

The PuzzleMaker

By

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Chapter 1

1 Down. A complicated bemusement

London, Wednesday, 11 October. 12:15 AM

The expansive Sunday Times editorial office was, as usual, at this time of day a hive of activity. Journalists, researchers, and editors rushed to make their early evening deadline in the dry poorly regulated air-conditioned air. At least it was not filled with smoke as it used to be when he first started thirty years ago. However, the blue nicotine hue that hung over most of the cigarette smoking staff was now replaced by wafts of men's aftershave competing against female French perfume, which at times seemed like all out chemical warfare. Maybe smoke was a healthier option, he thought, as he made his way across the floor.

These days George did not recognise many of the younger faces; few were employed at the newspaper as long as he.

A young female intern, early twenties, with blonde short cropped hair, stared at him as he silently walked past her desk. "Who's that?" She asked her colleague, in a strong Cockney accent.

Ten years her senior and sitting opposite, fashion editor Beverley Grange glanced up at the elderly man, early sixties, slowly weaving his way across the floor, avoiding eye any contact with other staff. His non-distinctive, slightly ill-fitting dark brown pinstriped suit, with an overcoat folded over his left arm, and a full-length black gentlemen's brolly hanging from his wrist, looked very much from another era.

"Oh," Beverley replied, as she peered over her reading glasses at the man headed for the opposite corner of the immense office. "That's George," she said, with little interest, then went back to inspect the copy in front of her.

The young female nodded and tapped her lips with her blue bic pen. "I've seen him before. "He seems to float in and out without a word to anyone. Looks a bit of a nutter. What does he do?"

"Compiles the crossword puzzles."

"Really? You mean those cryptic puzzles and all that sort of thing? He does them? Wow. My dad used to crack his brain on them every Sunday afternoon. Drove my mom mad, that did. Dead hard they are. I could never solve them."

"Me neither." Beverley said, dropping her pen and abandoning her text. She removed her reading glasses and glanced around the room. "In fact I don't think anyone in the office has ever completed them twice in a row. He always comes up brain crushers."

"Brain crushers you mean. So he *is* a nutter," she sneered.

No one knew how George managed to avoid the compulsory editorial meetings, annual Christmas parties, or receptions of expired, retired, or job changing colleagues, but he did. The tedium of shaking hands and explaining his work to someone new, or listening to drunken co-workers talking about their latest exploits with bad breath bathed in a vapour of alcohol and vomit, was all too much for him to bear. After his first years of employment he developed an art of avoiding nearly all forms of contact with anyone in the office not connected to his work.

There was only one person of course, and that was enough.

Unmindful to the general noise of people talking, chatting on phones and clicking away on their computers, he strolled unobtrusively towards his own tiny room in the corner.

A treasured luxury in an age of desk sharing and cutbacks, he had successfully negotiated an irreversible clause into his contract when he first joined the newspaper; a guaranteed personal private office. However, the actual metered space had significantly diminished over the years. Now there was just enough room for a small desk and a chair, and no more. During the last downsizing his own hat and coat stand was made redundant. The tall late Victorian dark brown mahogany stand now resided in his house just inside the front door, next to the near identical stand he inherited from his parents. After inserting the key and turning the lock, George disappeared into his office.

The moment his door closed, a woman in her early fifties came into action. Dressed in a light grey three-piece matching outfit, and sitting approximately fifteen metres to the right

of Georges office, she opened a locked drawer under her desk. A small box filled with envelopes was removed. All were cut cleanly open, ready for inspection, together with folded emails lodged between.

As always, she knocked gently on the door and waited for the call to enter.

“Come in,” George said, his voice scarcely audible.

Holding the box firmly, she opened the door just enough to step in.

“Good afternoon George,” she said, cheerfully. “We've got a healthy batch this week. It should keep you busy for a while.”

George gave a short but shy smile. For less than a second he made eye contact as she placed the box in the middle of his small century-old, patina rich, worn desk.

“I'll drop around later to see if you've picked any winners. Quite a few this week, I'm sure.”

“Thank you Matilda,” his soft voice answered. He stared down at the overflowing box in front of him.

She lingered, as if wanting to ask something. George never noticed, his mind was elsewhere. He pulled the box of letters and emails towards him.

“Right,” she said, with an air of finality, “I'll leave you to it.” Matilda closed the door and returned to her desk.

George took a moment to stare at the orderly bunch. He ran his hand along the edge of the letters and emails to get an idea of the amount. At least two hundred, he thought. Finding a winner would be quick. The cryptic crossword last week was one of the easiest he had published in months, possibly years.

He had to give them hope.

Matilda could have picked out a winner for him but that was not the way things worked in his tiny department governed by time and tradition. George was head of his own one-man operation devising the cryptic and general crossword puzzles that appeared in the newspaper every day of the week. Each would normally take about thirty minutes to work out, except Sunday. The cryptic crossword puzzle for the Sunday Times was meant to be difficult. If it did not crack brains its reputation would flounder. Created by his predecessors in the early part of the 20th century, standards were set, and had to be held up, no matter what.

He reached into the box and took out a handful of letters and emails. Matilda had sorted them in the usual manner. The first to arrive were at the front and last at the rear. His sense of pride, that everything was fair and square for those who took the time and effort to solve puzzle was utmost paramount.

The prize – a rolled gold fountain pen worth about two hundred pounds. Very generous, he thought. Although he could remember the day when printing the winners name in the newspaper was more than enough accolade.

As usual, according to his instructions, the cut-out puzzle solution from the newspaper remained inside the envelope, concealed. He knew of secretaries and assistant editors in other newspapers who removed the solved puzzle and pinned it to the outer envelope for the editor to check, all for convenience. To George that felt like a violation. After years of working in intelligence during the cold war he had a strong compulsion for privacy and confidentiality. Answers to even a crossword puzzle should not be exposed with a paperclip for all to see. Matilda had also strict instructions to keep the box in the small locked drawer under her desk, which she dutifully did.

He could trust Matilda.

Within ten minutes he found a winner and was in the process of writing down the name and address when his telephone rang.

"Hello?" He answered, then recognised the caller at the other end. "Ahh Benton old friend," he said, in a mildly uplifting voice. "How are you? Haven't they pensioned you off yet?"

"Oh no, I'm still here," Benton replied, "but in general I spend most of my time in the garden, except for the last couple of weeks, it's been a trifle hectic."

"Well at least you're happy I'm sure. So, what is the honour of your call."

"I have a small job to do and I'd like to use your services, if you don't mind, that is?"

"Of course, you never stop working for Queen and country do you."

"Or retire," Benton replied. They both chuckled.

"I'd be happy to do a placement for you. When?"

"If it could go out next Sunday, then that would be wonderful."

George glanced up at the mundane calendar pinned to the grey wall next to his desk.

"You will have to be quick. The deadline is still Friday as usual."

"I was going to bring them around myself but I could give them to you right now, if that's okay with you?"

"Yes of course. I'll be happy to do that for you."

George wrote down the words Benton dictated. "Very good. I've got that. I should be able to think of a question that will match. Anything else?"

"How about dinner sometime soon?"

"Dinner? Now that would be nice, it's been a while."

"Not this week, too busy. Let me give you a call when the time is right."

"That's fine Benton, I'll speak to you soon."

George looked down at the words on the note pad. From his desk drawer he removed a separate folder containing special blank crossword templates for the Sunday edition. He checked the calendar pinned to the wall to see which number of the week it was, then pulled out the corresponding template. Benton had an exact copy.

2 Down: The sixty-four thousand dollar question

Three hours later George opened the gate to the small garden of his early twentieth century terraced house in the quiet Wimbledon suburb. The leaves on the few shrubs had turned yellow and fallen. An autumn chill hung in the air. Time to sweep the path and remove the dead leaves tomorrow, and that would be enough gardening until spring. From his jacket pocket he took a small bunch of keys and inserted the front door key into the Yale lock he had known his entire life.

Inside the darkened hallway, a ray of autumn sunlight shone through the blue, red and yellow arched stained-glass windows onto the rustic brown and white diamond shaped floor tiles that carried on through to the kitchen at the back. A few small paintings with unassuming scenes of the English countryside hung randomly on both walls left and right. Above them, sporadically decorated the remaining free space, small Japanese puzzle boxes of various sizes, resting on little dark brown wooden ledges.

George placed his broly in the mahogany hat and coat stand that had previously resided in his office. Next to it stood his parents near identical stand. A gentlemen's broly and a woman's umbrella rested upright in the umbrella well, as they had done for the last twenty-five years, since their death.

Carefully, he hung his dark tweed overcoat on his own stand then headed for his very private comfort zone.

Darker than the hallway, the front sitting room curtains were always drawn shut. The air greeted him with the soft sweet smell of wood with a hint of Pledge furniture polish. Nearly all visitors who came to the house were brought into the dining room at the rear. His front sitting room was special. No more than five people had entered here within the last twenty years.

In the opposite corner next to the dated cream and dark brown tiled fireplace, he poured a Drambuie from a small drinks cabinet, and sat down in a comfortable and worn dark leather armchair. Many years ago it was turned towards the fireplace and governed by his father. Now it faced out into the room, the most ideal position for concentration, and where he had the best view. After taking a sip he placed the whiskey glass to one side and let his eyes fall on to a small box that lay on the rosewood side table next to the armchair. Unlike the petite hand sized boxes in the hallway, this was twice as large.

George, concentrating, took it in his hands, and turned it over. It felt smooth, old, silk like, with fine thin lines carved into the wood which gave the impression of little drawers.

He raised it to eye-level and studied it closely. From the moment he left his house this morning to go to his office, this box was the only thing that had occupied his mind. Benton's telephone call had made him forget about it for a short moment, but now, feeling refreshed and energised, he was once again totally engrossed by his most recent puzzle. The person from whom he bought it claimed it was made for a large doll's house and represented a cabinet for one of the rooms. He knew better, but did not say. To George, it had puzzle written all over it.

Carefully, he placed his fingers on each side of the box and pressed. A small drawer opened; empty. This he had already done a number of times before, but knew there had to be more to it. Many of the lines were just that, lines, but he had his doubts. George turned the box over and tried to take a closer look in the drawer, then had an idea.

He placed his fingers in the open slot, then moved his hand from left to right, there was nothing. Feeling slightly defeated yet still hopeful, he gently shoved his hand in deeper. The fleeting idea of getting stuck worried him, and as the thought developed, the notion of damaging the box began to seriously play on his mind. Carefully rooting, as deep as he dared, he felt something, a lever.

This was new.

Never had he come across anything like this before. A brief smile crept through his concentration to the corners of his mouth, and a tempered rush of excitement heightened his senses; this was the thrill. Gently, not wanting to damage what he felt, he pushed against it. A second drawer, directly beneath the first, sprung open.

It was impossible to see if it contained anything because the first open drawer blocked the view. When he attempted to close the top drawer, the bottom began to close in unison. George stopped to concentrate. He tried to pull the bottom draw out completely, it didn't move. He pushed the bottom drawer back in, and it clicked into place. Once again he inserted his fingers into the slot, pushed the lever, and the bottom drawer sprung out a second time. Leaning back in the armchair he took another sip of Drambuie. For the next ten minutes he stared at the box in near absolute silence. The only sound in the room was the faint ticking of the early thirties mantelpiece clock on top of the fireplace. The solution was somewhere, but where?

George shifted in his armchair, then sat upright, alert. He turned the box around whereby the drawers faced outward, and ran his fingers over the smooth wood at each end. Unnoticed before, he felt two dull points on each side. Both slightly protruding, no more than a half a millimetre, like the smoothest bump, and hardly detectable. Shoddy workmanship or water damage affecting the wood to expand ever so slightly could be an explanation, but George knew better. A box so expertly crafted as this would have no craftsman flaws, and water damage could not work so precisely on either side and nowhere else. There had to be more.

He had a thought.

Turning the box around, he placed each index finger over the bumps and pressed hard. Using both thumbs, he pushed against the top drawer; it slid in with a gentle smooth glide. The bottom drawer finally remained open. Finally, success.

To his surprise, a small cream coloured parchment that looked like silk, lay rolled up in the compartment. It smelled of peony, a Chinese flower normally associated by wealth and aristocracy in ancient times. He smiled briefly, then carefully removed it. It was covered with small Chinese characters. George reached for the old seventies black telephone next to him and punched in a number.

“Hello Benton? Yes it's me, George. I found something you might be interested in. A Chinese silk parchment, eleventh century I think. At least the box is I think, the parchment could be later. I thought you might want to have a crack unravelling the writing on it.”

“Really? It sounds like a piece of Chih. Expensive in those times. Where did you get it.”

“A little present I discovered in a little puzzle box I acquired recently, and it looks authentic.”

Benton sounded excited. “That's very kind of you.”

“I'll take it with me when I see you next time.”

“Did the work for Sunday go okay?”

“Yes, it's in.”

“Wonderful. Thank you very much George. Speak to you soon.”

George leaned back in his armchair and took another small sip of Drambuie. He acquired the box about a month ago for more money than he wished to part with. Now that it turned out to be an authentic ancient Chinese puzzle box with a hidden parchment its worth had increased astronomically.

Every day since the purchase it had occupied his mind. The beauty of the seemingly simple box fascinated him. He could not help but wonder about its secrets. The contents were indeed interesting, but to George the mystery of the box itself was the real prize. Rarely had he seen such an unpretentious work, yet so complicated. Other than the few lines, there were no markings on the outside whatsoever. It resembled a block of wood, but too beautiful and well-crafted to be *just* a block of wood.

Made of sandalwood, it had a beautiful dark red-brown colour with nothing elaborate to expose its origin or secrets; a rarity. Most puzzle boxes he found over his many years of collecting were heavily lacquered, or had ebony inlays or ivory set into the wood for decoration. At first he did not believe the box was Chinese until he found a small faint Chinese symbol on the underside. He thought it was a dent or small scratch. After close inspection under a strong light and loop he realised it was a symbol from the Song dynasty in the eleventh century. Everything about the puzzle box was a mystery, which made it all the more interesting. Boxes like these did not really exist before the nineteenth-century. Was the parchment original? What did it mean? Benton should be able to decipher the ancient symbols, it was after all, amongst other talents, his hobby. Then the puzzle would be partially solved. He was not too sure he could ever get to the bottom of it, time had buried

many secrets here. Selling it on could be very beneficiary. Especially now that anything old and Chinese were selling well at the prestigious auction houses. It could even secure him a very nice pension for the next thirty years. But would he sell it? Never.

Feeling relieved and proud of his little conquest, he took another sip and looked up at the walls of his small living room.

Chinese and Japanese puzzles and boxes in all shapes and sizes rested on their individual handmade shelves, filling just about every nook and cranny. Only a fraction of his collection, he began when he was about ten years of age. His uncle, who worked with the Americans after the surrender of the Japanese after World War II, gave him a puzzle box he picked up in Tokyo as a gift when he realised his nephews passion for puzzles as a young boy. The collection grew until it filled every inch of his bedroom before his father allowed him to extend it into the garage in his late teens. It was not long before he began to construct his own little puzzles and intricate boxes and the wooden shelves they stood on. After his parents died he gradually filled every room in the house with his little treasures, as he called them. Each with its own private pedestal, the beauty of it fascinated him. It was probably also the reason why he never married. No girl of interest back in his youthful years never shared his fascination. Only his parents were his true fans, but they were long dead. These days he isolated himself from all but one or two friends like Benton who seemed to understand his mind, and accept his own peculiar interests.

3 Down: Another word for superannuated.

Chapter 2

4 Down: Was once ruled by a man but not a man

Belgrade, Tuesday, 17 October. 1:30 AM

No better time to work. At least few people would notice him as he made his way through the dark streets on foot. The ones who were aware of his presence were generally wary of meeting others on these quiet streets. Muggers and sex crazed maniacs had the

upper hand in this area of Belgrade after dark. He could have been one, it was a very thin line to cross, but his particular line of work had its own rewards, cash, and enough of it.

He crossed the street, casually, not drawing attention to himself in his dark grey hooded tracksuit top, decked with a heavy dark green old army jacket. Hood up, he looked like a regular teenager of the era. Hitting thirty, he had the walk and motions of a youth, but that was where it ended. The old tracksuit had no identifiable stripes or logo markings. His black trainers were also not easily identifiable, a thick black marker had taken care of the familiar trademark stripes.

It was not as cold as it usually was at this time of year, the temperature was around 14°C. The fine polyurethane gloves he wore were not because of the weather.

Coming up to the traffic lights he did not wait for the little green man to appear. The only cars driving around were far off in the distance. They knew to stay out of this area.

Just another two blocks, a ten minute walk, and he would be there. In the distance he heard the wrinkle of a bottle rolling on concrete up ahead. In the badly lit street, two legs stuck out from a doorway. A drunk. Since the end of the Balkan Civil War in the nineties many old soldiers had traded their guns for drink, just like his father. Sad, but what else was there to live for. Anyone over fifty had little chance of getting work. Unemployment benefits were near non-existent. Instead of a weekly kilo of potatoes and some meat many used the allowance to buy Rakia to forget the misery. Alcoholism had never been so bad, and he didn't help prevent it either.

Now a block closer he saw the tall dark industrial building that housed the largest printing press in the country. Memories immediately came to mind from when he worked there as a teenager during the summer holidays. His father, who always said he worked for the president but never explained exactly what, got him the job of cleaning the thick black grind mixture of oil and ink off the machines, and other menial cleaning jobs.

None of the managers ever spoke to him, but always greeted him with a polite smile and nod as they passed him on the work floor. At the time he never realised why none of his fellow workers, especially boys his age, got the same gentle treatment, now he did.

Little had changed in and around the building since then, so he suspected few of the habits on the factory floor would be all that different from when he worked there fourteen years ago. The old bent and rusted wire fence that once surrounded it had been replaced with one sturdier, but that could never stop him getting into the grounds. His best way into

the building itself would be through the emergency exit door on the left. Normally it could not be opened from the outside; smokers had long fixed that problem. The locking mechanism had been adjusted so they could go out for a cigarette break and not worry about being locked out.

In the distance a police car appeared. It was not the moment to be stopped and asked for ID papers or worse still, searched. He ducked into a darkened doorway and waited for them to pass.

A few minutes later he stood at the fence and looked around for any sign of movement. Nothing. Usually the only sound normally heard at this time of night was from the printing press inside. Now there was silence. He turned to take another look around to check for anyone watching, he was alone. He opened his hand and a steel cutters concealed up his sleeve slid down. He gripped the end with both hands and began to cut through the wire. Two minutes later he stood next to the smokers door and gently nudged it open a couple of centimetres, just enough for a peek inside.

In less than an hour there would be a coffee break and workers would come out to get their nicotine fix. But why was everything quiet? Opening the door a little further, he peered in, and immediately saw the problem. The printing press had broken down. Workers in their oil and ink stained blue overalls had a side panel off and were replacing a broken gear. All he had to do was wait, then he could carry out his orders.

An hour later the large Heidelberg rotary printing press started up. The repair mechanic stood on top of the inspection gantry overlooking the long line of large, noisy printing presses. Resting on the steel safety barrier, he scrutinised the role of paper being fed into the machine. As the noise built up he put on his yellow headset and spoke in the microphone to his colleague at the other end of the line.

“The press will have to be taken apart at the end of the week for major maintenance,” he said.

“I know. But right now, getting it to work at least eighty per cent of the time should keep the foreman happy.”

“He knows that,” he said with a cynical tone. “But the clueless managers, especially the interims, don’t. They can’t understand why we need extra hours to carry out maintenance.”

“This sort of on-the-go repairs cost a lot more in the long run.”

“And none of the idiots have been employed long enough to realise that.”

“How does it look now?” His colleague, out of sight, asked

The platform gave him a bird’s eye view enabling him to spot obvious problems with the paper feed. The noisy press was three quarters the length of the factory floor, at least forty metres long. He leaned over the barrier to inspect the second machine in front of him. With concentration fixed on the rollers and paper feed, he never heard or noticed the person in the dark blue overalls come up the ladder, to take up position behind him.

A spray of blood hit the paper and swiftly carried on down the printing press line. At the far end, his colleague was surprised at the sudden red streak running through the printed roll. It began to spread out like the unfolding of a red silk shawl. He cupped the microphone with his hand. “Do you see this? Something is wrong.”

There was no answer from the other end.

He panicked, and hit the emergency stop.

At three in the afternoon, Bojan Nikolic sat in his small two-room apartment in Belgrade watching television. When he arrived back at his apartment in the early morning, before dawn, he took a shower and dumped the overalls in the small open fire in the living room. After a few hours sleep and a small breakfast he opened the last bottle of his fathers home-made Rakia. Five bottles he bought from him every couple of weeks, which contributed to his father’s meagre state pension, and sold most of them on to friends for a little profit. Not that he really needed the money, he did it to help his father more than anything else.

BZZZZZZZ – the door buzzer. He hated that sound. Every time it buzzed it jolted a few nerves, and every time he thought he would change it, but never got around to it. He put the glass of Rakia to one side, went to the door and peered through the spy hole. A familiar smiling face greeted him, and held up an envelope with payment for the nights work. Bojan turned the security lock on the door, and opened it wide. The smile and envelope had disappeared. He looked down to see a gun with a silencer. His friend moved forward. Bojan backed into the room and three bullets were fired.

Chapter 3

London, Wednesday, 18 October. 12:15 AM

People could set their clocks on George's trips to the office. At exactly the same time every Wednesday and Friday he appeared on the large editorial floor. For some, it seemed like out of nowhere. For the more experienced, he just blended into the furniture, unnoticed. George manoeuvred a path between the desks without so much as a gesture or nod to any of the staff, and disappeared into his tiny office. Matilda, as usual, removed the box from the locked drawer and brought it to him once he had settled down behind his desk.

Carefully he began to go through the envelopes and emails. One by one he checked the answers. It took no longer than 20 seconds to scan a complete puzzle, but usually George had moved on to the next sheet in a fraction of that time after spotting the first incorrect answer. Of course there were the regulars, he recognised their handwriting immediately. But just because they were regulars it did not mean they always got it right. There were also those who for ever complained about the cryptic crossword as being far too complicated, and wrote to him and the senior editors requesting it to be made more accessible. Those who got it right never complained, so he ignored the grouches. He also received letters from fans who wrote personal letters to the "*puzzle maker*", as they called him. Some requested to meet him "to get to know the person behind the famous cryptic puzzles," they said. Others even requested a picture.

He ignored them all.

George sifted through the completed puzzles. A few were ninety-nine percent right, but incorrect spelling, or a letter crossed out and superimposed by another, making it nearly illegible, would be their downfall.

"Tipp-Ex," he grumbled, "use Tipp-Ex."

Some, of course, would fill in nonsense answers. But hopefully, somewhere amongst the pile he would find a winner. This week gave little hope. His insert for Benton would bring the best to their knees. But as usual, he always had a backup.

The telephone rang. George picked it up.

“Good afternoon George. How are you?”

“Ahh Benton, my old friend. Very well, thank you. Just sorting out last week’s winners. I think your extra insertion caught most out. But not to worry, if nobody can solve it then we’ll just have to dig up Mr Smith, won’t we?”

“Yes, you always had one to pull out of the bag, didn’t you. And talking of pulling something out of the bag, would it be possible to add another insertion this week?”

“Yes, of course. For Queen and country, as always,” George said, with an air of pride.

“Wonderful, here is what I have.”

George wrote down four words and stared at them for a second.

“In the usual place?”

“Yes, please. I hope it’s possible.”

“No problem at all. They will be in the Sunday edition as usual.”

“Thank you George, much appreciated. By the way, I’ve got an opening. How about dinner Friday over a week.”

George checked the calendar on the wall next to his desk. “The twenty-seventh. That would be wonderful.”

“About seven?”

“That would suit me just fine.”

George reached into his inside jacket pocket and took out a small dark brown leather bound diary, and wrote down the time and date.

“I’ve got that. Thank you very much. I’ll see you then. Cheerio.”

Chapter 4

London, Thursday, 26 October 8:30 AM

The lone cyclist sat on his bicycle halfway down Cedars Road, which ran onto Clapham Common. It was not terribly cold, nine degrees Celsius, but only his eyes could be seen through the dark grey thick woollen hat, pulled down as much as possible. He had an equally thick matching woollen scarf, that covered the rest of his face. Parked in the driveway of a small car park, the location enabled him to easily observe oncoming traffic. The low wall and surrounding bushes were perfect camouflage, making it nearly impossible for others to notice him from the road in front.

Twenty minutes later he spotted what he was waiting for. Male, early forties, greying temples, wearing a Nike sports outfit, and riding a black carbon fibre sports bike, the type he never could afford. He lowered his head as he passed, unassuming, then set off behind.

His waiting point on Cedars Road had been carefully chosen. CCTV cameras covered just about every other street in Central London. All seeing eyes could follow anyone or anything everywhere, however, where he took off was a blind spot. They would pick him up less than 100 meters away on the road alongside Clapham Common, but have no footage of him waiting, then following.

He caught up with the cyclist, then kept a distance of at least four to five metres – just enough. Luckily, the cyclist in front did not have a mirror. His focus would mostly be on the traffic in front, not so much behind. He knew exactly which route he would take, having followed him for the last three days.

They turned right onto Clapham Common North side. Just further up, the Nike cyclist came to a halt in the bus lane at the traffic lights. He stopped close behind, preventing other cyclists from coming in between. The lights turned green, they took off, and as predicted, rode straight on. Up ahead, the traffic grew from quiet suburban modesty to a stronger contingent of red double-decker buses, heavy duty trucks and more cars. Their pace slowed slightly, due to traffic, but he knew this stretch was going to go on for at least a couple of kilometres, he had time. His little mirror attached to the handlebars gave him a perfect view of the traffic coming up behind. It was just a question of pick and choose.

As they came into East Hill he checked his mirror and saw his chance. He quickened his pace and moved in closer. His front wheel was just centimetres from the back wheel of the cyclist. He checked his mirror once again. A large lorry laden with gravel came up from behind on the right. He quickly shot forward to the inside of the Nike cyclist, with only the smallest distance between himself and the curb. One wrong move and he would take a fall. He pushed hard down on the pedals. His front wheel drew up parallel to the Nike rider who turned and looked at him in surprise and disbelief. In an instant he flipped his front wheel against the other. The Nike cyclist faltered, lost his concentration and balance, and was about to regain it when he shot out his right elbow, making physical contact, completing the sequence. The Nike cyclist veered to the right, then crashed to the ground. At only a distance of a couple of metres, it was impossible for the heavy duty lorry to break on time. The sickening sound of a helmet and skull crushing under the front wheels triggered screams from people on the footpath around them. The truck came to a quick stop before the rear wheels could complete the job, it was too late.

The cyclist carried on, glancing briefly in his little mirror at the panic and commotion unfolding behind. He took the next right and headed straight for the East Putney Tube station.

Within a few minutes he arrived, dismounted his bike, and shoved it between a line of others parked to the left of the florist, then walked away. Deliberately leaving it unlocked, it would probably be on the other side of the city within the next twenty-four hours, for sale for about twenty to thirty pounds, irresistible to those who needed cheap transport.

In the early morning rush-hour, the Tube was busy. He made his way towards the entrance. Using a stolen Oyster card he planned on going to High Street Kensington station, then on to Paddington.

Once inside the station he removed his hat and scarf and dumped them in a rubbish bin. He turned his jacket inside out, exposing a less distinguishable dark grey colour, and melted into the masses.

Standing on the platform he could see the train coming up to the platform. The push of people behind brought him closer to the edge. As it approached he felt a little pinprick in his lower back, then it hit him. 9000 volts of electricity shot through all his muscles in his back causing them to spasm and propel him forward. He hit the front of the train with a hard thump.

The Tube train driver only saw his wide eyed pupils for just a second. They looked more surprised than shocked, then he slammed on the emergency brakes. The screech of steel wheels grinding into the rails was drowned out by the screams of crowds on the platform as he disappeared under the carriage completely.

chapter 5

London, Friday 27 October 6:30 PM

It had been more than a week since George had received the call from Benton. He pulled the front door to his house shut to head over for dinner. A rumble of hunger ran through his gut. Normally he would have eaten an hour ago, but Benton had those foreign habits. Dining around 8 PM, or later. He would have preferred to have been there now with a drink in one hand and using the other to steal tiny titbits to quench the hunger pang, unfortunately Benton had an aversion to people in the kitchen as he worked his magic.

Unlike himself, Benton was a great cook, and always surprised him with meals from every corner of the planet. Italian, Greek, French, Thai or Chinese. He could put his hand to anything.

Directly recruited into MI6 shortly after graduation from different universities, they met on the first day of training and quickly made a connection. Strangely, it was the only thing they had in common. An invisible line that went beyond likes and dislikes which met in the middle. George, the shy mathematics and cryptography genius who preferred to sit at home and work on puzzles than go to the pub. Benton, a culture and language master, and passive extrovert. After his training he worked in the foreign office as a cultural attaché and lived in another country every four years soaking up the local way of life and language like no other. Few people were aware of his MI6 background. It remained a secret, even to his wife and children. When Benton finally moved back to London a number of years ago, they had lunch together about once about every six months.

McClelland's Islay twelve-year-old single malt Scotch was Benton's favourite tipple. George bought it at the local off-licence, and had it wrapped up. Benton never cared for his Drambuie, much too sweet, he always complained. A woman's drink, he told him the very first time he saw George sip it nearly forty years ago. Of course he disagreed, but the thought still brought a smile to his face even after all those years. George arrived at 7:30 PM, the time they agreed.

To his dismay the house was in darkness.

Something was not right.

All the lights were off, which was unusual, because a porch light was always switched on whenever he was expected.

Unlike George's relatively plain early twentieth-century terraced house, Benton lived in a grand semi-detached Victorian house. Its large garden, surrounded by tall evergreens, let little or no street light reach the house, which made it darker than the neighbours, and more unnerving. George rang the doorbell and took a step back to see if any movement followed. All remained silent. Each of the windows below and above were dark, unsettling. Each its own black hole. George felt intimidated by the colossal structure, and had to take a couple of deep breaths to drum up the courage to check further.

In the pitch dark George felt his way along the gable wall as he went around to the back of the house. He tried to peer in through the kitchen window, which looked out onto the rear garden. There was no sign of Benton. George wondered if he got the date wrong, but that was impossible, he just never did. Cautiously, he shuffled along to the dining room window, and knocked his knee against the edge of something invisible in the dark. An excruciating bolt of pain shot through his leg. He doubled over, and rubbed the spot on his knee. He quickly realised he walked into a large black wheelie bin. Slowly, he limped back to the front. Once again he stared up at the grand dark looming house. Benton was definitely not at home. The only option he could think of was to call him and see where he was. George reached into his jacket pocket for his mobile, then realised he forgot to take it with him.

It was useless. He felt defeated.

Time to head for home and call him from there. He could not believe he got the date and time mixed up. Benton was no different, appointments were never missed. Maybe he was called away to the office for some reason, or family, an emergency, or something like that. Benton's wife died four years ago, but his two grown children, Barton and Poppy, lived in London. Knowing Benton he would have called him to let him know dinner had been cancelled. He went by bus to Benton's, as he usually did, but now decided to take a taxi back home. His knee hurt.

Sitting in the back of the black London taxi, George rubbed his knee once again and noticed the fabric was torn.

"Oh dear," he moaned, not wanting to look closer to see if he had been cut. Torn skin, and especially blood, made him queasy. At least the pain had eased off. Although when he got back home, he would have to find the courage to take a closer look.

Once home in Wimbledon George put on the kettle for tea, then checked his trouser leg. Through the small tear in the fabric he could see no cut. Slowly, fearing the worst, he rolled up his trouser leg, dreading to find a gash in his knee. Surprisingly there was none, only a red mark and swelling on the right side of his kneecap. His trousers would have to soak in water and Persil just like his mother used to do, then he would have to make a trip to the tailors to fix the tear. That he would do next week. First, call Benton.

Settling into his comfortable armchair in the living room, George called from his old-fashioned telephone, but no one picked up. Tomorrow he would try again.

Chapter 6

Belgrade, Saturday, 4 November 14:15

Dragan Nikolic opened the door to his son's apartment, and immediately saw his dead body lying in the armchair. The television was still on.

"AAAAHHH," he screamed, and dropped plastic shopping bag containing five bottles of Rakia. He rushed over, grabbed him by the shoulders and stared in shock at the lifeless body. Gently he pulled him close to his chest – tears ran down his face.

"No no no," he shouted, rocking his son back and forth in his arms. After a few minutes he finally got the courage to look at him once again. Two bullets through the heart and one in the forehead. An assassination, he had seen it many times. The blood was dark and dry. His son had been dead for more than a week, he realised.

Pictures of him as a young boy flashed through his mind. Playing with him at the local swimming pool while teaching him how to swim. Collecting him from school. Giving him driving lessons on the quiet back roads at the Deliblatska Pescara nature reserve outside Belgrade when he was in his early teens. He remembered Bojan introduce his first girlfriend when he was fifteen. Waving goodbye when he left on a train to go abroad, and later standing in the living room in his military uniform. Now, he held him just as he used to when he was a little boy, when holding him close was an unconditional acceptance of love between a father and child. He held his lifeless body in his arms. The pain was almost too much to bear. The grief that tore through him for the son he loved so much was nothing like he had ever experienced before.

"You are the last," he wept. Dragan put his hand to his sons cold cheek and stroked it gently. "You looked after your father. You are a good boy." His head dropped and shook. "Your brothers are gone, your mother is gone, now I have no one." Dragan's tears landed on Bojan's bloodied sweater.

"Why?" He cried, shaking his head. "Why?"

Feeling emotionally drained, the old senses of what he once was crept back into his mind like a dormant demon. Never had he known revenge, or wantful anger. He worked according to orders given without a thought about his own personal feelings. Now, with nothing else to live for, he felt robbed of the only person in the world he cared about. His son should have lived to be an old man, like him. Why was he robbed of his life so young? Someone was going to pay for this.

Slowly, Dragan released hold and turned to look around and study the room. Everything around him was old and worn, and cheap. His son could easily afford a far better apartment in a nicer part of the city, but he never cared for luxury. He lived meagrely, inconspicuously, as if to stay out of sight and not be noticed, just like his father.

Dragan stood and looked around for a clue, visible evidence, anything at all to connect him to the killer. In the small dull and sombre bedroom with faded wallpaper, he reached for a suitcase under the bed and opened it out. Two T-shirts, jeans and a black shirt that smelled of nicotine and sweat. At the bottom lay a little non-descript card with small holes, nothing else. He expected to find a handgun but there was none. He lifted the pillow on the bed, and there it was.

Safety switch off, a silencer screwed on.

His son was on alert, which was not totally unusual given the work he did. He sniffed the barrel and knew it had recently been used. Dragan checked the only dilapidated cupboard in the squalid bedroom for more clues, there were none. No papers, no hidden artefacts, just some clothes, all thrown together. Quietly and systematically he went through the apartment and searched for secret hiding places, loose floorboards, trick panels, but without success. In the kitchen he opened every cupboard and searched attentively through pots, jars, plastic containers, but again nothing aroused suspicion.

Finally, more than an hour later, he sat down at the kitchen table, exhausted. He now knew his son's apartment better than his own. Serbian newspapers lay strewn on the table in front of him. He picked one up. A small piece of white blank cardboard, with holes punched into it, fell out from between the pages. There were no markings on the card to identify its origin or what it was for, except for the number 10.3 faintly embossed in tiny near invisible letters in the bottom corner. He remembered seeing something similar at the start of his search.

Back in the bedroom, he placed the suitcase on the bed, and threw out all the clothes. There it was. The identical white card lay unobtrusively in the bottom. Dragan picked it up, and carefully studied it. Slightly different to the other, the number 5.1 was embossed in the bottom corner.

There must be more.

He tried to feel the bottom of the case under the lining, but quickly lost patience and ripped it out. Nothing. He threw the case on the floor, then lifted up the mattress to see if

more cards lay somewhere under it or on the floor. It was then he noticed a 10 cm slit along the seam of the stained covered mattress. Subtle and inconspicuous would never have found it if he had not lifted the mattress at that particular angle. The opening would never have revealed itself. He shoved his hand in, and felt more cards. In a frenzy, he ripped open the bottom, and more cards fell to the floor.

All square and similar in size, they were near identical except for the holes – different in each card. A memory surfaced of old computer punch cards back in the sixties and seventies. However, they were usually rectangular, these were square. He checked the Serbian newspaper where the first card fell out. Carefully he went through each and every page looking for any clues. There was nothing to find. Or at least, nothing obvious. Then, in the corner of the kitchen, behind the door, a stack of old newspapers caught his eye.

Starting at the top he went through every page of every newspaper one by one, opening them out on the kitchen table, searching. The third newspaper was not Serbian, but English. It was of no real surprise since his son had studied English in London just before the war in the 90's. When the conflict escalated he returned home to serve in the army like his brothers.

Dragan turned the pages of the newspaper, nothing. Under it lay another English newspaper, half the size, an insert from the first, the cultural section. It had longer articles, more in-depth, some three or four pages long. Then he opened a page to find a piece of it missing. Two columns were cut out. He turned the page to see it run through a Jeremy Clarkson article that began on the third column, which meant it was not connected to that article. What had been removed? An article? A picture? It was impossible to know. Dragan checked the rubbish bin, it was empty.

Leafing through the remaining pages, nothing else was missing. Putting the paper to one side he continued to check the Serbian newspapers. Again, nothing unusual stood out, no markings, nothing underlined, no missing pages or pieces cut out.

After the seventh paper, another English newspaper. He laid it on the table and inspected everything methodically. Roughly three quarters into the culture section he found another page where two columns had been cut out. Grabbing the first newspaper he checked the page number, they were identical. Getting impatient, Dragan quickly searched through the rest of the pile on the floor. After the seventh, he found another English newspaper, and after seven more, another. All were the same, the Sunday Times, all with

two columns cut out, and no clue as to what. In total he found six newspapers, that spanned back six weeks.

Back in the living room he stared at the body of his son in the armchair. A decision had to be made. Painful, but necessary. Dragan took out his mobile and called an old acquaintance.

Thirty minutes later, Dragan let four men, all in their early sixties, enter the apartment with a dark grey military canvas stretcher.

Working professionally in near silence, they wrapped his son in a white sheet and placed it in a black body bag. All dressed in black, they carried the body out of the apartment. Years of clearing away corpses for Tito and the last war had fine-tuned their expertise. When finished, Dragan reached for his wallet to pay them. No need they told him. Friendship had no price. They only hoped he could catch the killer. The only thing they did except was a bottle of his home-made Rakia before they left.

Staring mournfully at the chair where he found his son, Dragan noticed another card lodged in the side of the seat cushion. Picking it up he turned it over to see the number 10.3 embossed in the corner. He had already a card with the number 10.3, this had to be a double. In the kitchen Dragan checked it against the other card. The holes were slightly different. Had his son's killer dropped it when he placed him in the chair? There was no way of knowing.

It had been more than an hour since they left. Dragan sat in the kitchen and stared at the pages with the missing columns. It was confusing. He looked at the date of each newspaper, Sunday, every time. Then checked the dates against the calendar in his diary. Finally he spotted something. Dragan sat up straight and ran the check again. There was no paper for Sunday last. Only one shop in the city, next to the train station, sold foreign newspapers. He looked up at the light blue stained plastic clock on the kitchen wall, it was 5:30 PM, he had to be quick.

The old and tired Dragan who went into the apartment early that morning now stood upright and moved with vigour. Somehow old age and bodily weariness had disappeared. His years of experience and training suddenly came back into play. He checked his sons gun under his belt, and left the apartment. Rapidly, like a man half his age, he went down the flight of stairs and out the building towards the newsagents, roughly a kilometre away. He checked his watch once again, it was late, they would be closing soon, he had to hurry.

Twenty minutes later he arrived outside the small stationery shop as the owner was in the process of pulling down the outside shutter.

"Please, I have to get a newspaper," he politely asked the man, half his age, who wore small round wire glasses.

"I'm sorry, I'm closed," the shop owner replied, then bent down to push the shutter to the ground. Dragan shoved his foot under it, blocking its closure.

"I asked nicely," he said, in a quiet, calm, cold voice.

"Please, we are really shut."

The man, as tall as Dragan, had sunken cheeks and a little goatee, with a grey tip. He raised his left hand and was about to say something when Dragan caught him by his little finger and gave it a quick, short, jerk.

The man gasped.

He was about to protest when Dragan quickly placed two fingers over the man's lips.

"You will lose that finger if you say another word," Dragan told him calmly. "Now pull the shutter up and we will go into your shop."

"I have no money...."

He winced and drew in a quick deep breath as Dragan applied more pressure to his finger.

"I'm not interested in money. I just want the newspaper."

The man turned pale, his face looked more drawn than ever, and frightened. Slowly he reached down to the bottom of the shutter, grabbed the cold steel handle, and lifted it up to just above their heads. He stopped and stared at his aggressor.

"I can't get to my keys to open the door," he said nervously, glancing at his little finger which had now turned deep purple.

Dragan released his finger, but kept his eye on the newsagent as he took a bunch of keys out of his left pocket.

Once inside, the owner put on a light at the back of the shop.

"Which paper?" He asked nervously.

"English newspaper. Sunday times."

The newsagent gave him an inquisitive look. "I usually only have one for a client who collects it every week, but he did not come in the last couple of weeks."

"Where are they?"

“Ehm, out in the storeroom at the back.”

“Get them.”

“But he still might come to collect them.”

“He won’t. He sent me to get them for him. I only need last Sunday’s paper.”

“Is he ill?”

“Something like that. Now where is it?”

“I... I’ll just get it,” he said, sounding unsure about the whole situation. He walked towards the back room, Dragan followed closely.

The room, damp and musky, was packed up to the ceiling with old newspapers, books and magazines. The newsagent looked around, unsure of where he had put it.

“Oh yes,” he whispered. He turned to the right, Dragan blocked his path.

“Excuse me, they are behind you.”

Dragan moved to one side to let him pass.

The newsagent reached down to a bundle about the meter high and began to search for the newspaper. After a couple of minutes he finally retrieved it from the pile.

Two minutes later Dragan was outside the newsagent’s. He pulled the shutter down with gloved hands, and left it unlocked. It would look like a burglary gone wrong. No need to call his friends to clean up.

Back at his apartment he opened the Sunday Times Supplement and went directly to the page where the piece had been cut out in the other editions.

“Huh? What is this.” He scratched his head and ran his fingers through his five day old grey stubble.

“A crossword puzzle?” he muttered under his breath. He took out the white card numbered 10.3 and laid it on the puzzle. The letters TC, GB, DC showed up on one section, FT in another. The third line contained OA and CD. He placed a different card on the puzzle and got another combination of letters. This time four black squares appeared through the holes. He checked the other cards. Only one, the first, seemed to match up to the puzzle. Then he tried the code of the card he found in the chair. It showed a grouping of letters that were different.

“A code,” he whispered. “The letters are a code.” He had nothing to do with codes or encryption during his working life but knew enough to realise there had to be some sort of

key to unravel it and work out its meaning. During his search of the apartment he had come across nothing like that. He studied the newspaper crossword a little closer. Printed directly above the puzzle, in the right-hand corner, was a name. George Withers.

At an Internet cafe in the middle of Belgrade Dragan Nikolic searched for flights to the UK. The easiest was air Serbia, which flew directly to London. He could travel the day after tomorrow, Monday, which would give him enough time to arrange a place to stay in London. Families of some old contacts had settled there. All he needed was an empty room, that shouldn't be too difficult. He booked a one-way ticket. How long it would take would depend on how quickly he got the information he needed, which was usually within a couple of minutes under normal circumstances. Within ten minutes he had booked a flight. His own tools, which were never suspect, was all he needed. Guns he never used, they rarely got the answers he wanted.

Back at his own equally bare apartment, he arranged a room in London after only two calls. The next day he went back to his son's apartment and carried out another search. Nothing new was found to reveal why his son was murdered. What he did find was a wad of money hidden in plastic at the bottom of the toilet reservoir.

The last thing he did was burn all of his son's clothes and pack his possessions into a bin bag and take them home. Before going to sleep he drank three quarters bottle of Rakia and thought about the times he had with his son and what he was going to do to George Withers to revenge his death.