

"Fast, fast, and unflinching—exactly what a thriller should be."  
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# MARK GREANEY

## THE GRAY MAN

"One of the best new thrillers"  
—James Keene, New York Times  
bestselling author of *The Godmother*







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The fight was on. The fact that Court didn't have a clue what they were fighting over was a nonissue. He did not waste a single brain cell pondering this turn of events.

Court Gentry was a killer of men.

These were men.

And that's all there was to it.

Markham got a shot off with his SIG Sauer handgun but missed high; his forty-caliber round pierced the aircraft's skin near the cargo hatch, sending pressurized air from the cabin. Gentry dove behind the cargo on the floor. As he did so he saw Markham and Barnes frantically unhooking the bench harnesses.

McVee was the only man on Gentry's left as the Gray Man crouched behind the pallet and faced the cockpit doors, thirty feet away. Dulin was up by the bulkhead wall near the doors, and the other three operators were ahead and to his right. Court rolled left, emerged from behind the pallet with his M raised, and fired a long burst at McVee. The man's goggled face slammed back against the wall, and his H&K dropped away from his fingertips.

The black-clad operator fell back on the bench, dead.

Gentry had killed him, and he had no idea why.

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THE GRAY MAN

MARK GREANEY



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*For Edward F. Greaney Jr.  
and Kathleen Cleghorn Greaney*

*Mom and Dad, I miss you both*

I would like to thank James Yeager and his brilliant cadre of trainers at Tactical Response Inc. in Camden, Tennessee, for getting me up to speed on rifles, pistols, immediate-action medical, and team tactics, and most especially for having the decency to put me out after setting me on fire. God bless you; America is a safer place because of all you and your students do. Now go lay down some hate.

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[MarkGreaneyBooks.com](http://MarkGreaneyBooks.com)

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# PROLOGUE

A flash of light in the distant morning sky captured the attention of the Land Rover's blood-soaked driver. Polarized Oakleys shielded his eyes from the brunt of the sun's rays; still, he squinted through his windshield's glare, desperate to identify the burning aircraft that now spun and hurtled toward earth, a smoldering comet's tail of black smoke left hanging above it.

It was a helicopter, a large Army Chinook, and horrific though the situation must have been for those on board, the driver of the Land Rover breathed a subdued sigh of relief. His extraction transport was to be a Russian-built KA-32T, crewed by Polish mercenaries and flown in from over the border into Turkey. The driver found the dying Chinook regrettable but preferable to a dying KA-32T.

He watched the chopper spin in its uncontrolled descent, staining the blue sky directly in front of him with burning fuel.

He turned the Land Rover hard to the right and accelerated eastward. The blood-soaked driver wanted to get as far away from here as fast as possible. As much as he wished there was something he could do for the Americans on board the Chinook, he knew their fate was out of his hands.

And he had his own problems. For five hours he'd raced across the flatlands of western Iraq, fleeing the dirty work he'd left behind, and now he was less than twenty minutes from his exfiltration. A shot-down chopper meant that in minutes this place would be crawling with armed fighters, defiling bodies, shooting assault rifles into the air, and jumping around like fucking morons.

It was a party the bloodstained driver would not mind missing, lest he himself become a party favor.

The Chinook sank off to his left and disappeared behind a brown ridge in the distance.

The driver fixed his eyes on the road ahead. *Not my problem*, he told himself. He was not trained to search and to rescue, he was not trained to give aid, and he certainly was not trained to negotiate for hostages.

He was trained to kill. He'd done so back over the border in Syria, and now it was time to get out of the kill zone.

As his Rover accelerated through the haze and dust at over one hundred kilometers an hour, he began a dialogue with himself. His inner voice wanted to turn back, to race to the Chinook's crash site to check for survivors. His outer voice, on the other hand, was more pragmatic.

"Keep moving, Gentry, just keep moving. Those dudes are fucked. Nothing you can do about it."

Gentry's spoken words were sensible, but his inner monologue just would not shut up.

---

# ONE

The first gunmen arriving at the crash site were not Al Qaeda and had nothing to do with the shoot-down. They were four local boys with old wooden-stocked Kalashnikovs who'd held a sloppy morning roadblock a hundred meters from where the chopper impacted with the city street. The boys pushed through the growing phalanx of onlookers, the shopkeepers and the street kids who dove for cover when the twin-rotor helicopter hurtled down among them, and the taxi drivers who swerved off the road to avoid the American craft. The four young gunmen approached the scene warily but without a shred of tactical skill. A loud snap from the raging fire, a single handgun round cooking off in the heat, sent them all to cover. After a moment's hesitation, their heads popped back up, they aimed their rifles, and then emptied their barking and bucking guns into the twisted metal machine.

A man in a blackened American military uniform crawled from the wreckage and received two dozen rounds from the boys' weapons. The soldier's struggle ceased as soon as the first bullets raked across his back.

Braver now after the adrenaline rush of killing a man in front of the crowd of shouting civilians, the boys broke cover and moved closer to the wreckage. They reloaded their rifles and raised them to shoot at the burning bodies of the flight crew in the cockpit. But before they could open fire, three vehicles raced up from behind: pickup trucks full of armed Arabian foreigners.

Al Qaeda.

The local kids wisely backed away from the aircraft, stood back with the civilians, and chanted a devotional to God as the masked men fanned out in the road around the wreckage.

The broken corpses of two more soldiers fell clear from the rear of the Chinook, and these were the first images of the scene caught by the three-man Al Jazeera camera crew that jumped from truck to truck.

---

Just under a mile away, Gentry pulled off the road, turned into a dry streambed, and forced the Land Rover as deep as possible into the tall brown river grasses. He climbed out of the truck and raced to the tailgate, swung a pack onto his back, and hefted a long camel-colored case by its carry handle.

As he moved away from the vehicle, he noticed the drying blood all over his loose-fitting local clothing for the first time. The blood was not his own, but there was no mystery to the stain.

He knew whose blood it was.

Thirty seconds later, he crested the little ridge by the streambed and crawled forward as quickly as possible while pushing his gear in front of him. When Gentry felt suitably invisible in the sand and reeds, he pulled a pair of binoculars from the pack and brought them to his eyes, centered on the

plume of black smoke rising in the distance.

---

His taut jaw muscles flexed.

The Chinook had come to rest on a street in the town of al Ba'aj, and already a mob had descended on the debris. Gentry's binoculars were not powerful enough to provide much detail, so he rolled on his side and unsnapped the camel-colored case.

Inside was a Barrett M107, a fifty-caliber rifle that fired shells half the size of beer bottles and dispatched the heavy bullets with a muzzle velocity of nearly nine football fields a second.

Gentry did not load the gun, only aimed the rifle at the crash site to use the powerful optics mounted to it. Through the sixteen-power glass he could see the fire, the pickup trucks, the unarmed civilians, and the armed gunmen.

Some were unmasked. Local thugs.

Others wore black masks or wrapped keffiyeh to cover their faces. This would be the Al Qaeda contingent. The foreign fucks. Here to kill Americans and collaborators and to take advantage of the instability in the region.

A glint of metal rose into the air and swung down. A sword hacking at a figure on the ground. Even through the powerful sniper scope Gentry could not tell if the prostrate man had been dead or alive when the blade slashed into him.

His jaw tightened again. Gentry was not an American soldier himself, never had been. But he was an American. And although he had neither responsibility for nor relationship with the U.S. military, he'd seen years of images on television of carnage just like that which was happening before him, and it both sickened and angered him to the very limits of his considerable self-control.

The men around the aircraft began to undulate as one. In the glare from the heat pouring out of the arid earth between his overwatch and the crash site, it took him a moment to grasp what was happening, but soon he recognized the inevitable outpouring of gleeful emotion from the butchers around the downed helicopter.

The bastards were dancing over the bodies.

Gentry unwrapped his finger from the trigger guard of the huge Barrett and let his fingertip stroll over the smooth trigger. His laser range finder told him the distance, and a small group of canvas tents between himself and the dance party flapped in the breeze and gave him an idea of the windage.

But he knew better than to fire the Barrett. If he charged the weapon and pulled the trigger, he would kill a couple of shitheads, yes, but the area would turn so hot in an instant with news of a sniper in the sector that every postpubescent male with a gun and a mobile phone would be on his ass before he made it to within five miles of his extraction. Gentry's exfiltration would be called off, and he would have to make his own way out of the kill zone.

No, Gentry told himself. A meager measure of pay-back would be righteous, but it would set off a bigger shit storm than he was prepared to deal with.

Gentry was not a gambler. He was a private assassin, a hired gun, a contract operator. He could frazzle a half dozen of these pricks as fast as he could lace his boots, but he knew such retribution would not be worth the cost.

He spat a mixture of saliva and sand on the ground in front of him and turned to put the huge Barrel back in its case.

---

The camera crew from Al Jazeera had been smuggled over the border from Syria a week earlier with the sole purpose of chronicling an Al Qaeda victory in northern Iraq. The videographer, the audio technician, and the reporter/producer had been moved along an AQ route, had slept in AQ safe houses alongside the AQ cell, and they'd filmed the launch of the missile, the impact with the Chinook, and the resulting fireball in the sky.

Now they recorded the ritualistic decapitation of an already dead American soldier. A middle-aged man with handwritten name tape affixed to his body armor that read, "Phillips—Mississippi National Guard." Not one of the camera crew spoke English, but they all agreed they had clearly just recorded the destruction of an elite unit of CIA commandos.

The customary praise of Allah began with the dancing of the fighters and the firing of the weapons into the air. Although the AQ cell numbered only sixteen, there were over thirty armed men now in step with one another in front of the smoldering metal hulk in the street. The videographer focused his lens on a moqtar, a local chieftain, dancing in the center of the festivities. Framing him perfectly in front of the wreckage, his flowing white dishdasha contrasting magnificently with the black smoke billowing up behind him. The moqtar bounced on one foot over the decapitated American, his right hand above him swinging a bloody scimitar into the air.

This was the money shot. The videographer smiled and did his best to remain professional, careful to not follow along with the rhythm and dance in celebration of the majesty of Allah to which he and his camera now bore witness.

The moqtar shouted into the air with the rest. "Al lahu Akhbar!" *God is greater!* He hopped in euphoria with the masked foreigners, his thick facial hair opened to reveal a toothy smile as he looked down at the burnt and bloody piece of dead American meat lying in the street below him.

The crew from Al Jazeera shouted in ecstasy as well. And the videographer filmed it all with a steady hand.

He was a pro; his subject remained centered, his camera did not tremble or flinch.

Not until the moment when the moqtar's head snapped to the side, burst open like a pressed grape and sinew, blood, and bone spewed violently in all directions.

*Then* the camera flinched.

---

Gentry just couldn't help himself.

He fired round after round at the armed men in the crowd, and all the while he cussed aloud at h



lack of discipline, because he knew he was throwing his own timetable, his entire operation out the window. ~~Not that he could hear his own curses. Even with his earplugs, the report of the Barrett was deafening as he sent huge projectiles downrange, one after another, the blowback from the rifle muzzle break propelling sand and debris from the ground around him up and into his face and arms.~~

As he paused to snap a second heavy magazine into the rifle, he took stock of his situation. From a tradecraft perspective, this was the single dumbest move he could have made, virtually shouting to the insurgents around him that their mortal enemy was here in their midst.

But damn if it did not *feel* like the right thing to do. He resecured the big rifle in the crook of his shoulder, already throbbing from the recoil, sighted on the downed chopper site, and resumed his righteous pay-back. Through the big scope he saw body parts spin through the air as another huge bullet found the midsection of a masked gunman.

This was simple revenge, nothing more. Gentry knew his actions altered little in the scope of things apart from changing a few sons of bitches from solids into liquids. His body continued firing into the now-scattering murderers, but his mind was already worrying about his immediate future. He wouldn't even try for the LZ now. Another chopper in the area would be a target too good for the angry AQ survivors to ignore. No, Gentry decided, he would go to ground: find a drainage culvert or little wadi, cover himself in dirt and debris, lie all day in the heat, and ignore hunger and bug bites and his need to piss.

It was going to suck.

Still, he reasoned as he slammed the third and final magazine into the smoking rifle, his poor decision did serve some benefit. A half dozen dead shitheads *are*, after all, a half dozen dead shitheads.

---

## TWO

Four minutes after the sniper's last volley, one of the Al Qaeda survivors warily leaned his head out from the doorway of the tire repair shop where he had taken cover. After a few moments, each second giving him increased confidence that his head would remain affixed to his neck, the thirty-six-year-old Yemeni stepped fully into the street. Soon he was followed by others and stood with his compatriots around the carnage. He counted seven dead, made this tabulation by determining the number of lower appendages lying twisted in the bloody muck and dividing by two, because there were so few identifiable heads and trunks remaining on the corpses.

Five of the dead were his AQ brethren, including the senior man in the cell and his top lieutenant. Two others were locals.

The Chinook continued to smolder off to his left. He walked towards it, passing men hiding behind cars and garbage cans, their pupils dilated from shock. One local had lost control of his bowels in terror; now he lay soiled and writhing on the pavement like a madman.

"Get up, fool!" shouted the masked Yemeni. He kicked the man in the side and continued on to the helicopter. Four more of his colleagues were behind one of their pickup trucks, standing with the Al Jazeera film crew. The videographer was smoking with a hand that trembled as if from advanced-stage Parkinson's. His camera hung down at his side.

"Get everyone alive into the trucks. We'll find the sniper." He looked out to the expanse of field, dry hillocks, and roadways off to the south. A dust cloud hung over a rise nearly a mile away.

"There!" The Yemeni pointed.

"We . . . we are going out there?" asked the Al Jazeera audio technician.

"Inshallah." If Allah wills it.

Just then a local boy called out to the AQ contingent, asking them to come and look. The boy had taken cover in a tea stand, not fifteen meters from the crumpled nose cone of the chopper. The Yemeni and two of his men stepped over a bloody torso held together only by a torn black tunic. This had been the Jordanian, their leader. There was a splatter path of blood from where he'd fallen to the outside walls and window of the tea stand, all but repainting the establishment in crimson.

"What is it, boy?" shouted the Yemeni in an angry rush.

The kid spoke through gasps as he hyperventilated. Still, he answered, "I found something."

The Yemeni and his two men followed the boy into the little café, stepped through the blood, looked around a fallen table and back behind the counter. There, on the floor with his back to the wall, sat a young American soldier. His eyes were open and blinking rapidly. Cradled in his arms was a second infidel. This man was black and appeared either unconscious or dead. There were no weapons apparent.

The Yemeni smiled and patted the boy on the shoulder. He turned and shouted to those outside. "Bring the truck!"

A dozen minutes later the three AQ pickups split at a crossroads. Nine men headed to the south in two trucks. They worked their mobile phones for local help to assist them as they went to scour the landscape for the lone sniper. The Yemeni and two other AQ drove the two wounded American prisoners towards to a safe house in nearby Hatra. There the Yemeni would call his leadership to see how best to exploit his newfound bounty.

The Yemeni was behind the wheel, a young Syrian rode in the passenger seat, and an Egyptian guarded the near-catatonic soldier and his dying partner in the bed of the truck.

---

Twenty-year-old Ricky Bayliss had recovered some from the shock of the crash. He knew this because the dull throbbing in his broken shin bone had turned into molten-hot jolts of pain. He looked down at his leg and could see only torn and scorched BDU pants and a boot that hung obscenely off to the right. Beyond this boot lay the other soldier. Bayliss didn't know the black GI, but his name tag identified him as Cleveland. Cleveland was unconscious. Bayliss would have presumed him dead except his chest heaved a bit under his body armor. In a moment of instinct and adrenaline, Ricky had dragged the man free of the wreck as he crawled into a shop next to the crash, only to be discovered by wide-eyed Iraqi kids a minute later.

He thought for a moment about his friends who had died in the Chinook and felt a sadness muted by disbelief. The sadness dissipated quickly as he looked up at the man sitting above him in the truck bed. Ricky's dead friends were the lucky bastards. *He* was the unfortunate one. He and Cleveland, the dude ever woke up, were going to get their goddamn heads chopped off on TV.

The terrorist looked down at Bayliss and put his tennis shoe on the young man's shattered leg. He pressed down slowly with a wild grin that exposed teeth broken like fangs.

Ricky screamed.

---

The truck sped down the road, crested a rise just outside of al Ba'aj, and then quickly slowed before a roadblock at the edge of town, a standard local insurgency setup. A heavy chain wrapped to two posts hung low across the dusty pavement. Two militiamen were visible. One sat lazily on a plastic chair with his head leaning back against the wall of a grammar school's playground. The other stood by one end of the chain, next to his resting partner. A Kalashnikov hung over his back, muzzle down, and there was a plate of hummus and flatbread in his hands, food hanging off his beard. An old goat herder urged his pitiful flock along the sidewalk on the far side of the roadblock.

The Al Qaeda man cursed the weak resolve of the insurgency here in northwestern Iraq. Two lazy men were all they could muster for a checkpoint? With such idiocy the Sunnis might as well just hand over control to the Kurds and the Yejezi.

The Yemeni slowed his truck, rolled down the window, and shouted to the standing Iraqi, "Ope

this gate, fool! There is a sniper to the south!”

The militiaman put down his lunch. He walked purposefully towards the pickup truck in the middle of the road. He put a hand up to his ear as if he did not hear the Yemeni’s shout.

“Open the gate, or I will—”

The Yemeni’s head swiveled away from the insurgent nearing his truck and to the one seated against the wall. The seated man’s head had slumped over to the side, and it hung there. An instant later, the body rolled forward and fell out of the chair and onto the ground. It was clear the militiaman was dead, his neck snapped at a lower cervical vertebra.

The gunman in the back of the truck noticed this as well. He stood quickly in the bed, sensing threat but confused by the situation. Like his new leader in the driver’s seat, he looked back to the local man in the road.

The bearded militiaman approaching the truck raised his right arm in front of him. A black pistol appeared from the sleeve of his flowing robe.

Two quick shots, not a moment’s hesitation between them, dropped the Egyptian in the truck bed.

---

Bayliss lay on his back, looking up at the scorching noontime sun. He felt the vehicle slow and stop. He heard the shouting from the driver, the impossibly rapid gunshots, and watched the masked man above him fall straight down dead.

He heard another volley of pistol rounds cracking around him, heard glass shatter, a brief cry in Arabic, and then all was still.

Ricky thrashed and shrieked, frantic to get the bloody corpse off of him. His struggle ended when the dead terrorist was lifted away, out of the truck bed, and dumped onto the street. A bearded man dressed in a gray dishdasha grabbed Ricky by his body armor and pulled him up and into a seated position.

The brutal sun blurred Bayliss’s view of the stranger’s face.

“Can you walk?”

Ricky thought it some sort of shock-induced vision. The man had spoken English with an American accent. The stranger repeated himself in a shout. “Hey! Kid! You with me? Can you walk?”

Slowly Bayliss spoke back to the vision. “My . . . my leg’s broken, and this dude is hurt bad.”

The stranger examined Ricky’s injured leg and diagnosed, “Tib-fib fracture. You’ll live.” Then he put his hand on the unconscious man’s neck and delivered a grim prognosis. “Not a chance.”

He looked around quickly. Still, the young Mississippi pian could not see the man’s face.

The stranger said, “Leave him back here. We’ll do what we can for him, but I need you to get up and move to the passenger seat. Wrap this around your face.”

The bearded man pulled the keffiyeh head wrap from the neck of the dead terrorist and handed it

Bayliss.

---

“I can’t walk on this leg—”

“Suck it up. We’ve got to go. I’ll grab my gear. Move!” The stranger turned and ran down into the shaded alleyway. Bayliss dropped his Kevlar helmet in the cab, wrapped the headdress into place, climbed out of the bed and onto his good leg. Excruciating pain jolted from his right shin to his brain. The street was filling with civilians of all ages, keeping their distance, watching as if an audience to a violent play.

Bayliss hopped to the passenger door, opened it, and a masked Arab in a black dress shirt fell off the truck into the street. There was a single bullet wound above his left eye. A second terrorist lay slumped over the steering wheel. Bloody foam dripped from his lips with his soft wheezes. Ricky had just shut his door when the American stranger opened the driver’s side, pulled the man out, and let him drop to the asphalt. He drew his pistol again and, without so much as a glance, fired one round into the man in the street. He then turned his attention to the pickup, tossed in a brown gear bag, an AK-47, and an M16 rifle. He climbed behind the wheel, and the truck lurched forward and over the lowered chain of the roadblock.

Ricky spoke softly, his brain still trying to catch up with the action around him. “We’ve got to go back. There might be others alive.”

“There aren’t. You’re it.”

“How do you know?”

“I know.”

Ricky hesitated, then said, “Because you were with the sniper team that fragged those dudes at the crash site?”

“Maybe.”

For nearly a minute they drove in silence. Bayliss looked ahead through the windshield at the mountains, then down at his shaking hands. Soon the young soldier turned his attention to the driver.

Immediately the stranger barked, “Don’t look at my face.”

Bayliss obeyed, turning back to the road ahead. He asked, “You’re American?”

“That’s right.”

“Special Forces?”

“No.”

“Navy? You’re a SEAL?”

“No.”

“Force Recon?”

“Nope.”

“I get it. You’re like in the CIA or something.”

“No.”

Bayliss started to look back to the bearded man but caught himself. He asked, "Then what?"

"Just passing through."

"Just passing through? Are you fucking kidding?"

"No more questions."

They drove a full kilometer before Ricky asked, "What's the plan?"

"No plan."

"You don't have a plan? Then what are we doing? Where are we going?"

"I *had* a plan, but bringing you along wasn't part of it, so don't start bitching about me making the shit up as I go."

Bayliss was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "Roger that. Plans are overrated."

After another minute of driving, Bayliss snuck a glance to the speedometer and saw they were moving over the bad gravel road at nearly sixty miles an hour.

The private asked, "You got any morphine in your bag? My leg is hurtin' bad."

"Sorry, kid. I need you alert. You're going to have to drive."

"Drive?"

"When we get into the hills, we'll pull over. I'll get out, and you two will go on alone."

"What about you? We've got an FOB in Tal Afar. It's where we were heading when we were hit. We can go there." The forward operating base would be spartan and isolated, but it would be well equipped for holding off attackers and a hell of a lot more secure than a pickup truck on an open road.

"*You* can. I can't."

"Why not?"

"Long story. No questions, soldier. Remember?"

"Bro, what are you worried about? They'd give you a medal or some shit for this."

"They'd give me some shit."

They entered the foothills of the Sinjar Mountains minutes later. The stranger pulled the pickup over to the side of the road and into a dusty grove of date palms. He climbed out, pulled the M4 and his bag with him, and then helped the soldier into place behind the wheel. Bayliss grunted and groaned with pain.

Next the stranger checked on the soldier in the truck bed.

"Dead." He said it without emotion. Hurriedly he removed Cleveland's Interceptor body armor and uniform and left him in the cab of the truck in his brown boxers and T-shirt. Bayliss bristled at the treatment of the dead soldier but said nothing. This man, this . . . whatever the hell he was, survived out here in bandit country through expediency, not sentiment.

The stranger threw the gear on the ground next to the trunk of a date palm. He said, "You're gonna have to use your left leg for the brake and the gas."

“Hooah, sir.”

---

“Your FOB is due north, fifteen klicks. Keep that AK in your lap, mags next to you. Stay low-pro you can.”

“What’s low-pro?”

“Low profile. Don’t speed, don’t stand out, keep that keffiyeh over your face.”

“Roger that.”

“But if you can’t avoid contact, shoot at anything you don’t like, you got it? Get your mind around that, kid. You’re gonna have to get nasty to survive the next half hour.”

“Yes, sir. What about you?”

“I’m already nasty.”

Private Ricky Bayliss winced along with the drum-beat of pain in his leg. He looked ahead, not the man on his left. “Whoever you are . . . thanks.”

“Thank me by getting the fuck home and forgetting my face.”

“Roger that.” He shook his head and grunted. “Just passing through.”

Bayliss left the grove and pulled back onto the road. He looked in the rearview mirror for a last glimpse of the stranger, but the heat’s haze and the dust kicked up by the truck’s tires obstructed the view behind.

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## THREE

On London's Bayswater Road, a six-story commercial building overlooks the bucolic anomaly in the center of the city that is Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens. Comprising a large suite on the top floor of the white building are the offices of Cheltenham Security Services, a private firm that contracts executive protection officers, facility guard personnel, and strategic intelligence services for British and other western European corporations working abroad. CSS was conceived, founded, and run on a daily basis by a sixty-eight-year-old Englishman named Sir Donald Fitzroy.

Fitzroy had spent the early part of Wednesday hard at work, but now he forced himself to push the task out of his mind. He took a moment to clear his thoughts, drummed his corpulent fingers on his ornate partners desk. He did not have time for the man waiting politely outside with his secretary—there was a pressing matter that required his complete focus—but he could hardly turn his visitor away. Fitzroy's crisis of the moment would just have to wait.

The young man had called an hour before and told Sir Donald's secretary he needed to speak with Mr. Fitzroy about a most urgent matter. Such calls were a regular occurrence at the office of CSS. What was irregular about this call, and the reason Fitzroy could hardly ask the emphatic young man to return another day, was the fact his visitor was in the employ of LaurentGroup, a mammoth French conglomerate that ran shipping, trucking, engineering, and port facilities for the oil, gas, and mineral industries throughout Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America. They were Fitzroy's largest customer and for this reason alone he would not send the man off with apologies, no matter what other matters were pressed.

Fitzroy's firm ran site security at LaurentGroup's corporate offices in Belgium, the Netherlands, and the UK, but as large as was Fitzroy's contract with Laurent as compared to CSS's other corporate accounts, Sir Donald knew it was no more than a drop in the bucket as far as the mammoth corporation's total annual security budget. It was well known in protection circles that LaurentGroup ran their own security departments in a decentralized fashion, hiring locals to do most of the heavy lifting in the eighty-odd nations where the corporation owned property. This might mean something as innocuous as vetting secretaries at an office in Kuala Lumpur, but it also included the nefarious, like having a recalcitrant dockworker's legs broken in Bombay, or a problematic union rally broken up in Gdansk.

And surely, from time to time, executives at Laurent's Paris home office required a problem to go away in a more permanent fashion, and Fitzroy knew they had men on call for that, as well.

There was a dirty underbelly to most multinational corporations that worked in regions of the world with more thugs than cops, with more hungry people who wanted to work than educated people who wanted to organize and bring about reform. Yes, most MNCs used methods that would never make the top list of the chairmen's briefing or a budget line in the annual financial report, but LaurentGroup was known as an especially heavy-handed company when it came to third-world assets and resources.

And this did not hurt the stock price at all.

Donald Fitzroy forced his worry about the other affair from his head, thumbed the intercom button



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