds in the distance are spaced like pews in a church and are at the same height as though they are resting on a glass ceiling. They are glowing a deep red, as if, lit by a different sun than the one that shone so fiercely during the day. The wheat

fields respond to the breeze that lightly caresses the ripening wheat ears. Large, ancient oak trees lie in the corners of the stone walls that separate the fields.

Each group is targeting a different house. Flies are swarming around their sweaty faces, their eyes bulging from the consumed amphetamines and alcohol. They are unshaved, fired up, with all semblances of army etiquette discarded, as these are not required for a massacre. Some are excited as they now have a thirst, almost a craving for this evening's actions. Their trigger finger is twitching, waiting to feel the pressure and then the release as the gun answers the call to action. The first-time recruits are looking at each other, pensive and sweating, already feeling the guilt that will be squashed with the weight of the war crimes they have yet to commit.

In a children's bedroom nearby, golden sun is shining through the billowing curtains and a few flies are circling around the ceiling. The walls are a sky blue with drawings of exotic African animals drawn by their talented and loving mother.

The mother, in her mid-thirties, with long flowing black hair is wearing a white hand-embroidered dress and a blue apron. She is holding her second child, her favourite, but she, as all good mothers, will never let on. She is singing the children's favourite lullaby while an older, rather detached child is reading a book in bed quietly.

“Nini, sine, spavaj sine (*Hush son, sleep son*)
San te prevario (*Sleep is eluding you*)
Beša ti se, beša ti se (*Your cradle, your cradle*)
Na moru kovala” (*Was forged out at sea*)

An armed militia suddenly enters through the open door and shoots the mother in the back, without pausing for a moment. Another armed militia follows, marches through the internal bedroom door in search of other householders.

The father is tying trout flies at his small desk, in the corner of the lounge, for his next outing to the pristine Pliva, a trout fishing haven. He is daydreaming that the allusive ten-pound trout, that resides in his favourite pool, will break the surface in its dramatic taking of the artificial fly he is making.

The sound of the shot brought him out of his daydreaming and has him rushing for his shotgun. A journey not achieved as the bullet in his head shuts down his entire purpose for living. So quickly, he has no thoughts of goodbye.

The mother is falling to the ground and knows her youngest, in her arms, will be killed too so she falls heavily ensuring he is knocked out by the fall. In her last moments of coherence, she covers him with her body and dress and hears her dear husband's death notice.

Pointing to the older child the leader orders, "Don't kill the child," to the younger militia soldier who has just killed the mother. "Take him back to the lock-up."

"Fuck it, that will mean I miss out on all the fun." With that the annoyed soldier grabs the screaming child and walks out the door.

Amer's mind is brought back by an angry Vadim, "Mu-dak (idiot), I am not here to listen to a duet."

Amer checks for a birthmark on his victim's left shoulder. The one called 'strawberry.' It is there, much bigger than it had been on a 11-year-old boy. He has his long-lost brother before him. Dorak soon shows signs of surprise then recognition. Amer quickly places a finger over Dorak's mouth. Not a word is to be uttered.

"I need my more powerful cattle prod as he is still not alert enough to feel the pain," says Amer to his audience as he ambles back to his toolbox, giving himself time to work out the next important sequence of events.

He opens a hidden compartment containing a Russian PSM pistol with a screwed-on silencer and loaded with a full magazine for such an occurrence like this. Amer, looks up and smiles at the guard that is watching him and quickly raises the gun up from behind the toolbox lid and shoots him in the head and the other, the troublesome Russian guard, in the chest. He then fires at the camera breaking its lens.

"What the hell is going on? My picture is down. Is that shots I heard? I must have Dorak alive," shouts Vadim.

Amer turns off the power source feeding the camera and monitor. He kneels by the moaning guard who is clutching his stomach and lifts his chin so he can see his eyes. The guard's eyes show fear, as the bravado has all vanished.

"Spare me, spare me, I'm sorry, I'm sorry-"

Amer smiles and slowly shakes his head.

"We will never get to have that fight, what a shame. Enjoy this instead." With that he places his cattle prod on the guard's heart inducing violent spasms of a fatal heart attack. Slowly a puddle starts to form under the dead guard's body as his bowels release their grip on life.

Amer waves some smelling salts under Dorak's nose, and his eyes open.

"Dorak, Dorak, it's Amer, your younger brother." He shakes him again. "Dorak, I need you to stay awake and shoot the guard that is about to come in. Can you do this for us?"

Dorak is too exhausted to do anything more than nod and take Amer's gun.

"Hide in that recess", Amer points to another doorway, "and take the shot as soon as possible."

Again, Dorak nods slowly.

Amer quickly places the guard shot in the head on a chair that is in the far corner of the room nearby where Dorak will be hiding. He undresses the dead guard, who was foolish enough to goad him, and places him in the torture chair.

"Dorak you will need to wear these clothes, trust me."

Amer wipes as much blood and sweat off Dorak as he can with the guard's T-shirt and then dresses him in the guard's uniform.

Every minute or so Amer stops, activates his cattle prod and emits a loud scream to maintain the charade of an authentic torturing process, for the benefit of the upstairs guard.

Upstairs the Ringleader's mobile phone vibrates. He has been totally engrossed playing Mortal Kombat 11 on his laptop. He quickly takes off his headset and looks at the caller ID. He raises his eyebrows and answers the call.

"Mr Chernov, how are you?"

"What the hell is going on? My picture is down. I thought I heard muffled shots."

"I can hear plenty of screams. Everything appears in order at this end."

"Amer is not answering his phone. Get him to ring me back," orders Vadim.

"I will do that immediately."

The ringleader removes his pistol from his shoulder pouch and creeps silently down the stone stairs. The loud screams from Amer's theatre production reverberate in the small corridor. He slowly and silently opens the cellar door, while raising his gun.

Amer senses a slight draft and a subtle, but discernible, noise from the weary door hinges. His back is facing the door, for he needs to conceal the features of the naked dead guard in

the chair whose body is shaking from the 5500 kilovolts emitted from the cattle prod. There is a slight smell of burning flesh. Amer bends down to the dead victim's ear and asks very quietly.

“Where is the gold?”

There is no answer, and a sound of an electrical pulse has the naked guard's body shaking.

Amer bends down to the victim's ear and asks louder, “Where is the gold?”

Again, there is no answer and the guard's body shakes. The ringleader looks at the corner of the room and sees one of his men slumped on a chair, with his back facing him above a pool of blood.

“What the fuck is going on here?”

Amer turns slowly with the cattle prod in hand, his blue overalls stained with sweat and blood, “That idiot” - Amer points in the general direction of the dead Russian- “tried to shoot my customer.”

Amer turns around and loudly shouts, “Where is the fucking gold?”

The confused ringleader walks over to look at the dead Russian and turning, notices that the slumped torture victim that Amer is working over is shorter than Dorak. He quickly raises his pistol to shoot Amer.

Dorak, hiding in the dark shadow of the unlit recess, has his pistol held in both hands, wavering from the strain of standing on his feet and remaining conscious. He takes two shots at the chest as he does not trust a head shot. The ringleader, who is hit below his left shoulder, reels back. Before he can fire his gun, Amer kicks it away and dives towards ringleader with his Fairburn-Sykes knife, which he had hidden between the dead torture victim's legs.

Amer knows he has to land with the knife extended so it ruptures the stomach. To his surprise the ringleader has anticipated the move and manages to stop the knife penetrating more than a couple of inches. They are now locked in a struggle for control over the knife.

Whilst Amer is a competent knife fighter, he is no match for the much stronger and larger ringleader. With a slight smile the ringleader turns the blade slowly as Amer's hold weakens. A soft thud sound ends the ringleader's ambitions, his future and any thoughts of the past. Dorak has made an executioner's head shot.

“You took your time brother.”

“At your service, anytime.”

“How many are there of them.”

“There were four soldiers and two drivers. The drivers left in the other car. So, we have only one more guard. Where is he?” asked Dorak who is rapidly running out of energy.

“He is at the gate; I will handle it.”

Amer wipes the new blood that has seeped from the wounds on Dorak’s face with his black sleeve.

As they approach the stairs Dorak turns, “What about your gear Amer? We may need it.”

“We only require this for the time being,” Amer says as he lifts his pistol and loads a fresh magazine into it.

“Stay here while I check where the outside guard is,” he adds.

Amer creeps up the stairs quietly and makes his way into the bright kitchen and listens. There is no sound. He crawls to the nearby window facing the driveway, turns off one of the inside lights, and slowly inches up to the window pane. He looks towards the gate and then scans the courtyard to see the guard, cigarette in his mouth, with his back to him. A dark puddle indicates that the guard had needed to relieve himself up against the driver’s door of Amer’s car.

“You should not have done that, you fucking twat,” whispers Amer.

Amer locks the kitchen door and whispers down the stairs.

“Dorak, come up and stay low, the guard can see into the kitchen.”

The porch light is on, and it is too bright so Amer risks turning it off. The Russian guard rushes back to the gate thinking that he might be getting a visit from the ringleader.

They wait a few minutes and then, after unlocking the door, Amer drags Dorak out.

”Help me, this guard got 230 volts to the heart. Vadim is furious. I need to get him to the doctor urgently,” shouts Amer.

“Blyad! (fuck),” shouts the concerned guard as he rushes over to help one of his comrades. Amer draws his pistol which he has hidden down the back of Dorak’s neck and kills the surprised gateman with several shots to the chest and then to his head.

“Come on Dorak, please stand up and walk to my car.”

As Dorak raises himself with Amer’s “Amer, Amer I have searched for you everywhere.”

Tears flood down Dorak's face as it dawns on him the significance of the evening.

Amer hugs Dorak and suppressed memories of his childhood flood back.

"I know, I know. Please help me, we have little time," pleads Amer as he bundles the bulky Dorak into the front seat of his fastidiously tidy 335i two door BMW.

Amer puts the safety belt on the now unconscious Dorak and races back inside to collect his toolbox, remove the sticker and to wipe down all the surfaces he has touched.

He ferries his toolbox up the cellar stairs and back into the car boot. He wipes the urine off the driver's door handle and stores the rag, a DNA goldmine by now, in the boot for later disposal.

In the meantime, Dorak has slumped over the closed car door and christens it with the blood flowing freely from his nose and ears.

CHAPTER 3: DOCTOR PHELPS

Amer enters the back streets of Salzburg where rubbish bags, left out for the early morning pick-up, lay shredded across the pavement. Stray cats and local foxes have been on the search for the workers' discarded sandwiches. The streets are lit by the latest LED streetlights. It is very quiet as the workforce that frequents this industrial area are now tucked up in bed.

Inside the BMW, a persistent stream of blood has run from Dorak's face wounds and the passenger door and seat have a dark red colour of congealed blood. For a moment Amer is extremely disappointed with the staining of his once immaculate car interior. He, however, knows the car's days are numbered now as there will be CCTV footage of the number plate.

"Dorak, I am going to get you to a doctor as soon as we have switched cars," whispers Amer. He knows the conversation is wasted as Dorak is in a pain-induced sleep.

Amer turns into a side street that is lit by a sole red glowing streetlamp. This area of Salzburg is famous for a bat that is very sensitive to light and the green coalition council have changed all the lighting along the bats' highway.

Amer switches off the engine and coasts the last 200 metres in neutral to a row of garages by a large mechanic's workshop. The surrounds of the workshop are very tidy; there are no windows facing the road and the area is well lit with security lights that have sensed their arrival. The advertising boarding states, 'WE DO MODIFICATIONS TO PERFORMANCE CARS - THAT OUR COMPETITION CANNOT DO'.

He gets out of the BMW and walks over to a security code box that is cleverly concealed under a white metal lid and enters his code. Automatically one locked garage door opens, and the interior lighting comes on revealing a whitewashed interior. This is an expensive workshop where many owners collect their toys after hours.

Amer enters the garage and looks for the concealed car key lockbox which is located low down on the rear wall and removes the car key using the same code he has used before.

Pulling the silk car cover off reveals the sensual lines of a Porsche Boxster Spyder. The front wheel arches rising to cascade down to meet the smiling mouth of the air intake. The same body lines that fatally attracted James Dean, who in 1955 died in a head-on crash. The lines that will never age, unlike the procession of its fastidious owners who will succumb to mother nature's will. The black hood has long tie backs, looking like black bra straps giving the driver the same thrill as they are removed. Sitting proudly on the driver's seat is an envelope and a bottle of champagne from Christoph. *'That's a nice touch,'* Amer thinks.

“How are you my beauty? I hope you appreciate the money I have just spent on you. You will soon meet my brother Dorak.”

For a number of years Amer has talked to his cars. They represent to him the only things he can truly trust as they have never let him down. To Amer the love affair with this car is timeless. He spent months tracking it down. Its looks, that caught his eye in the first place, will never fade, its performance will never wilt, and its guttural roar will never fail to excite.

A radiant and joyous smile comes across his face as he caresses the car's body. He takes his blood-stained blue overalls off and uses them to wipe the remnants of blood from his hands and reverses the Spyder out of the garage. Amer tears some nearby cloth to make a temporary but necessary seat cover. He lifts his brother from the BMW and places him in the Spyder's low passenger bucket seat.

He transfers the two top layers of his toolbox from the BMW to the Spyder's front boot, and the bottom layer, with the car cover and champagne, to the rear boot. The two boots, when open, are a show stopper, leaving the uninitiated to wonder where the engine is.

After removing the BMW's number plates Amer takes the small petrol can, he always carries, and pours it over the BMW's seats. He throws his blue overalls onto the wet driver's seat and then walks around and lifts the bonnet up and cuts the fuel hose. He then leans into the car and turns the ignition, placing his left foot on the brake, he shifts the gear lever into drive. As the car moves slowly forward he throws a lit piece of rubbish through the open driver's window. Flames engulf the vehicle as it drives towards the edge of the nearby steep bank. The curb attempts to halt this deed, but to no avail, and the car commences its death journey down the embankment. A trail of flames chases back up the bank racing to him as the petrol, jettisoned out of the cut fuel hose, catches fire. It is almost like the car is trying to get its own back.

He writes a note to Christoph.

CHRISTOPH, PLEASE GET RID OF THE BMW DOWN THE EMBANKMENT AND TAKE THE COST OUT OF THIS. WILL EXPLAIN LATER.

He leaves the note and €500 in the garage under a brick. After turning off the lights and activating the garage doors to shut, he gets into the Spyder. Amer pauses momentarily at the embankment staring at the inferno that is holding back the cooler night air.

A moment of sadness hits Amer. He needs to pay his last respects to his burning BMW, it had deserved a kinder separation, but he had to get rid of any traces of their DNA. He whispers, “Sorry, my friend” and the feeling of loss is soon dismissed when he looks at his sleeping beloved brother.

In a car that is not known to Vadim's security team makes Amer bolder on the drive to Starnberg. He enters a poorly lit back alley in a residential area where there are rows of garages on both sides.

The garages appear rundown, but Amer's garage has a reinforced door, an alarm, two concealed security cameras—one of which is even embedded in the leg of the wooden workbench—and an acid sprayer which is built into the overhead light fitting. Ensuring any uninvited visitor's stay would be short.

He looks over to Dorak. His taller brother is now a handsome man albeit battle scarred. His dark hair and dark eyes being offset by his white, but bloodied teeth. He allows himself some time to think about all the time he has spent searching for him. Both he and Dorak had made it almost impossible to reconnect as all social media platforms were too risky for their occupations. He realises he has something to thank Vadim for; bringing them together.

Amer retrieves the toolbox from the Spyder's front and rear boots and reassembles it. He grabs a bag containing his racing gear which he always leaves in the car and walks over to the garage door. Extracting the small remote that is around his neck, he uses it to deactivate the alarm and open the automatic garage door. He enters his man cave pulling his Tischlerei toolbox.

The garage is surprisingly untidy for Amer. This is deliberate as he does not want the garage to attract attention. This is not where he stores his Spyder. The car has its own state-of-the-art garage, at his home, on the other side of Starnberg.

Dust and leaves have gathered on the unswept garage floor. The mystery how they got there will never be solved, as Amer only visits three or four times a year in person but more frequently via his smartphone and security cameras.

He locks the toolbox in a cupboard and at the back of the garage he removes a pile of bricks and lifts a concrete slab. Underneath is his black waterproof stash bag. He looks inside and checks that the wads of €100 bills, his passports, guns, and surveillance equipment are where he left them and puts the bag in the Spyder's front boot.

Amer changes into his white fireproof racing overalls and black driving shoes which proudly display the red and blue Stand 21 logo. He tightens up the Velcro back support belt and smiling, stretches out his hands and arms. His last act is to hang his black clothes in the cupboard for collection sometime in the future.

Amer dials a number on his mobile.

In a house about 20 miles away a mobile phone rings and a body dressed in a long-sleeved top and cotton pyjamas slowly wakes up, turns on the light and takes the call.

In Dr Phelps' line of work each late-night call means lots of money. The quality furnishing in the bedroom indicate that Dr Phelps requires money, lots of money, to maintain his opulent lifestyle.

“Doctor Phelps, how can I help?”

“Doctor, it's Mr Balan (Amer's operational surname), you worked on me a few months ago. My colleague has cracked ribs, cut mouth, usual stuff from a severe beating. It requires fixing tonight. We are 20 minutes away.”

“That will be €4,000 in cash.”

“That's doubled from last time.”

“It's one o'clock in the morning. Have the money or I will go back to sleep,” replies the doctor with a fair degree of annoyance in his voice.

“See you shortly,” answers Amer, who had already taken a disliking to Dr Phelps the time before.

Dr Phelps is an upper class, well educated, corrupt English doctor. At just short of six feet and weighing 70 kilos Dr Phelps is the perfect size for his beloved cycling. He has even shaved what remains of the hair on his head. In fact, he has not stopped there. The wet shaver is his friend in the shower.

Dr Phelps searches for a phone number on his pad and rings the number.

“He has contacted me and is due in 20 minutes.”

Vadim is lying on his bed with white being the dominant theme behind the interior designer's plan. He is using his Lenovo Yoga laptop, which he somehow balances on his mountain of a stomach and is looking up his address book. He finds the number and makes a WhatsApp call on his cell phone.

“You have wanted an assignment from me and now is your chance.” Vadim pauses.

“Fire away, Mr Chernov.”

“Get three armed units to this address.”

A picture of a handwritten address, on a notepad, is on the smartphone screen.

“Kill this man.” A picture of Amer is on the screen. “And make sure this one, the taller one, who will be injured, and sporting bandages comes to me, alive, with no more damage.”

A picture of Dorak is on the screen.

“When you have him, we will arrange a rendezvous. Have you received the emailed images?”

“Yes, Mr Chernov.”

“€50,000 will be deposited in your account and €50,000 on delivery. Send me your bank details.”

“That works for us.”

The leader of the infamous biker gang is a large man, to some he would be called huge. His muscular arms proudly showing a patch work of tattoos. Like many gang leaders he has risen to the top by outlasting his challengers, dishing out more beatings than he has received.

He emails back his bank details immediately. Silence on the phone is a sign that the two diligent and efficient parties are busy. Vadim is transferring the money while the gang leader is dialling on his other phone.

“I have transferred 50,000 Euros,” says Vadim.

“I have been looking forward to this moment, Mr Chernov. Please wait a minute.” Putting his finger over the microphone so Vadim will not hear he talks into the other phone. “We need to do an extraction on the outskirts of Starnberg . One injured, one armed operative to kill. The doctor on site is complicit.”

“We can be there in 40 minutes, using three bike teams,” replies his associate.

He switches back to the other phone.

“They will go on bikes for speed. They can be on site in 50 minutes.” The gang leader has learnt to be conservative with estimates.

“They had better make it quicker than that and I want the capture recorded live on a GoPro.”

“40 minutes it is with GoPro streaming, and we will dispose of the body the usual way after having set fire to all evidence.”

“Confirmation of the transfer should arrive at the same time your boys do. Do not fail me.”

“We have not yet failed a client and don’t intend to start, Mr Chernov.” He punches the air. His gang has landed its first Russian client. More will surely follow.

Vadim goes back to stroking his favourite cat that has purchased the vacant real estate, his stomach, now that the laptop has been moved. Vadim is tapping a foot to an easy beat and has a lightness in his limbs. Another ‘thorn in his side’ is about to be removed.

Vadim was brought up in the vast countryside outside of T’bilisi, Georgia. His loving parents were killed while he was still young, in a car accident and he went to live with a childless uncle and auntie.

The loss of his parents had a long-lasting impact on Vadim. From that point on he made a vow never to love someone so much that their loss would be devastating. His only breach is his daughter Sasha. To protect her he has repositioned her in London, never to return to Moscow. Which was not a loss to Sasha as she has spent most of her years in luxury living between London, Latvia and Monaco.

At a young age Vadim saw making money as being more important than schooling and he was soon selling cigarettes and drugs at college. He once joked he was earning more than his teachers, so it was daft to attempt to listen to them.

He married into some wealth and used all the money gifted to the new couple to invest in buying more contraband to sell in Moscow. By the time the Soviet regime was breaking up, in the early 90s, he had already made money for some key players in the Kremlin, depositing their take in their overseas bank accounts. It was thus natural that his bid for a state-owned oil company was successful.

He maintained his close links to the Kremlin by his lavish entertainment at his villas in Jurmala; the picturesque resort of pine forests and dunes in Latvia.

The eventual rewards made him look, just what he is, a very clever man. One who has made a fortune without having to compete with the Russian mafia who keep well away from him as he had the ear of the power brokers in the Kremlin.

Back at the immaculate two storey house, the security lights have been turned on. There is enough back light to make out the blooming wisteria which frames the white wood shutters that have been tied back to welcome the summer. The doctor has his car parked in the garage behind the house so not to clutter the overall impression of enchantment that the property imbues. The lawn is mown, albeit without any pattern. A robotic lawn mower is resting for

the night in its station, ready for duty tomorrow as new grass blades dare to venture towards the sun.

The doctor heads to the shower and stands naked in front of his full-length mirror. Dr Phelps loves to marvel at his physique, just the way most athletes do who have their body fat sitting at less than 15%. Dr Phelps had even paid for an underwater weighing. This involved calculating the volume of water displaced which informed Dr Phelps, for €1,000 that he has 14% body fat that puts him in the super-athlete class.

He loves mirrors; really loves mirrors. One in the bathroom and one full length in his bedroom. It is the favourite part of the day, to see the result of the testing cycle ride on his tanned physique. He wears a permanent sneer so years of neglect of his teeth are not reflected back to him. A sight befitting a man who is too tight to invest in his teeth.

He puts on his white medical coat and heads into his office. Dr Phelps, who is in his early sixties, lives alone as he is a perfectionist. No partner is good enough for him. He is a 'Lycra boy' with a goal, within a couple of years, to win The L'Étape Switzerland for his age group.

He has decided complete his remain working years in cycling heaven. Well, that is the official story whereas, if truth be known, he was caught charging for fake patients and was permanently banned from practising by the General Medical Council in the United Kingdom.

Pictures of the doctor on racing bikes adorn his office. His face showing a smugness of self-righteousness, common in doctors, and amplified in Dr Phelps case through the added ironic delight of overcharging, or you could say, robbing criminals.

He got into this medical practice for the dark side by accident, treating a shot wound late one night and was surprised at the generous payment he received. He specializes in extracting bullets and all the associated gunshot residue and then staging the wound so that another story is plausible. He is so well respected in those circles that he now has even charged retainers to some large gangs for being available 24/7.

The Spyder's lights hit his study windows, casting large moving shadows on the opposite wall. Dr Phelps looks at the images from six security cameras on his computer screen and takes a photograph of the front of the Spyder and sends it on by email.

HERE IS THE NUMBER PLATE. I WILL TRY AND HOLD HIM HERE. HAVE RECEIVED PAYMENT, THANK YOU.

He presses the switch to activate the gate and the Spyder crawls towards the front door. The sound of tyres on the newly laid gravel can be heard from his upstairs office.

Amer leans over to wake Dorak.

“Come on Dorak you must help me here. Where is your safe house?”

“It’s in Latzfons, Northern Italy.”

Amer enters the address of Dorak’s safehouse, into the Spyder’s Satnav. A smile comes across his face as he sees the winding mountainous route on the sat nav. He has over 8 hours of ecstasy in front of him. He will need to drive, very fast on 700 kms of mountain roads to northern Italy. ‘*What a drive. A drive made in heaven,*’ he thinks to himself.

With some difficulty he lifts his dishevelled brother to his feet. He quickly inspects the passenger area and sees to his relief that the sheet has caught all the spilt blood. They arrive at the front door, thankfully Dorak’s legs are the only part of his body uninjured. The door opens before Amer has time to knock.

“Do come in, straight through and second on the left.” He looks at Dorak. “Who do I have here?”

An annoyed Amer hands over the €4,000 in a tight bundle.

“For that amount of money just fix him, give him painkillers and keep your mouth shut.”

Amer is worried about the damage the Russian guards may have done to Dorak in their botched interrogation.

“Steady on, I am only trying to make conversation at this godforsaken time.”

Dr Phelps helps Amer to drag Dorak into the immaculate surgery that has a strong chemical smell. The doctor puts on his gloves very carefully and slowly, for he now must endeavour to keep them on site for at least 30 minutes. He is pleased to have the full payment from Amer in his pocket before the oncoming mayhem occurs.

“Help me lift him onto the table and hold him while I cut his shirt off.”

The doctor commences a long and thorough examination of Dorak.

Tapping on Dorak’s rib cage, Dr Phelps asks, “Who the hell did this damage?”

Amer ignores the question and asks, “What is the damage Doc?”

“Three cracked ribs, badly bruised testicles, a cut lip that will need three stitches and a knife wound under his neck that I will glue with Truglue skin adhesive.”

“Will he be able to travel for a few hours in a car?”

“That should be fine. I will give him some sleeping agent so he will not scratch his dressings.”

After twenty minutes most of the work has been done. Dr Phelps knows he cannot hold them much longer without raising suspicion. Turning to Amer, Dr Phelps says, “Please watch that he does not scratch his neck dressings. I will get some medications you will need for the trip from my office.”

The doctor walks to his office and opens his medicine cabinet loudly and then sends a quick email from his computer.

PATIENT HAS BEEN FIXED. WILL NOT BE ABLE TO HOLD THEM. TOO DANGEROUS FOR ME. WILL LET DOWN PRESSURE IN ONE TYRE TO SLOW THEM DOWN.

The doctor then strides to the front door. He turns on the security lights and calls out to Amer, “How is he doing?”

“He is still out cold.”

“I need to get some herbs from the garden to stop the swelling around his rib cage.”

Dr Phelps slides quietly out the door and picks some herbs and then kneels by the driver’s side front tyre and starts to remove the dust cap. Amer is observing him from the doorway with his pistol in hand.

“A bullet if you touch my car. Who knows I am here?” ask Amer as if another death makes no odds.

“Hold on there,” the surprised Doctor raises his hands slowly, one hand still holding the herbs.

“Let’s take a walk to your study, nice and carefully, keeping your hands up,” orders Amer.

As they enter the Doctor’s study Amer heads for the computer.

“Stand over there”-he waves his pistol at the general direction of the window-“if you want to live.”

He opens and reads the last sent emails.

“How did you know Vadim is after us?”

“His security contacted all doctors who patch up criminals. I was forced to comply.”

True, Vadim's security team had been busy contacting doctors working in the dark side. He had been alerted that he might receive a call from two fugitives, one who he recognised from a previous treatment. A substantial reward has been the real incentive for compliance.

Dr Phelps temper flares, he cannot stand being threatened in his own sanctuary, so he makes a sudden lunge with a scalpel he has previously picked up from the desk. His scalpel may have reached its intended target, Amer's heart, had Amer received a normal upbringing but never with a war-hardened Bosnian. A swift move to the left and a squeeze of the trigger has the doctor dropping the knife, clutching his chest, and falling to the floor mainly through shock rather than the pain.

Finding it difficult to breathe, Dr Phelps has to have the last word, "They will find you. You are both dead men walking."

Amer steps over the dying doctor and runs downstairs and drags Dorak into the Spyder. After two minutes of driving, he swings the Spyder around and returns to the house. He has realised that he needs to get some pain killers for Dorak, as well as erase the surveillance recording and emails and wipe all touched surfaces. He does not want to make it easy for the police to implicate him in the Doctor's death.

Amer parks the Spyder by the gate facing the way he will depart, and with his pistol walks quickly back to the open front door.

Looking up he sees the surveillance cameras he had missed previously.

His eyes followed the wiring to the top left-hand window, the doctor's study.

He quickly strides in through the open front door and jumps up the stairs three at a time. The doctor's body is motionless on the floor in a pool of blood.

The surveillance cameras are wired to the computer. Amer taps a key, and the computer screen comes alive.

He deletes the surveillance recordings and the emails and wipes down the keyboard and mouse. He sprints out to the car. The distinctive noise of three motorbikes approaching swiftly, comes up the valley.

"Shit."

Amer gets into the car and secures his safety belt.

"Dorak, brace yourself," instructs Amer.

Dorak groans as he is thrust into the side window by the force of the accelerating Spyder.

The lead bike swerves to miss the car, sending the rider and armed pillion over the handlebars into the nearby wall. Amer smiles, there is now one less bike to worry about.