

TERENCE
STRONG

WORD OF
WAR



SILVER FOX
PRESS

United Kingdom

Prologue

THE PROTECTOR

Timeline: Baghdad, April, 2008

He stepped out of the air-conditioned cool of the airliner into the broiling heat of Baghdad International Airport. And back into the nightmare.

His heart quickened the moment he smelled the musky desert air. And again, when he was surrounded by the chatter of Arabic voices in the underground Arrivals Lounge.

The clamour and bustle set him on edge, the closeness of people. Anyone could be concealing a weapon, anyone wearing a corset of high-explosives and nails beneath their robes. Even a pregnant woman or child standing next to you could be a walking bomb. That was it, you never knew. Until it was too late.

No longer in the British military, Royce was being met by a senior member of the civilian security company for which he now worked. As a “newbie”, he was initially treated more like a client than a member of staff.

A tall, taciturn Geordie with ginger hair had been allocated to “Meet and Greet”, a task to which he wasn’t most obviously suited. The man wore chinos and an oversized casual shirt with the Magpies’ team badge on the breast pocket.

‘Hello, sir, my name is Geordie,’ he said in a heavy accent, without a hint of irony or humour. He also spoke with the rapidity of a machine-

gun. 'I'm Team Leader of our call sign Kilo Five. If you've retrieved your luggage, just follow me.'

With a day sack on his shoulder and towing a wheeled pilot's case, Royce walked with his new team leader to the underground carpark. The unexpected sound of a moped backfiring made him jump. Oddly that snapped him out of the funk he'd been in, back to reality. Reality Royce could deal with, blind fear and flashbacks he couldn't.

'We're a three-vehicle convoy,' Geordie continued as they approached the tired-looking Merc saloons. 'All B6 armoured. Lucky we could manage that on today's roster. Wasn't expecting one man down with an appendix and you coming in so quick.'

'Nor was I,' Royce replied. 'I was on holiday in Cyprus when I got the text from Head Office. I diverted straight here. The paperwork hasn't even caught up yet.'

Geordie grunted. 'First rotation with the company?' he asked. When Royce nodded, the man raised an eyebrow. 'Know anyone here?'

'Stefan Seeff. South African. We were in Afghanistan.'

'The lion-shagger?' Geordie paused for a beat. 'Yeah, he's alright.'

Geordie curtly introduced Royce to the rest of the team. They were all British and all worked for IAP in London. International Asset Protection had offices in Canary Wharf and was run by a former SAS major, dealing with advisory military contracts at governmental level.

The team dispersed to its allocated vehicles. Geordie opened the boot of the Merc in the middle of the three and extracted a body-armour vest. 'Dump your luggage in here and put this on please.'

Royce followed the instructions while Geordie stripped off his own top to reveal a cutaway T-shirt over a wiry and freckled body. He strapped on his belted firearm holster and armoured vest, while still rattling on, 'I'll be traveling in front with our driver.' He pulled his Magpies' shirt back on and opened the rear passenger door. 'Wear your seat-belt at all times. Doors will remain locked, controlled by our driver. Should there be a mechanical failure or we stop for any other reason, don't attempt to open the door or leave unless told to do so

by me or another team member. You will be cross-decked to another vehicle which will pull alongside.’

Seemingly without pausing for breath, the man continued as Royce climbed in, ‘There’s a first aid kit on the floor next to you should it be needed. Usual travel time to the Green Zone is twenty minutes. At any Entry Control Point or other checks stay in the car and take instructions from me.’ He dumped a NATO-style ballistic helmet in Royce’s lap. ‘Keep that to hand at all times. Welcome back to Baghdad.’

As soon as Geordie fell into his seat with his Heckler & Koch MP5 short across his lap, the driver started the engine. They followed the first Merc slowly out through the inner perimeter cordon manned by the Iraqi Police, over the flyover to the outer cordon, which was controlled by the US military.

Once past the ramps, they were running the gauntlet of the ten mile, six-lane expressway – known as “Route Irish” by the occupying Allies – to the city. To the Iraqis themselves it was called, less prosaically, simply as “Death Street”.

‘Any trouble so far today?’ Royce asked.

‘Not today,’ Geordie replied. ‘But there was a shooting on this route yesterday and two IEDs. A lot of dead and injured. Bad shit.’

Royce stared out of the bullet-proof window. ‘Seems it’ll never end.’

‘Keeps us in business,’ Geordie replied flatly.

The lead driver of their small cortège seemed to know his stuff. He veered away from roadside police observation platforms, which insurgents with machine-guns or suicide bombers liked to occupy in cars with tinted windows. Royce noted he also kept well clear of a small American military convoy they passed, which made an inviting target, and was obviously suspicious of one particular stretch of newly-laid concrete. The terrorists were known to have posed as repair crews to bury daisy-chained artillery shells to be detonated by electronic garage-door openers or mobile phones.

‘Home sweet home,’ Geordie breathed as they finally cleared

Checkpoint Three and entered the relative safety of the Green Zone, next to the mighty Tigris River.

The whole district was surrounded by towering concrete blast walls and protected by the United States' war-machine. This was the administrative and military heart of the Coalition, which had invaded Iraq and overthrown its despotic dictator, Saddam Hussein.

What Royce knew, which was never mentioned in the heavily-guarded American Embassy, was that the man himself had actually started his notorious political life as a trained assassin for the CIA. And a failed one at that.

The neighbourhood of the Green Zone was also the traditional home of the nation's political elite with its fine houses and exclusive hotels. There had been no shootings or suicide-bombings around the Zone for several weeks. In that troubled land it had almost become a Camelot or *Shangri-la*. Foreign military personnel and aid workers swam in the hotel pools, celebrity chefs were flown in to cook and singers to sing for the loaded opportunists.

Everyone was living in a dream, a bubble. That's how it felt and that's what they actually called it, "The Bubble". Business thrived, people made money. Lots of money. Millions. Dollars, euros, pounds, roubles, yen. The booze flowed. People got rich, got careless.

Then that Easter, like all bubbles, it burst. Everything changed overnight. Shi'ite insurgents of the Mahdi Army, led by the radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, opened up with mortars, rocket-propelled grenades and Katyusha rockets from the Sadr City area of east Baghdad.

The sumptuous Baghdad Palace Hotel received a direct hit on its famous ballroom. Luckily it was empty at the time and only one staff member suffered a minor injury. However, as a result of the damage, several planned exhibitions, conferences and other corporate events had to be cancelled or transferred to other venues at short notice.

It was the evening after the attack that James Royce found himself striding down the luxuriously-carpeted corridor on the third floor of the hotel, a couple of minutes before eight o'clock, the time of the

scheduled first meeting with his new client.

Precise time-keeping was one of Royce's traits from a former life spent in the British Royal Marine Commandos. Another was smartness. He was dressed inconspicuously in a beige tropical jacket, slacks and a white-and-blue striped shirt.

He was clean-shaven and tanned from years spent outdoors, his eyes a flinty green grey mix in colour. Like the North Sea, he used to joke. His tawny hair was just now in need of a trim.

Royce was accompanied by Geordie. For good reason, American security in the Green Zone was strict to the point of paranoia. It would take a day or two at least before his biometrics were taken, his paperwork processed and ID badge issued. And if you weren't badged you didn't exist, didn't pack a firearm, didn't go anywhere or do anything without being escorted by someone who was.

There was a big, crew-cropped American seated farther along the corridor, a Glock sub-machine gun resting ostentatiously on his lap. He stood up as the two men approached.

'This is James Royce,' Geordie introduced. 'He's on your list.'

The American nodded, gnawed on his chewing gum, and smiled. 'Sure, Maynard's expecting him.' He studied Royce for a moment. 'So you're the replacement?'

Royce glanced along the empty corridor. 'Would seem so.'

'Call me when they're done,' Geordie said, turning on his heel, 'and I'll collect him.'

Still smiling, like he was in on some secret joke, the American indicated the door opposite. 'That's Maynard's room. Number Thirty Six. Be my guest. By the by, my name's Abe.'

The former Royal Marine stepped forward and rapped on the polished wooden door. On the other side, he heard a female voice curse. He caught the words, 'Christ, is that the time already?' The words were followed by shuffling footsteps coming towards the door. It opened cautiously, inch by inch.

She was taller than he'd been expecting, with a stylish bob-cut of

marmalade hair. Her skin was milky white with dark stains of tiredness around her eyes. She had full lips and a ready, impish smile.

‘You Royce?’

He nodded. ‘Yes. For Mr Maynard Price. GEOcom. He’s expecting me.’

Behind him, he heard the American security man guffaw. The woman shook her head. ‘Ignore Abe, he’s an ass. Yes, I am he.’

Royce lifted an eyebrow. ‘Pardon?’

Her blue eyes were smiling mischievously although her lips weren’t. She stepped back and threw open the door in an extravagant gesture for him to enter. She was slim, wearing a dressing-gown in jade-coloured satin. It showed a glimpse of cleavage. Her reading spectacles were parked up on her head like an Alice band.

‘I am Maynard Price,’ she announced. Her voice had the deep and throaty tone of someone who smoked and drank a little more than the recommended limits of the health fascists. ‘My grandmother’s middle name, handed down. Useful for opening doors in Arab countries where we females are considered a sub-species.’

Royce frowned. ‘But you are -’ He hesitated.

‘Yes, I’m Chief Exec of GEOcom. Mid-East Div. Specialising in high tech cell-phone networks for remote regions.’ She grinned at him. ‘Chief Exec, yeah, so I must be doing something right, yes?’

‘I’m sorry for the misunderstanding, ma’m.’ He closed the door behind him. ‘I was parachuted in, so to speak. The paperwork hasn’t caught up with me yet.’

She studied him closely and frowned. ‘I had asked for an American to replace Chuck – if possible.’

‘It wasn’t possible.’ Royce gave a wolfish smile. ‘I’m sorry, but GEOcom’s security contract is with IAP, a British firm. American contractors like Chuck and Abe are in the minority with us.’

The smile moved from her eyes to her lips for the first time. ‘Of course, IAP must have been cheaper.’ She hesitated. ‘I also asked for someone who didn’t have an appendix.’

‘Ah yes, poor Chuck,’ Royce replied. ‘Unexpected that. I had mine checked out before I left the UK. It’s fine.’

A flicker of a grin suggested that she appreciated the joke. ‘Have you worked with Abe before?’

‘No. But I’m sure we’ll get on fine.’

‘Alternate shifts. Twelve hours on, twelve hours off. But then Geordie will no doubt explain the drill.’ She led the way through from the ante-chamber into the sumptuously appointed reception room. There were marble columns, glitzy mirrors and gold fittings. She indicated the L-shaped brown suede sofa. ‘Shall we take a seat?’

‘Sure, Mrs Price.’

‘Miss. Call me May.’ He nodded as she sat opposite him and gracefully furred her legs. She dropped her spectacles down from her forehead onto her nose and began reading from a sheath of paper. ‘Your details, sorta CV?’

‘Jeez,’ she added. ‘Protector’s Details. Protector? Why does this company put that? It makes you all sound like own brand condoms from Wal-mart.’

‘Most firms refer to us as operators. But then, that’s what we are,’ he replied drily. ‘Close protection.’

She chuckled. ‘Quite so. I’m very aware how dangerous working in this part of the world can be. But security arrangements are made between our companies, of course, way above our heads. It’s why I like to know my protection operators personally. Because I know my life – and ultimately my company’s success – may depend on them.’

‘Of course.’

‘Can I ask you a question or two?’

‘Fire away, ma’m.’

‘So am I right you’re quite new to this?’

‘Close Protection? A year of specialist training.’

‘And before that, the SBS? The Royal Navy, what’s that?’

‘You’ve heard of the SAS? The British SAS?’

Maynard frowned. ‘Of course, military nutters, like our SEALs.’

Royce said, ‘Well the SBS – the Special Boat Service –is like the SAS but with webbed feet.’

Maynard laughed out loud. ‘Oh God, really?’

‘I served here, in Iraq. Mostly down south around Basra.’

‘Then you left the British military. Why?’

Royce shrugged. ‘Circumstances. The time was right to move on.’

Maynard was perceptive. ‘I’m guessing it was a bit more than that. I know when someone’s being economical with the truth.’

Royce said, ‘I don’t want to get into politics and personal opinions.’

‘Because it’s against company policy?’ Her eyes narrowed. ‘But *I’m* your client and I’m asking you directly. Our respective board members won’t be here with us if we’re ever being shot at, will they? So please tell me.’

Royce took a deep breath, he really didn’t need this. After a beat he said, ‘Iraq has been an illegal war, and badly managed. A total disaster.’

‘In what way?’

Royce said, ‘Saddam’s army and police force were totally disbanded because they were Ba’athist. The US left their entire Military Police Division back home in the States. So the local mosques had to bring in people simply to enforce traffic control. It created a huge vacuum that invited its Iranian neighbours and the jihadists to fill. The whole thing was a monumental cock-up.’ He hesitated, and added, ‘Pardon me.’

‘But you’re back here, in Iraq,’ she pointed out.

He smiled at her. ‘At least now, May, I’m being paid the going rate.’

She glanced down at her notes. ‘Age 42. Married?’

‘Once. It lasted three years, no kids. She wasn’t military-wife material,’ he said matter-of-factly, adding, ‘I was never there and I didn’t exactly play the faithful husband, I’m afraid.’

Maynard’s eyes narrowed again. ‘So run me through your professional career.’

He shrugged, hating this sort of stuff. ‘Academically, I was middle of the road at school. Good at Sports and at English because I liked reading. Okay with arithmetic rather than maths. My father was a Royal

Marine and I followed him. I served in the first Gulf War in Iraq – and the second. Then Afghanistan. That was enough.’

She arched a quizzical eyebrow. ‘You’re not a great fan of politicians?’

‘You might say that.’

‘No bad thing,’ Maynard rejoined. ‘And I like someone who can think for himself, independently.’

‘And your assignment here?’ Royce asked.

She gave a small chuckle. ‘You would not believe how few employees ask me that, or even care.’ Her eyes opened wide. ‘Would you mind awfully pouring me a drink?’

‘Of course.’

‘So English. You could be my butler.’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘I’m joking.’

‘I’m not. What would you like?’

‘Just a bourbon and ice. The cabinet is over there. Get something for yourself.’

He returned with her glass and a tumbler with sparkling water, lime and ice for himself. ‘Your assignment?’ he reminded.

‘Ah yes,’ she said, accepting the glass. ‘I’m in Baghdad to win a lucrative mobile phone contract. My company should have the edge because we have hi-tech solutions for communications in remote areas. But I have rivals from outfits in both Sunni and Shi’ite business communities here, not to mention Israel. Bribery and other dirty tricks are not unheard of. There are also Dutch and German contenders.’

‘And the bombing of the ballroom,’ Royce said. ‘It’s meant the planned Comms Expo and conference has been cancelled.’

‘Quite so.’

‘An unfortunate accident.’

Maynard pulled a face. ‘If indeed it was an accident.’

Royce frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

She shook her head. ‘No matter. One can get paranoid in this neck of the woods. It’s been good to have met you, Mr Royce – Oh that is

a bit formal.’

‘James,’ Royce said, ‘Or Rollo, my nickname in the Marines.’

‘Oh, I get it.’ Maynard smiled. ‘Like the posh car. ..Anyway, I’m sure we’ll get on fine. When will you be able to start?’

‘Apparently it’ll take a few days before badging’s complete and I’m actually on the job.’

There was an intense glitter in those electric blue eyes, Royce noticed. ‘I look forward to it,’ she said. He shook the slender, offered hand and left.

The noise and heat of the hotel bar downstairs hit him like a wall. What was it about war-zones around the world, he wondered? They were like magnets to opportunists, rogues and adventure-seekers in equal measure. No matter how desperate and bloody the fighting, the number of dead and injured civilians, the political, media, commercial and military circus was forever in town. Whatever the shortages of medicines, food and water for general populations, there was never any such shortage of alcohol or tobacco or sex.

He squeezed his way through the crowd, knowing he’d find his friend Stefan somewhere here at the centre of the action.

Just turned thirty, the South African called Seeff had served with him in the British Army in Afghanistan and had since lured him into the “The Circuit”, as it was known, a lucrative market of ex-military personnel who specialised in the dark art of “close protection”. However it was a vocation that had exploded from almost nowhere and standards were very varied and very often left wanting.

Royce found Seeff at one end of the spectacularly large, round rosewood bar with its saffron marble top. Two attractive, fresh-faced young women sat on barstools beside him. One blonde and one auburn, they both wore the emblazoned T-shirt and jeans uniform of the numerous charities and NGOs operating in the country. In fact Geordie had already pointed them out to him holding hands in the lobby.

‘I went to that Thai massage parlour,’ Seeff was saying, grinning as

he always was. ‘You know, the one on the next block. Sells herbs. Run by Mr Ping.’

The athletic blonde woman with no make-up nodded. ‘I know it.’

‘Well, I have this really fantastic massage. Swedish hot-stone or some such. I feel great.’ He paused. ‘The girl pops out and Mr Ping puts his head round the door. He winks and says, “Hey, Misser Stefan, you like Happy Ending, eh?”’

Seeff added to his rapt audience, ‘My mind’s racing. Happy Ending? I suddenly realise what he means. “Oh, ah! How much extra will that be?” I ask. Mr Ping looks sorta affronted and shakes his head. “Ah, no charge, no extra. All part of service.”’

The auburn aid-worker in a tight blue T-shirt leaned forward, her voice husky and low. ‘What happened next, Stefan?’

‘Well, I’m waiting and thinking, will it be the gorgeous Li-Li who gave me the massage. Or maybe the sexy receptionist who eyed me up when I came in.’ He drew breath. ‘For ten minutes I wait. Suddenly the door opens and Mr Ping peers in. “Happy Ending over now, sir,” He says, “You finish yet?”’

Neither of the women laughed. Royce decided to rescue his friend. ‘Stef, pal, how are you? Great to see you again.’

Seeff’s eyes widened and his jaw dropped. ‘Yubbah dubbah doo!’ he exclaimed. ‘Hi, Rollo! When the hell d’you fly in?’

‘Earlier this afternoon. I did email you.’

‘Internet’s crap here. Besides I’ve been working all day.’ He dropped down off his barstool, glancing at the women on each side of him. ‘Keep the seat warm for me, ladies. This is my best mate, Rollo. We’ll be back in a minute.’

He ushered Royce away from them, farther down the bar where drinkers were queuing to be served. ‘What you want, boss? They’ve actually got your Żubrowka vodka – and tonic?’

‘Just a beer, Stef, thanks. Need to keep a clear head.’

Seeff grinned. ‘New boy syndrome, eh?’ he said, and squeezed himself into the front of the queue. Ever popular, he was quickly

served by one of the barmen and returned with two tall glasses of lager.

‘How are you finding it?’ Royce asked.

‘A fuck sight better than Kabul, that’s for sure. At least this place is in the 21st century – well, sort of.’ He took a gulp of beer. ‘And what about your new client, Mr Price, have you met him yet?’

Royce’s green eyes hardened into the seaman’s thousand-yard stare he was renowned for. ‘You bastard, Stef,’ he challenged. ‘You knew Maynard was a woman.’

Seeff laughed and shrugged. ‘Bit of a standing joke with the lads here, sorry. Thought you might throw a fit if you knew it was babysitting a woman.’

Royce sampled his beer. ‘Why would I?’

Seeff shrugged. ‘They can be tricky to handle in CP. Don’t always like being told what to do, especially ones like her. A bit of a ball-breaker, I hear.’

‘She seems fine, charming,’ Royce said. ‘Knows what she wants. Respect, even if she is a Yank.’

The South African suddenly realised that a good-looking Australian construction exec was chatting up his two latest targets. ‘Shit, we’d better get back. Those two are hot.’

Royce nodded. ‘Known them long?’

It was just turned nine o’clock. ‘All evening,’ Seeff said.

‘Have you spent a lot on them?’

‘Enough. They like their cocktails.’

‘D’you know their names?’

‘Of course.’

‘Martina and Billy-Jean?’ Royce suggested.

Seeff didn’t get it. ‘No, Sue and the blonde is Morag.’

Royce grinned. ‘I want to come out, Stef, to you, my bestest mate. I know that, of all people, you will understand.’

Seeff was confused. ‘What?’

‘That I am a lesbian.’

That threw Seeff for a second. ‘Come again?’

‘I only fancy women, Stef. And your two lady-friends, Sue and Morag don’t fancy me. Or, more importantly, you.’

The blood drained from Seeff’s face as the penny dropped.

Royce said, ‘Seems to me like the age-old story of expectation over experience.’ He gave a half-grin.

Seeff’s knuckles clenched white, pulling away from Royce’s restraining grip. ‘Spent a fuckin’ hundred on them...’

‘Oh, I know Sue and Morag,’ Maynard said. ‘Lovely girls. Fearless, too, in the work they do. Not sure either of them want a rich sugar daddy.’

It was four weeks’ since his return to Baghdad and Royce now felt he knew his client well enough to recount the anecdote. ‘I don’t think Stefan would ever fit that bill anyway. Although *he’s* still convinced he could *cure* them.’

They were seated on the suede sofa in her suite, Maynard wanting to conduct her own assessment of his first month’s service. It wasn’t conventional, but it was typical Maynard Price. She liked people to like working for her.

The hotel air-conditioning had broken down and she had suggested that Royce might like to remove his jacket. He was more than happy to, also taking off the Czech CZ85 9mm automatic pistol and Gould & Goodrich holster that made him feel like a Prohibition-era gangster. He placed them on the coffee table.

Maynard laughed lightly, ‘I don’t ever see Stefan becoming a sugar daddy, either. He’s even hit on me a couple of times in the bar.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be. I was sort of flattered.’ She took her glass of bourbon from the coffee table and sipped at it. ‘I’m certainly a bit older than him. That must make me a “milf” in modern parlance. Or is that a cougar?’

‘Definitely more a cougar,’ Royce said. Then he thought better of it, adding, ‘If you don’t mind me saying?’

‘Of course, not. I asked you.’ She took another sip of her drink. ‘I love my job, James, but it can be difficult, confusing – and a bit lonely – as a woman operating in the Middle East.’

‘I’m sure,’ Royce added, nursing his mineral water, ice and lemon.

‘I have to dress in a business suit,’ she said, indicating the tobacco linen number she was wearing, ‘with trousers and a jacket long enough to cover my ass. Low heeled pumps and no more than a hint of mascara. And a hijab, of course. Otherwise Arab men are convinced I’m a hooker or will happily jump into bed with them to seal a deal. I’ve even been seriously propositioned by Heads of State.’

Royce nodded. ‘That I can believe,’ he said. He knew the Middle East well enough.

‘And if I relax at the bar here at the hotel with my own kind, I get pounced on by every chancer from the military, media or construction.’ She smiled and touched his wrist. ‘That’s why it’s been good to have you here, James. To have a civilised drink and meal, and a sensible, fun conversation.’

‘That’s been my pleasure, ma’m.’

‘If only you stopped calling me that.’

‘Old habits – ma’m.’ He grinned. ‘Sorry, May.’

Her candid blue eyes seemed to draw him in. ‘How’s it been for you? First close-protection assignment and all that?’

‘It’s been good. Better than I expected.’

‘You’re very serious.’

‘It’s a serious business.’

‘I always do what you tell me,’ she said and stopped.

He realised that she hadn’t removed her hand from his wrist. She went on, ‘I’ll be finished here in a couple of days. Hopefully with a contract signed. Then it’ll be on to Tel Aviv for a spell. I want to ask your company to let you and Abe come with me if possible. Are you up for that or do I have to have a new CP man?’

Was he up for it? “Close Protection” was new to him, but he’d landed on his feet. He couldn’t have asked for a better client. Maynard

Price was savvy, witty and sharp. He knew she was three years' older than him but she had the fit body of many women half her age. She was a vegetarian and practised Pilates. Was he up for it? If he didn't know himself better, he'd have believed he could be falling for her.

His hand wrapped around her hand, gently easing his fingers between hers. It was subtle but the message was unmistakable. 'I'd be happy to look after you, May, anywhere,' he confirmed. 'Can I ask if you think you will clinch the deal here?'

She considered for a moment, deciding what was safe to say. 'Finally it's between GEOcom and a Sunni outfit here. My researchers in Baltimore say some extremist cleric called Ibrahim al-Samarrai is involved with them. They think he'll milk the contract to buy arms.'

Royce frowned. He knew that name, could see it in his mind's eye on the Rogue's Gallery of Most Wanted in the Ops Room. Suddenly it came back to him. 'Aka al-Baghdadi.'

'Who?'

'His nom de guerre, al-Baghdadi,' he repeated. 'A local bad boy, nothing to worry about...'

As his voice trailed off he realised she was hardly listening to him. Her eyes were tightly focussed on his, flickering occasionally to his mouth, then back again. There was a light in those eyes, a challenge, daring him. He knew it, she knew it. A twist of a smile played momentarily on her lips. Now they both knew it.

He made his decision in that split second. One hand closed over hers like a clam-shell, his other grasped her hair, clawing her head back to expose her arched throat. He closed his teeth around it, biting her flesh gently until she hurt.

She pushed him away, deliberately keeping up the pretence. 'Fuck me, James!' she protested, but her blows lacked strength or anger.

'Shut up,' he ordered, scooping her up in his arms and carrying her towards the bedroom. Buttons popped off her shirt as she struggled fiercely, clawing at his face.

Although he felt the blood trickle from his cheek, he knew she was

playing tigers. He threw her onto the mattress with considerable force. The bedhead cracked against the wall, chipping the paintwork.

She gasped for air. ‘Bastard!’

‘Bitch!’ he replied.

His mouth fell on hers, kissing and biting. She dug her fingers into his back, becoming aware that he was now ripping the jacket from her shoulders. Shaking herself free, she found he’d already torn away her expensive chiffon shirt, snapped her bra. One breast fell free, its nipple pink and angry.

‘Don’t fucking touch me!’ she warned as his teeth closed on it slowly and decisively.

That was how it went for the next half hour or so. A fight, a battle between two animals. Each hurt and tested the other, attacked and counter-attacked with as much tenderness as ferocity. He’d recount later, one day, that it had been a fierce struggle with no casualties, and both of them the winners.

She bit his ear and squeezed his balls until she knew it hurt. ‘Fuck me doggy,’ she hissed in his ear.

He grabbed her waist, none too gently, aware how narrow it was, feeling her ribs under his fingertips. She was on her knees, her ginger bob-cut now a soft muddle as he pressed her face into the pillow. There was no resistance. His left hand found the smooth, tight sag of her belly and dug in deep, forcing her back against him. A low slow whimper escaped her lips. Then she cried out, her voice masking the muffled sound of the explosion outside. Neither were aware of the slight tremble of the building.

His personal radio handset crackled into life. It was on the floor, buried in the pile of his discarded clothes, the sound muffled and indistinct.

‘Leave it,’ she gasped.

He was tempted. ‘It could be important.’

‘No, it won’t be,’ she said decisively and pushed herself hard back onto him. ‘Finish me off, for God’s sake.’

The next couple of minutes were lost in a violent frenzy of pain and pleasure, the two of them entwined in the tangle of sheets. Then his radio started transmitting again. 'Tango Two Alpha, this is Tango Two Bravo -'

This time he did not hesitate. He swung his legs off the bed, snatched up the radio and stood naked with it to his ear.

'Rollo, it's Stef. Did you hear the bomb outside the hotel?'

'What? No.'

'Really? Never mind, we think it was a suicide bomber. A small blast.'

Royce relaxed. 'Anyone hurt?'

At that moment the Green Zone sirens kicked in, their eerie wailing noise alerting the citizens that they were under terror attack.

'Only the bomber, but that's not the point,' Seeff continued. *'We think it was a diversion. A bunch of gunmen have broken in. We're going into lock-down.'*

'Where are they?'

'Heading up the stair-well.'

'Shit!' He tossed the radio on the floor, grabbed his trunks and pulled them on. As he did he heard the commotion outside the door of the suite in the next room. That is where he'd left his Czech-made automatic and its holster, on the coffee table.

'GET IN THE BATHROOM!' he yelled back, over his shoulder. 'LOCK YOURSELF IN!'

As he raced into the lounge, a hail of bullets punched its way around the security lock of the front door and through the small ante-room to deflect like demented fireflies in all directions. The door crashed open as he dived for the coffee-table. Four or five dark-clad Iraqis wearing ski-masks burst in, shooting indiscriminately. They were through the ante-room, then into the main reception area. One round shattered the mirror above the mock fireplace and another hit the ornate chandelier, showering crystals of broken glass like rain.

Royce slid to a halt on the Persian rug, reaching for the automatic pistol he'd abandoned on the coffee-table. He fumbled to release it from its holster, remembering suddenly that the two magazines of live

ammunition were in his jacket pocket on the sofa.

As he dived to find them, struggling to get them out and loaded, the seconds seemed to expand into minutes in his head. He expected the rounds of death to thud into him at any moment, his life to be extinguished without warning.

It was then that he realised that the terrorists had no real interest in him. While one stood by the door, carrying an AK47 at the ready, the others went straight for the bedroom.

Maynard never reached the safety of the bathroom door. Her alabaster body was studded instantly with bullet holes that ripped into her vital organs. The beautiful, slender and naked body twitched and convulsed on the floor for several long seconds before it finally stopped.

Her killers seemed mesmerised, frozen as they watched the result of what they had just done.

Royce finally snapped the magazine into the butt of his automatic. The man on the door appeared to focus on him for the first time, swung round the AK47. Royce knew then he'd lost. He was a trigger-squeeze too late. He was staring down the barrel of death.

But the first shot fired came from the stair-well in the hotel corridor. It hit the gunman on the door in the back of his head, punching out an exit hole in his face. As the man collapsed, Seeff stepped into the room, his gun still smoking.

'HOSTILES RIGHT! RIGHT!' Royce yelled in warning. As he shouted, he aimed at Maynard's killers himself and opened up. The four men were clustered together in the bedroom and it was a turkey-shoot. Royce fired in a frenzy of barely-controlled anger, round after round after round.

Then, suddenly, nothing. With a flick of the wrist, he ejected the magazine, pumped in the second and then shot them all again.

The bedroom was hazy with smoke and stank of cordite. He felt Seeff's restraining hand on his shoulder. 'Okay, mate, steady on. You can't kill a dead man twice.'