

The Puzzle Maker

By

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The Sunday Times editorial office was large and a hive of activity with reporters, researchers, and editors rushing to make their deadline in the dry, air-conditioned air. At least it was not filled with smoke, as it used to be when he first started. These days George did not recognise many of the younger faces, although few were employed at the newspaper as long as he.

'Who's that?' a young female, early twenties, with blonde short cropped hair, asked her colleague, ten years her senior, sitting opposite. She glanced up at the elderly man, early sixties, slowly cutting across the floor. He wore a non-distinctive, slightly ill-fitting dark brown pinstriped suit, an overcoat folded over one arm, held a full-length black gentlemen's broly in the other, and looked very much from another era.

'Oh,' she said, peering over her reading glasses as the man headed for the opposite corner of the immense office. 'That's George,' she muttered with little interest, then went back to study the copy in front of her.

The young female nodded, tapped her lips with her bic pen. 'I've seen him in the office a couple of times,' she said, in a strong cockney accent. 'He seems to float in and out without a word to anyone. Looks a bit of a nutter. What does he do?'

'He compiles the crossword puzzles.'

'Really? You mean the cryptic puzzles and all that? He does them? Wow. My dad used to crack his brain on those every Sunday afternoon. Used to drive my mom mad. Dead hard they are. I've never been able to solve them.'

'Me neither,' her colleague said, abandoning the text. 'In fact I don't think anyone in the office has ever completed them twice in a row. He always comes up brain crunchers.'

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

No one knew how he managed to avoid 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 colleagues 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 the first years on the job 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 computers, he walked towards his own tiny room in the corner. A treasured luxury in an age of sharing desks and cutbacks, he had successfully negotiated an irreversible clause into his contract when he joined the newspaper nearly thirty years ago – a guaranteed personal, private office. However, the actual metered space had significantly diminished in size 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 had to be made redundant. The tall late Victorian mahogany stand, now resided in his house just inside the front door, next to the near identical stand he inherited from his parents.

George disappeared into his office. As he closed the door a woman in her early fifties, dressed in a light grey three-piece matching outfit, who sat approximately fifteen metres to the right of Georges office, opened a locked drawer under her desk. She removed a small box filled with envelopes, all cut cleanly open, and printed emails lodged between them.

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

'Come in, she heard George say in a barely audible voice. Holding the box firmly, she opened the door just enough to step in and not let it knock against his desk.

'Good morning George,' she said, cheerfully. 'We've got a healthy batch this week which should keep you busy for a while.' George gave a short but shy smile, and made eye contact for less than a second as she placed the box in the middle of his small century-old, dark brown wooden desk.

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

'Thank you Matilda,' he said, in a near whisper.

She lingered, as if wanting to ask something. George did not notice, his mind seemed 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 went back to her desk.

George took a moment to stare at the orderly bunch, then 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 puzzle last week was one of the easiest he had published in months, possibly years.

He had to give them hope.

Matilda could easily have done the work for him but that was not the way things worked in his tiny department governed by time and tradition. He was head of his own one-man operation devising the cryptic and general crossword puzzle that appeared in the newspaper every day of the week. Each would normally take about fifteen minutes to work out, except Sunday. The crossword puzzle in the Sunday Times was meant to be difficult. If did not crack some brains its reputation would flounder. Created by his predecessors in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, standards had to be held up.

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 paramount.

The prize was 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 enough.

The envelopes were opened, but the cut-out puzzle solution from the newspaper remained still enclosed in the envelope, concealed. He knew of secretaries or assistant editors in other papers who would remove the solved puzzle and pin it to the outside of the envelope for the editor to read, 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 did. He could trust Matilda.

Within 10 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 listened to the caller at the other end.

'Ahh Benton,' 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 spent most of my time in the garden, except for the last couple of weeks, it's been a bit hectic.'

'Well least you're happy I'm sure. So, what is the honour of the 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 edition, then that would be wonderful."

"You will have to be quick. The deadline is tomorrow morning."

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

'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 up. Anything else?'

'How about dinner sometime soon?'

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

'But not this week, it's too busy. Let me give you a call when the time is right.'

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

George hung up, then looked down at the words written on the note pad. From his desk drawer he removed a folder containing templates of blank crossword puzzles for the Sunday edition, and checked the calendar pinned to the wall to see which week it was, and pulled out the corresponding template.

Three hours later George strolled up the small garden path of his early twentieth century terraced house in the quiet Wimbledon suburb. The leaves on the few shrubs in his tiny garden had now turned yellow. An autumn chill hung in the air. Time to sweep the path of all 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 lock. As he had done hundreds of times, George turned it a quarter to the left, half back to the right, then

back to the left a full circle. The lock clicked – the door opened. One of his friends in the agency devised it for him and Benton years ago. A one-off; a lock that no human could pick.

Inside the darkened hallway, a ray of autumn sunlight shone through the blue, red and yellow arched stained-glass panels in the upper part of the front door. It fell onto the rustic brown and white diamond shaped floor tiles, that ran the length of the hall to the kitchen at the back of the house. A couple of small paintings with unassuming scenes of the English countryside hung randomly on both walls left and right and along the stairs. Above them small Japanese puzzle boxes of various sizes, that sat on little dark brown wooden ledges, decorated the remaining free space.

George placed his broly in the mahogany hat and coat stand that had previously resided in his office. Next to it stood the similar stand with a gentlemen's broly and a woman's umbrella resting upright in the umbrella well, that had belonged to his parents, who died more than twenty-five years previous.

He removed his dark tweed overcoat, hung it with care on his own stand then headed for his comfort zone.

Darker than the hallway, his front living room where the curtains were always drawn, had a sweet smell of wood with a hint of pledge furniture polish hanging in the air. Nearly all visitors who came to the house were always brought into the dining room at the rear. His front living room was special. No more than five people had entered here within the last twenty years.

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

He lifted it, and turned it over in his hands. It felt smooth, silk like, and old.

He held it up at eyelevel 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. Bentley's telephone call had made him forget about it for a short moment, but now, feeling refreshed and energised, he came back to it. He placed his fingers on each side of the box in the middle

and pressed, a small drawer opened; empty. This he had already done a number of times before, but knew there should be more to it. He turned the box over and took a better look in the open drawer.

George had an idea.

He placed his fingers in the slot, then moved his hand from left to right, there was nothing. Feeling slightly defeated yet still hopeful, he gently shoved his hand deeper into the opening, then felt something.

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. Carefully, not wanting to damage what he had felt, he pushed against it. A second drawer, directly beneath the first, sprung out.

It was impossible to see if anything was inside because the first open drawer blocked the view. He tried to close the top drawer, but then the bottom drawer began to close in unison. He stopped to concentrate, then tried to pull the bottom drawer out completely, it was not possible. 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 once again. Leaning back in the armchair he took his glass which was balancing on the hand rest of the armchair, and took another sip of Drambuie. He stared at the box for a couple of minutes in near absolute silence. The only sound in the room was the faint ticking of the early thirties mantelpiece clock on top of the dull brown tiled fireplace. George shifted in his armchair, then sat upright, alert. He realised he had found something new and at the same time he knew he was not finished. He turned the box around whereby the drawers faced outward, and ran his fingers over the smooth wood on each side. He suddenly felt two points on each side he had not previously noticed. Slightly protruding, like the smoothest bump, distended no more than a half a millimetre, hardly detectable. It could be put it down to shoddy workmanship or water damage, affecting the wood to expand ever so slightly. But George knew that a box so expertly crafted as this could have no flaws whatsoever, and water damage could not work so precisely on either side and nowhere else. There had to be more.

He had a thought.

He placed each thumb over the bumps and pressed hard, then tried once again to push the top drawer back with both index fingers. It slid in with a gentle glide. The bottom drawer now remained open.

To his surprise it held a small parchment. He smiled briefly, then carefully removed the it. Holding it up to the dim light coming from the forty Watt bulb behind the faded lampshade in the ceiling, he studied it. It was covered with small Chinese characters. George reached for the old telephone next to him and punched in a number.

'Hello Benton? Yes it's me, George. I found something you might be interested in. It's a Chinese parchment, sixteenth or seventeenth century I think. You might want to have a crack unravelling.'

'Really? Where did you get it.'

'A little present from one of my boxes, 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 had bargained for, but the parchment had now increased that tenfold. He had spent nearly every day studying it, thinking 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. There were no markings on the outside whatsoever. It was like 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 no lacquer, ebony, elaborate carving or veneer 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 and faint Chinese symbol Mark into the wood on the underside. He thought it was just a mark from something banging against it, since it looked like a small scratch. But after close inspection under a strong light and magnifying glass 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? Or added later, and by whom, why? Benton would have no problem deciphering the ancient symbols, it was, amongst others, his specialty. Then the puzzle would be partially solved. He was not too sure he could ever get to the bottom of it, time had buried a lot of secrets here.

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. This was only a small fraction of his collection, which 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, brought one back for him as a gift. 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. There he also 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. Each with its own private collection, depending on where it came from, the level of difficulty, and the beauty of it. It was also the reason why he never married. Any 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.





## Chapter 1

Tuesday, October 17. 2:15 PM

The large Heidelberg rotary printing press had just started up after standing still for the last hour for repairs. The repair mechanic stood on top of the inspection gantry overlooking the long line of large, noisy printing presses. He rested on the steel safety barrier and scrutinised the role of paper as it began to feed into the machine. As the noise built up he put on his yellow ear protection headphones. The damn machine would have to be taken apart at the end of the week for major maintenance, but right now, getting it to work eighty percent of the time seemed to keep management happy. Of course, complaints would come in from clueless managers, usually interims, about the extra hours needed to carry out the maintenance, but this sort of on-the-go repairs cost a lot more in the long run. None were employed long enough to realise that.

The platform he stood on gave him a bird's eye view, enabling him to spot obvious problems with the paper feed. He leaned over the barrier to inspect the second machine in front of him. With his concentration fixed on the machines below he did not hear or notice the person in the dark blue overalls coming up the ladder, and taking up position behind him.

The spray of blood hit the paper on the giant rollers which swiftly carried along the printing presses. At the far end, and out of sight, his colleague was surprised at the sudden change in the printed paper which now had a red streak running through it, and starting to spread over the entire role like an unfolding red silk shawl – he hit the emergency stop.

Bojan Nikolic sat in his small two-room apartment in Sarajevo watching television. It was three thirty in the afternoon and he was drinking his fathers home-made Rakia. At least ten bottles he bought from him each week, 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 more to help his father than anything else. Only an hour earlier he arrived back at his apartment, took a shower and dumped the overalls in the small open fire in the living room.

BZZZZZZZ - the door buzzer went. He hated the sound of that buzzer. Every time it went off 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 smiling face greeted him, a friend he saw much too infrequently. Bojan turned the extra security locks on the door, and opened it wide. The smile 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 2

Wednesday, October 18. 10:15 AM

People could set their clocks on Georges trips to the office. At exactly the same time every week he appeared, for some, it seemed out of nowhere. He strolled across the large editorial floor, without so much as a gesture or a nod to any of the staff, and disappeared into his tiny office. Matilda, as usual, removed the box from under the locked drawer and brought it into George.

Sitting at his desk he carefully began to go through the envelopes and emails after Matilda left the office. One by one he checked the answers. 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 it was far too complicated, and requested the crossword be more accessible. He also had small group of fans who would write personal letters to the “*puzzlemaker*”, as they called him. Some wanted to meet him and get to know the person behind the famous cryptic puzzles. A few even requested a picture. He ignored them all.

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

‘Tipp-Ex,’ he mumbled, ‘use Tipp-Ex.’

Some, of course, would fill in nonsense answers. But hopefully, somewhere amongst the pile there would be a winner. This week gave little hope, his insert for Benton last week 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 the extra insertion last week 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? He said with a chuckle.

‘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.' George suddenly sat upright in his seat. 'For Queen and country, as always.'

'Wonderful, here is what I have.'

George wrote down the couple of words and stared at them for a second. One was six letters the other eight.

'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 next Friday evening.'

'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, and I'll see you then. Cheerio.'

## Chapter 3

Thursday, October 26. 8:30 AM

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

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

The waiting point in the street had been carefully chosen. CCTV cameras covered just about every 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 at Clapham Common, but never have any footage of him waiting, then following.

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

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

As they came into East Hill he checked his mirror and saw his chance. He quickened his pace – moved 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, and his front wheel drew up parallel to the Nike rider who turned and looked at him in surprise. 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 against his shoulder, 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 of the lorry brought screams from people on the footpath around them. The truck came to a quick stop before the rear wheels could complete the job, but it was too late. The cyclist carried on, glancing briefly in his little mirror at the commotion starting to unfold behind him. 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.

Early morning rush-hour, the tube was busy. He made his way towards the entrance. Using a stolen Oyster card he would go to High Street Kensington station and then on to Paddington. Once inside the station he removed his hat and scarf, changed his jacket, then melted into the masses.

Standing on the platform he could see the train coming up to the platform. The push of people behind him brought him closer to the edge. As it approached he felt a little pinprick in his lower back, then it hit him. **The shock of two and a half million volts of electricity** propelled him forward, he hit the front of the train with a crash.

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 the steel wheels grinding into the rails was drowned out by the screams of the people on the platform as he disappeared under the wheels completely.





## Chapter 4

Friday, 3 November. 6:30 PM,

It had been a week since George had received the call from Benton, and now he was getting himself ready to go around to his house for dinner. 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, Benton could put his hand to anything.

When they first met there were just out of university and directly recruited into MI6. From the first training day they hit it off together. George was the shy mathematics genius who preferred to sit at home and work on puzzles than go to the pub. Benton was the culture and languages master, and passive extrovert. He had worked in the foreign office as a cultural attaché and lived in another country nearly every four years, soaking up the local way of life and language like no other. Few people were aware of his real job. Since Benton was now based in London, they had lunch together about once about every six months.

George bought a bottle of Benton's favourite whiskey, McClelland's Islay twelve-year-old single malt Scotch, 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 always disagreed, but it did bring a smile to his face.

7 PM was the time they agreed, but when he arrived the house was in darkness. There were no lights, which was unusual, because there was always a light burning in the front porch at night.

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 went around to the back of the house. In the pitch dark, he felt his way along the gable wall. At the back of the house he tried to peer into the kitchen, but no sign of Benton. George wondered if he had got the date wrong, but that was impossible, he just never did. He shuffled along to the dining room window, and knocked his knee against the edge of a large black wheelie bin, invisible in the dark. An excruciating bolt of pain shot up through his

leg. He limped back out to the front of the house. Once again he stared up at the large house. Benton was definitely not at home. George reached into his jacket pocket for his mobile, then realised he had forgotten it. He decided to head for home and call him from there. He could not believe he got the date and time mixed up. Benton was also one who never missed an appointment. Maybe he was called away to the office for some reason, or maybe family business, an emergency or something like that. Benton's wife had died four years ago, but his two grown children, Barton and Poppy, lived in London. But knowing Benton he would have called him to let him know dinner had been cancelled. George began to walk away from the house. He had walked 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 a smudge of blood on his trouser leg at the knee.

'Oh dear,' he moaned, while starting to roll up his trouser leg, then decided halfway to leave it, not wanting to look at the cut. Blood, and especially torn skin made him feel queasy. At least his knee felt better than it did a half an hour earlier.

## Chapter 5

Saturday, November 4. 10 AM

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

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

'My son,' he shouted. 'No no no.' He rocked back and forth with his son in his arms. Tears streamed down his face. After a few minutes he finally got the courage to look at him. Two bullets through the heart and one in the forehead. An assassination, he had seen it many times. The blood, dark and dry, he realised his son had been dead for at least a week.

Pictures of him as a young boy flashed through his mind. Playing with him when he was about four at the local swimming pool, collecting him from school, teaching him to drive in the quiet back roads of the local forest in his early teens. He remembered his son introduce his first girlfriend when he was fifteen. Waving goodbye to him when he left on a train to go abroad, and later standing in the living room in his military uniform. Now he was lying dead in his arms. The pain inside was almost too much to bear. Overwhelming grief rose up for the son he loved so much.

'You are the last,' he wailed. Dabog put his hand on his son's cold cheek and stroked it gently. 'You looked after your father. Your brothers are gone, your mother is gone, now I have no one.' Dabog's tears flowed down his face and landed on Bojan's bloodied sweater.

'Why?' He said, shaking his head. 'Why.' He looked around room, searching.

Slowly, he released him, and turned him so he was in a sitting position in the armchair. He began to study the room. Everything in the apartment was old and worn, and cheap. His son could afford one far better in a nicer part of the city, but he never cared for luxury. He lived meagrely, and assuming, as if to stay out of sight and not be noticed, just like his father.

Looking around there was no clue, or visible evidence to connect him to the killer. In the small dull and sombre bedroom, with faded wallpaper, he reached for a suitcase from under the bed and opened it out. A couple of T-shirts, jeans and a black shirt that smelled of

nicotine and sweat and a little non-descript card with small holes were the only contents. He ran his fingers along the side panels of the suitcase, expecting to find a handgun but there was none. He leaned over and lifted the pillow on the bed – there it was. His son was on alert, the safety switch was off, the silencer screwed on, which was not totally unusual given the work he did. But when he sniffed the barrel he realised it had recently been used. Dabog 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 searching for secret hiding places, loose floorboards, trick panels, but there were none. In the kitchen he opened every cupboard and searched attentively through pots, jars, plastic containers, but again nothing aroused suspicion. Finally he sat down at the kitchen table, exhausted. Serbian newspapers lay strewn on the table. He picked one up – and a small piece of white 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, but he did remember seeing something similar just ten minutes earlier.

Back in the bedroom he opened the suitcase once again, threw out the clothes and stared down a near identical white card lying unobtrusively in the bottom. Studying it, he quickly realised it was slightly different to the other. He lifted up the mattress on the bed to see if there were more cards lying on the floor, then noticed a slit, subtle and inconspicuous, in the stained covering of the mattress. If he had not lifted the mattress at that particular angle, he never would have noticed it. He shoved his hand into the opening. The tips of his fingers felt something familiar. He removed four more cards.

Back in the kitchen he laid out the cards on the table. Again they were all square, similar in size, but the holes were different in each. They reminded him of the old computer punch cards from back in the sixties and seventies. However, they were usually rectangular – these were square. He opened out the Serbian newspaper the card had fallen out of and checked each page for clues, there were none. Then, in the corner of the kitchen next to the door leading into the living room a stack of old newspapers caught his eye.

Starting at the top he went through them one by one, opening them out on the kitchen table, searching for a link. 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 and the dismantling of the Yugoslav state. He gave up his studies and returned home, wanting to serve in the

army like his brothers. Dabog turned the pages of the newspaper one by one. Nothing. Under it lay another English newspaper, half the size of the first. He realised it was an insert from the first, the cultural section. He turned the pages. The articles were longer, more in-depth, some three or four pages long. Then he opened a page where a long slice, two columns wide, had been cut out. Why would anyone want two columns of an article? He turned the page and realised that a Jeremy Clarkson article began on the third column – meaning the first two were not connected to the article. He could not imagine what had been there. An article? A picture?

He checked the rest of the pages, nothing was missing, they were all complete. Putting the paper to one side he continued to check the Serbian newspapers. Again, nothing unusual stood out, no markings, no pages missing, nothing underlined. After the seventh paper, another English newspaper. He laid out a paper on the table and turned the pages, inspecting everything, and there, once again, another piece of a page had been cut out. He grabbed the first newspaper and checked the page. Dabog quickly searched through the rest of the pile. After the seventh, he found another English newspaper, and after seven more, another. They were all the same newspapers, the Sunday Times, and all had the same sized piece cut out – but still there was no clue as to what. In total there were six newspapers, spanning back six weeks. He went back into the main bedroom and stared at the body of his son in the armchair. A decision had to be made. Painful, but necessary. Dabog took out his mobile and called an old acquaintance.

Thirty minutes later, four men, all in their early sixties entered the apartment.

They were quiet and professional. Years of clearing away corpses for Tito and the last war had fine-tuned their expertise. Dabog was grateful for it, giving them a bottle of Rakia each as a down payment on what he could pay later. There was no need they told him, friendship did not have a price, they only hoped he could catch the killer.

It had been more than an hour since they left. Dabog sat in the kitchen and stared at the pages with the missing columns. It was confusing. He then looked at the date of the newspapers, that ran back every Sunday, and checked them against the calendar in his diary. He realised that there was no paper for last Sunday. Only one shop in the city, next to the train station, sold these newspapers. He checked his watch – he had to be quick.

He left the apartment, and slammed the door shut behind him. The tired and old Dabog who went into the apartment early that morning now walked upright and moved with

vigour. He checked his sons gun under his belt, and went rapidly down the flight of stairs. He looked at his watch once again, it was late, it would be closing soon, he had to hurry.

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

'Please, I have to get a newspaper,' he said to the man, who wore small round wire glasses.

'I'm sorry, I'm closed,' he replied, then bent down to push the shutter to the ground. Suddenly Dabog shoved his foot under the shutter, blocking from closing it completely.

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

'Please, we are really shut.'

The man, who was as tall as Dabog, had sunken cheeks and a little goatee, turning grey at the tip. He raised his left hand and was about to say something when Dabog caught him by his little finger and gave it a quick, short jerk. The man gasped. He was about to protest when Dabog quickly placed two fingers over the man's lips.

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

'I have no money....' He took a quick deep breath as Dabog 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 looked at his aggressor.

'I can't get to my keys,' he said nervously, glancing at his little finger which had now turned deep purple. Dabog let his finger loose, but kept his stare on the newsagent who reached into his left pocket and took out a bunch of keys.

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

'Which paper?'

'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 this week.'

'Where is it?'

'Ehm, I think it is out the back.'

'Get it.'

'But he still might come in for it.'

'He won't. He sent me to get it for him.'

'Is he ill?'

'Something like that. Now where is it?'

'I.... I'll just get it,' he said, sounding unsure of the whole situation. He walked towards the back room, Dabog followed closely behind.

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

'Oh yes,' he whispered. He turned to the right, Dabog blocked his path.

'Excuse me, they are behind you.'

Dabog moved to one side and let him pass. He reached down to a bundle about the meter high and began to search for the newspaper. After a couple of minutes he finally pulled it from the pile.

Two minutes later Dabog was outside a newsagents and pulled the shutter down with gloved hands. He did not lock it. It would look like a burglary gone wrong, and no need to call his friends to clean up.

Back at his own apartment he opened the newspaper and went directly to the page where the others had been cut out.

'A crossword puzzle?' He muttered under his breath. He took out the white card and laid it on the puzzle. The letters TCGBD were on one line, and FTO on the next. The third line contained OACD. He placed a different card on the puzzle and got another combination of letters. But this time some of the black squares appeared through the holes. He checked the other cards. Only one, the first, seemed to match up to the puzzle.

This was impossible – the letters were a code. There had to be another key. He looked closer at the puzzle, and printed directly above, in the right-hand corner, was a name. George Withers.

Dabog turned to his computer and searched for flights to the UK. The easiest was air Serbia, which flew directly to London. He could go the day after tomorrow which would give

him time to arrange a place to stay in London. There were still a few addresses he could use. 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. He would take his own tools, which were never suspect, although they would have to go in the cargo hold. The gun he would not need. Carrying them as hand baggage probably would create a problem. He packed a small bag with the bare essentials, drank three quarters bottle of Rakia and went to sleep thinking of the times he had with his son and what he was going to do to revenge his death.