



Prologue

The elegant, black, shiny coffin slipped out of sight into the yawning hole which waited expectantly, staring back blankly from the icy ground, waiting to devour the offering as whispered words were offered from among the hundreds standing graveside. Muffled sobs echoed around the emptiness of this damp, freezing Belfast morning in mid-January. Men dressed in the sombre black suits of death with immaculately polished shoes stood solemnly but resolutely, hatred filling their reddened eyes as women standing beside confused children muttered unheard promises. As if controlled by an unseen force, the people parted, forming a human tunnel of grief and four proud men marched through them dressed in the paramilitary uniform of the Provisional Irish Republican Army. Black balaclavas covered their faces to avoid the attention of the hovering drone overhead as they produced pistols from their waistbands and fired shots towards the blackened skies in unison.

One man stood at the end of the grave and declared to the masses;

“This murder will not go unchallenged. I promise on behalf of the IRA that the murdering English bastard who put this wee girl into this grave will soon be found and dealt with.” He fired another shot into the air before the men marched back through a back-slapping crowd and disappeared out into the city streets.

The congregation filed out back into the road and made their way towards the hotel hosting the wake, all but one man, a short stocky man with arms covered in tattoos. He took a handful of soil and threw it onto the coffin, looking up at the already carved headstone.

Beverly McCulloch.
Born 17.10.1990 Died 03.01.2019.
Beloved daughter and sister.
May you Rest in Peace.

“Beverly, I make this one last promise to you. I will trace this man across the world, find and kill him. He will beg for your forgiveness as he takes his last breath.” A black rook crowed its approval to these promises as it circled the trees. He took another handful of dirt, staring at it as if it were responsible for the killing.

“Ernie Stocken, former soldier and murderer of my sister, I am coming for you with every ounce of vengeance left in my body.”

Chapter One

Somewhere in Moscow. Russia.

Sitting in the drab, bunker-shaped room, he looked down through dry, sore eyes and inspected his arms. Held out in front of his naked torso, two filthy forearms coated with the grime from street living and dried blood looked a sorry sight and the stench of his stale body odour seemed to coat everything it touched. The evidence of a recent knife wound stretched across his left arm, still glistening red from the cut, seeping blood and offering the first hot swelling of infection.

Outside in the real world, the black snow filled skies that were in view from the narrow, barred windows at ceiling level gave little comfort for the day ahead as a cast iron radiator bolted onto the cream, peeling paint of the wall on the left side of the room tried its best to keep the temperature above freezing. It seemed to be fighting a losing battle but grumbled on regardless.

Pointless looking signs and propaganda were posted sporadically across the other walls in the faint hope that they would paper over the cracks in the plaster and the patches of mould which offered further evidence to the dank conditions of the room.

It was set to be another day of attrition, trying to keep warm, attempting to avoid contact with the other patients who he couldn't understand anyway and more importantly, stopping the duty staff from giving him medication. Shivering, he grabbed a stinking, woollen blanket and pulled it around his shoulders, trying to escape the bite of a Russian winter, his breath already forming clouds as it rasped from his chapped lips and escaped from between his unkempt moustache and scruffy, filthy beard. Thirty-five years old and he looked and felt fifty-five.

Another wave of confusion hit as his brain ran away yet again allowing chaotic thoughts to crowd out his mind. Never before had he felt this way, with this strange psychotic thought pattern that refused to calm down or make any sense and he dealt with it in the only way he knew how. Grabbing a blue, hard plastic chair, he hurried past the ten single, gray metal beds to the back of the ward before sitting down. Pulling his feet away from the freezing floor before they could get any colder, he crouched under the blanket waiting for the confusion to wrap itself around his senses once more. The other nine patients watched as this daily ritual played out in front of them yet again, the Englishman left all alone in Moscow.

It had been four days since the local police had delivered him to one of the city's run-down mental health facilities and the daily struggles between him and the nursing staff had worn thin on both sides. He was tired and afraid of what was happening and what was planned, the staff were exhausted with the constant conflict in trying to administer medication. They had at least reached a mutual understanding whereby they would stop trying to inject him with antipsychotic medication and he would stop punching them and for the moment it was a cease fire.

Without the drugs in his system, he had started to remember small details like his name, nationality, even date of birth, but he couldn't remember why he was held in this hospital and why somewhere so secure. This was something he needed to work out with a clear head before he could start putting the bits of the puzzle together and planning what came next.

With a violent tug, the blanket was pulled from him and jolting back into the chair, he braced himself for the beating before dropping to the floor and curling up into a ball, hardening his stomach for the boots that would come flying in.

"Hello sir," a soft English voice dissected the madness. He lay motionless, eyes still closed.

"Hello, I'm Mark Dorsett from the British Embassy," the voice continued. The man opened his eyes and stared up at the smartly dressed figure bending over him. Wearing a large black overcoat, he looked every inch a banker, no more than thirty years old and thick set from his years of playing rugby for Bath before entering the world of diplomacy. He had a kind face which seemed to inspire trust.

"I need you to help me," he mumbled. A waft of stale, rancid breath forced Mark Dorsett's head back an inch.

“That’s why I’m here, someone reported an English man was being held here. I have had to virtually force my way in as it seems the authorities did not want me to see you. What’s your name?” Sitting up and hunching his bare shoulders, the man coughed, phlegm clinging to his beard.

“I can’t remember much of what’s happened, just a couple of things that I don’t want others to know just yet.”

“I would like the chance to be able to get you safely out of here so what can you share with me?” the embassy man persisted.

The man stood up wiping his beard with the back of his hand, inspecting the contents as he considered what to say. Mark was surprised, as facially the man looked haggard but standing at around five foot ten, he had an athletic physique, large arms, muscular chest and defined abdominals. A huge scar crossing through the middle of the six pack didn’t look like a wound which had been untreated, more of a surgical incision which had recently healed with the purpleness and raising of the scar still very visible. Contrary to his initial impression, this man was not a vagrant or someone down on their luck and even through the filth, he could see something was different about him.

As he stood, the staff stepped forward looking for guidance, anticipating more trouble but instead of violence, the man pushed his hands into his own grubby trousers and produced a round metal disc held inside a small filthy plastic bag. God knows where it had been hidden but the mess on the plastic indicated that it was probably somewhere that Mark didn’t want to be near.

“Start with this, it’s all I have at the moment,” the man instructed. The guards stepped forward in an attempt to intercept the object but Mark acted quicker. Taking it between his thumb and forefinger, he dropped it into his bag, closing the top quickly. Dashing into a small staff toilet, he hastily locked the door behind him, filling the sink with cold water before taking the plastic bag and dropping it gingerly into the basin in the hope that the substance on the outside of the bag would wash off. Shaking the contents out onto a shelf by the sink, he inspected them and found they were army dog tags, the man’s name printed on them. **Ernie Stocken.**

Scrubbing his hands with a slimy purple handwash, he placed the dog tags back into his diplomatic bag, discarding the old plastic bag in the peddle bin. He then pulled out a notepad with a list of names typed on a laminated sheet.

“Bingo,” he muttered to himself before replacing the notebook in the safety of his bag. He reentered the ward, this time to find the commander of the institution waiting, standing with crossed arms and full of impatience. He approached him directly with a look of determination on his face.

“Hello sir, Mark Dorsett from the British Embassy. I am taking this man with me; he is a British citizen on official business and will be kept in our care, unless there are any criminal charges pending?”

“There are no charges,” the commander confirmed.

“Then please arrange for his discharge into my custody.”

“It will be a pleasure Mr Dorsett, he has not been an easy patient.”

