

**DARK  
HORIZON**

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## PROLOGUE

*How would it feel if the air itself picked you up by the scruff of your neck and shook you bloody, like a dog with its teeth in the throat of a rat?*

Sergeant Colin Brady wasn't usually a man given to introspection, to think with that kind of depth. His line of work didn't offer much leeway for that sort of thing. Most days, Colin was nothing but business; busy being boss of his small piece of British turf in a foreign land – in this case, the security checkpoint on the road to an RAF base on the coast of Cyprus.

But the chaos unfolding around him had knocked something loose in his normally well-disciplined head; made his mind go wandering as his pulse thudded wildly and sound-shock rang in his ears. He had been gathered up by an invisible giant and thrown aside as easily as he tossed the end of a spent cigarette into a bin.

He had no memory of the transition, just the bone-shaking impact of *nothing*, and then . . .

Then he was lying flat on the ground, his bare hands and his face pressed into a layer of grit and brick fragments, with pain coursing up and down his body. He had no idea how he got there, a good six metres away from where he had been standing.

One moment he was outside the gatehouse, stepping after Lance Corporal Grey as the other man called out to him.

‘Something’s up, boss,’ Grey said.

There was a car, he remembered, a rundown little Fiat, the image of the grubby orange vehicle coming back to him. *But it didn’t slow down. They’re supposed to stop.*

Colin tried to stand, and the pain punished him severely for his audacity. The front of his duty uniform was lacerated from top to bottom, the camouflage pattern of his MTPs scarred with dozens of shallow cuts that were steadily oozing blood. Splinters of metal and glass were lodged in his chest, his neck, his face. He looked as if he’d picked a fight with a threshing machine and come off the worse.

He sat up slowly, his head swimming, and gave a racking cough that brought up thick, black spittle. A settling cloud of dust and smoke surrounded him, a roiling, stinking haze that reeked of petrol and some kind of acrid chemical. The smell collected in the back of his throat, and he swallowed a retch.

Reaching up, Colin rubbed a hand over his cheek, and it came away sticky and red. His regulation short brown hair was matted, and he belatedly realised he’d lost his regiment beret. *And my weapon too.* He peered around, blinking, but couldn’t find his rifle. *I had it on my shoulder,* he told himself, his thoughts slow and ponderous. *When Grey called out.*

No cover and no gun. He would be deep in the shit when his commanding officer heard about that.

Colin looked toward the gatehouse and the drop-down barrier across the base entrance, but neither of them were there any more. The barricades had been replaced with a mess of broken metal and concrete, and the gatehouse was



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a slumping heap of rubble. There was no sign of Lance Corporal Grey or the other two men who had been on guard duty that morning.

He tried to call out, but his voice didn't work properly, the sound of it weird in his ears. The smack of compacted air that had hit him had done something nasty to his senses, but some of his hearing was coming back. Below the ringing in his ears, he heard the sizzle of super-heated metal as it cooled, the crackle of flames. And sirens too, warbling on the wind. It was hard for him to get his thoughts in a line. They slipped away from him, coming in and out of focus.

With effort, Colin finally rose to a standing position, hissing at the jagged pokes of agony down his front. His sense of balance was all over the place and, when he tried to walk forward, he listed like a drunkard. He stepped slowly, one foot in front of the other.

Where the road out of the nearby town met the route into the RAF base, there was now a shallow crater of hot, blackened debris. Pieces of broken Jersey barriers and bits of the orange Fiat littered the ground.

The car. It didn't stop, he remembered. It raced straight into the barriers at full tilt, and that was when the mental replay in Colin's head abruptly ended. He'd blotted it out, hadn't he? Like how it happened to people in films.

The explosion. He could only remember it by the evidence it left behind, the experience of being in it mercifully wiped from his memory.

The lad Grey had been right there, yelling at the driver to stop. Where was he now? Was anything left of him? Colin cast around, straining to listen for anyone calling for help, but the rising-falling sound of the sirens smothered everything.



Vision fogging, dots dancing in front of his eyes, he limped on, fighting down another hacking cough. As he came closer to the crater, he could see shapes at the edges of it, objects that looked like clumps of wet rags. Bits of shredded uniform and butcher's block remnants.

Colin shuddered and his gorge rose. But he had to look. He had to be sure.

Who did this? The sad reality of it was that the base could have been the target of any one of a hundred different threats, as payback for offences both real and imagined.

Colin dredged up his fractional memory of the orange Fiat. He hadn't seen the driver, just a dark shadow behind the windscreen. He recalled briefings about the brutal potential of what the military called VBIEDs – vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices, or car bombs to the likes of the general population. Even a small car like the one that had rocked up today could pack in a few drums of a lethal, destructive homebrew. Common ammonium nitrate fertiliser, diesel fuel and a cocktail of chemicals, wired to a trigger switch in the hand of some nutcase 'true believer' aching to go out in a blaze of glory.

In a flash of destruction lasting less than a second, three of Colin's men had been torn apart. And for what? If he had no idea who was responsible for this, if he couldn't look them in the eye and know the reason for it, what was the bloody point of it?

He heard vehicles coming and took a look over his shoulder. A pair of soft-sided Land Rovers had rolled up behind him and men were climbing out, scrambling toward the ruins of the gatehouse to search for survivors. Other uniformed figures were sprinting down the track from the base proper, some with rifles, some of them in white coats carrying medical kits.



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On the far side of the road, a group of locals were gathering around the front of a nearby café, which had been kicked in by the blast wave, intent on offering their help.

Then, down from the road to the town came a civilian ambulance roaring along at full clip, the light bar over the cab flashing madly. Tyres screeching, it skidded to a halt near where Colin stood swaying.

He stared at the canary-yellow vehicle and refocused. How had it got here so fast?

Despite his injuries and the concussion dragging on him, part of Colin's brain was still working as usual, the suspicious and observant part that made him so good at his job on the gate.

He stared at the vehicle and something about its livery looked off to him. From a distance it would have passed muster, but not from this close.

It was the letters spelling out the word 'Ambulance'. They had been hastily painted on. It wasn't right.

It wasn't a real ambulance.

Colin twisted about, sucking a breath to shout out a warning, but his ruined throat let out a wheeze instead of a bellow, and the effort of doing that was enough to make him collapse.

He stumbled and fell in a dizzy heap as the driver of the fake emergency vehicle climbed out and walked slowly towards him. It was a woman, small-framed with short black hair. Her face hidden behind a paper surgical mask, she was lost in a paramedic's uniform clearly sizes too large for her.

Colin kept trying to call out, but the hollow rasps that escaped his mouth were lost amid the constant keening of the sirens.

The woman's shadow fell across him and he looked up. Colin shook his head, reaching up to try and grab her, but he



had no more strength left. She deflected him easily, and it was then he saw the cluster of wires going from the cuff of her sleeve to a slim metal tube gripped in her hand.

When Colin had been briefed about the VBIED tactics used by some terror groups, the one that had stuck with him was the ‘second tier’ method. In these scenarios, attackers would explode a vehicle bomb in a location where local first responders would be able to quickly arrive on site. And then, when enough medics, firefighters or helpful civilians were in place, they would detonate a second device to do as much damage as possible to anyone who had come to assist.

He felt giddy as he realised what was going to happen. The fake ambulance was twice the size of the destroyed Fiat that preceded it, and it could easily hold a half-dozen more oil drums packed with improvised explosives.

‘No,’ Colin forced out the gasp as tears of pain misted his vision. ‘Don’t.’

He couldn’t see her face, but he heard the sneer in her voice when she looked down and answered. ‘Hamid is right about you,’ she said, acidic contempt dripping from every word. ‘You are all weaklings.’

The name she spoke meant nothing to him; then he heard the click of a switch closing, and Colin Brady’s world turned into a storm of searing white fire.



TWO MONTHS LATER

# ONE

If John Price had known he would be dead in ten minutes, he might have spent his last moments differently.

Instead of swallowing down his burning anxiety and following the directions he had been forced into obeying, he might have acted on some wild impulse to fight back. He might have risked everything in an instant of desperation.

But Price had no clue how close he was to his end, and so the fear drove him, controlled him and stifled him.

He held on to the steering wheel of his Porsche Cayman in a grim rigor as it sped along shadowed roads, the English countryside a black blur flashing by. He stared blankly out of the windscreen, past the swishing wipers and the rash of rainfall speckling the glass. Driving on automatic, Price didn't look at the man sitting next to him in the passenger seat, with his one gloved hand wrapped around the silenced, nickel-plated semi-automatic resting in his lap. He didn't dare to.

It was early evening but the dull clouds overhead made it seem later. A pool of illumination thrown from the sports car's headlights lit the dark ribbon of the narrow lane beneath the Porsche's tyres as it bent right and left with little warning, thick border hedges crowding in from either side and heavy, stooped trees lofting overhead to meet above like leafy archways.

Price drove too fast, like he always did. Faster than his wife and daughter liked, and well over the speed limit. Once upon a time he had done it just to be contrarian, to do it his own way for once and buck the rules, but now it was second nature to him. A bad, ingrained habit he never thought to correct. And he had no need to, he reasoned. He drove these roads week in and week out, off from their home in rural Kent out to the small commercial airport at Ridley Hill, and he knew them like the proverbial back of his hand.

When he couldn't sleep, Price took his Porsche out in the dead of night while everyone else in the house slumbered in dreamland, and he belted down these gloomy, narrow roads as fast as he dared with the car's lights turned off. It was a foolish, juvenile risk for a grown man to take and, in this moment, with a killer sitting beside him, he realised how thoughtless he'd been on those dark nights.

Thinking about his wife Sylvie and his daughter Janine brought a faint sound out of him, halfway between a gasp and a sob. He did love his family, after a fashion, even if that was something he'd never learned how to adequately express. In his mind he played out the absolute worst scenarios his imagination could create about what might be happening to them.

The car's wing mirror clipped some overhanging branches with a *rat-a-tat* snarl as Price's attention drifted, as did the Porsche's driving line. The man in the passenger seat immediately reached forward and slapped his hand on the top of the dashboard.

'Pay attention,' he warned, each word like a whip crack, and Price flinched at the command.

The man holding the silenced pistol had a low snarl of a voice and an Eastern European accent that Price didn't have

the experience to place. Densely set and broad across his shoulders, he had the build of a rugby fullback and a head of short, ash-grey hair thinning too early for someone of his age. His face appeared drawn and gaunt in the half-light of the car's interior. Cast against Price's slumped manner, a man who had once been a trim figure but now gone to seed, there was no question as to which of them was in the dominant role here, gun or no gun.

'Get your head straight,' added the passenger, shifting in his seat so he could glare directly at the driver. 'You know what will happen if you make mistakes. You know who will suffer the consequences.'

Price managed a wooden nod, staring at the road but not really seeing it. The last sight of his family was burned into his mind's eye. Sylvie holding Janine close to her in a terrified embrace. Panic and confusion writ across the pair's faces, accusation and dread radiating off his wife as the door closed on them. He could hear her asking the unvoiced question: *What did you do to bring this to our house?*

But Price didn't have an answer. He didn't know the gunman and his thuggish cohorts. And, at first, he hadn't understood what they wanted from him.

*At first.*

'Look, I can't take you inside,' said Price, at length, but his words came out in a dry croak and he had to repeat himself. 'Through the gates, I mean. You realise that?' He nodded at a laminated RFID card resting on the dash. 'The security pass is only for me ...'

'You will stop by the perimeter fence. At the end of the runway. I will get out, and you will do as you have been told.'

Price took that in with a blink, and a brief thought rose. Don, the ageing gate guard at Ridley Hill, might be on duty. If Price could warn him somehow, raise the alarm . . .

‘I know you are thinking of testing our resolve.’ The man with the gun spoke carefully, cutting off Price’s train of thought. ‘Do I strike you as someone who does not keep his word?’ He raised his other hand and drew a thumb across his neck in a slow, throat-cutting motion. ‘If you disobey, I assure you it will not go well for the women.’ Then he looked away, as if the conversation was starting to bore him. ‘Follow directions and in a few hours this will be over.’

‘H-how do I know you won’t kill us afterwards?’ Price stuttered, and his voice sounded high and reedy as he forced out the question.

‘Obey and there will be no need for bloodshed,’ the man replied. ‘You will be the guilty one. You will take the blame. That will be enough.’

Price’s panic surged and the words burst out of him in a cry as he shot a fearful look in the other man’s direction. ‘I don’t believe you!’

His fractional moment of distraction from the road ahead came at exactly the wrong instant.

Exiting a blind curve, the Porsche emerged into a straight where a branching drive led off to a nearby farmhouse. Parked over the mouth of that drive sat the angular bulk of an ageing Ford 7810 tractor, half of the tall rear wheels extending out into the lane, adorned with the bright crimson triangle of a road safety reflector blazing from the car’s headlights.

Price stamped hard on the brakes but it was already too late, his inattention and the wet surface of the road amplifying his mistake tenfold. The speeding car slammed into the tractor



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with enough force to lift the rear wheels, and the raw, punishing physics of the impact transferred the Porsche's forward velocity into a shock of motion that flung it sideways across the narrow road.

The car half-rolled and collided with the trunk of an oak tree, punching in the roof and destroying the windscreen in a torrent of glass. Branches as thick as girders invaded the car's interior, and John Price's end came quickly and completely as his chest was crushed in an instant.

The Porsche lurched and finally came to rest on its side, the engine roaring helplessly, the wheels spinning at empty air.

There was a moment of darkness and loss in the seconds after the impact, and when Matvey rose slowly from it, his first reaction was disgust. Warm liquid trickled down on to him, and he batted it away, his hand coming back wet.

The Porsche's anti-collision airbags had deployed, salting the air inside the car with powdery residue, and he clawed at the white mass in front of him, ripping it away so he could move. The harness on the vehicle's faux racing-car seats had kept him in place as it spun through the crash, saving his life.

But the driver had not fared as well. An ugly mass of damp, moss-sheathed wood pinned the Englishman in place above Matvey, and blood dripped in drools from his mouth and nostrils.

There was no point in checking on him. His eyes wide open, his expression one of frozen shock, Price was quite dead.

Matvey's annoyance came to a head. He swore under his breath, cursing the idiot for his carelessness in a string of gutter oaths, muttering every last virulent swearword in the Russian language as he worked the seatbelt fastener to release himself.



The latch let go and Matvey dropped against the passenger-side door, now pressed to the muddy ditch at the foot of the oak tree. He smelled rain-damp, hot oil and the raw musk of newly splintered wood. Could the car catch fire? He had no idea, but he wasn't going to wait around to find out.

Ignoring the pounding ache in his head and the shock of pain from his joints, Matvey felt around in the footwell until he found his silenced pistol where it had fallen, relieved that the gun hadn't been thrown out and lost on the road. He scrambled out of the gaping void where the Porsche's windscreen had been and into a gulley of ankle-deep water that sucked at his boots.

There were voices in the air, coming from behind him. He turned back towards the road, finding the shape of the damaged tractor and a barn beyond it. People were heading his way from that direction. He saw the glow of the flashlights they carried bobbing among the hedgerows as they came closer, drawn by the sound of the collision.

Matvey ducked low and moved off as quickly as he could, careful to stay out of sight, sticking to the cover of the ditch. If he was discovered, there would be too many questions and not enough answers.

He gripped the pistol tightly. Back in the old country, he might have chosen to kill whoever came looking and take his chances after the fact, but it was different here in Britain. The nation was tiny – too small for the brutal acts of violence his work often employed to go unnoticed. The local *musor* – the police – were not so easily bribed or cowed as those he tangled with back in the land of his birth. He couldn't just stride away from this with a swagger and a threat. There were going to be consequences; repercussions

that would cost him real money unless the situation could be salvaged.

As he paced through the drizzle, he took stock and coldly dissected the problem at hand. Matvey had always been good at being dispassionate and clinical when situations became intense. It was how he had managed to stay alive this long, when men of lesser character – the hot-headed and the short-sighted – had ended up in the ground.

He retrieved a blocky satellite phone from the zip pocket of his black leather jacket and scowled at it. The antenna was bent and the screen had fractured into a web of cracks, but the touch-sensitive surface still worked. Pulling off one glove with his teeth, he prodded at the device, checking the clock.

*We still have time.* He didn't want to entertain the other possibility – that one fool's mistake might ruin the job that Matvey and his crew had spent the past week preparing for.

He had a certain reputation to maintain. It was the reason people paid him as well as they did. If word got out that Matvey could not deliver, it would not only be his bank account that would suffer. It would make him look *weak*. It would make him appear *fallible*. And that was a death sentence. There was no room for errors in a business populated by killers, thugs and predators.

When he was sure he had put enough distance between himself and the crash, Matvey left the gulley and cut across fields in the direction of a nearby village, using the steeple of a darkened church to orient himself. As he walked, he worked the phone and dialled one of the handful of numbers in the memory.

Stepan answered on the fourth ring. His tone was wary, his English slow and over-enunciated. 'Yes? *Who is calling, please?*'



Matvey replied in their native language, quick and clipped. 'We have a problem. There will have to be a change in plan.' He described the situation and, to his credit, Stepan didn't say a word until he was finished.

*'That fucks everything,'* the other man said bluntly. *'The stupid bastard! We have no leverage over a corpse!'*

'Indeed.'

Stepan made a spitting sound. *'What the hell do we do now?'*

'The responsibility is mine,' replied Matvey. He came to a halt in the middle of the cold, damp field, standing amid rows of tilled earth and the beginnings of a potato crop. 'I will call up the line to the client. I will explain it to them. It will be their decision to proceed or to pull the contract.'

Stepan was quiet for a moment, and Matvey knew what he was thinking. *'What about the women? Whatever comes next, they have seen our faces.'*

'They are there with you?'

*'No. I am in the kitchen. Luka is watching them in the living room.'*

Matvey pictured Price's wife and daughter, sitting side by side on their expensive sofa, in the over-decorated sanctum of the dead man's home. Despite what he had promised, they would never have been allowed to live through the night. This simply meant that the timetable for their disposal would have to be brought forward.

'The kitchen,' he repeated. He had intended to do the work himself, but now there wasn't time. 'There will be knives there, for cooking. Use one of those. Do it swiftly.'

Matvey heard the rattle of a drawer being opened. *'All right.'* Stepan's tenor changed, becoming oddly calm. He knew that tone of old; the other man looked forward to what

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would come next. It was part of the reason he employed him. Stepan was a slave to certain base needs and, when correctly controlled, that made him both loyal and effective.

‘Call me back after you are done,’ he added, tapping at his own device as he started walking again. ‘I will send you my location. Come pick me up.’

*‘All right,’* Stepan repeated, and the ambience of the call shifted as he left Price’s kitchen and walked back into the living room.

Matvey heard the first fractional note of a woman’s scream, but the line suddenly went dead, and the only sound was the whisper of the fading rain.

To Continue the Story . . .

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