

# DEADFALL

Shaun Jeffrey



## **DEADFALL**

Published by Leucrota Press  
40485 Murrieta Hot Springs Rd. Suite B-4 #131  
Murrieta, CA USA

ISBN-13: 978-0-9824713-4-0

ISBN-10: 0-9824713-4-3

Copyright © 2010 Shaun Jeffrey  
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without permission. Please support the authors and do not participate in the piracy of copyrighted materials.

This is a work of fiction. All characters, names, and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Cover art by Studio Tu On.  
Cover and interior layout by Gilly.

First printing, March 2010.  
Manufactured and printed in the United States of America.  
Printed simultaneously in the UK and Canada.

**<http://www.leucrotapress.com>**

# DEADFALL

Shaun Jeffrey

Also by Shaun Jeffrey:

The Kult

To Deb and Callum.  
Words will never be enough. You rock my world.



# ONE

An ear-splitting boom reverberated along the street, rattling shop windows in their frames.

Amber Redgrave moved with catlike grace, sidestepping across the pavement to position herself between the origin of the noise and the frail client whose bouffant hairstyle resembled a grey crow's nest atop her head.

Hand hovering over the bottom of her thigh-length dark blue jacket, underneath which the Glock Model 30 nestled in a holster around her waist, Amber surveyed the street. She knew the bang wasn't a gunshot—she would know the distinctive sound anywhere—and it took her a couple of seconds to work out the noise originated from the exhaust of a blue Citroen Saxo.

Small droplets of sweat beaded on the client's forehead, squeezing their way through a layer of industrial foundation that looked as though it had been applied to her wrinkled face with a trowel by an inept builder.

"It was just a car exhaust," Amber said.

The old lady peered along the street, her lips pinched, eyeballs bouncing in their sockets as she looked around.

“Are you sure?” she said, her bottom lip trembling. She tightened her grip on the Versace bag suspended over her shoulder.

“Yes, look.” Amber pointed along the street to where the car waited at the lights, belching smoke. As soon as the light changed the vehicle sped away, unleashing a double-barrelled bang from its exhaust that made a number of shoppers along the street jump in surprise.

The old lady’s hand fluttered against her breast. “Oh my goodness. For a moment there, I thought that was it.”

Amber smiled. “Just relax, Ms. Hawkins. You’re quite safe.”

“Thank you, dear.” She touched Amber’s arm and squeezed. “It’s so much easier having a female bodyguard than one of those brutish men I’m so often lumbered with.”

The term *bodyguard* rankled Amber. She found the term *mercenary* even worse. She was a security consultant, her services available to the highest bidder.

The job to escort Ms. Hawkins arose at the last minute when the woman’s usual guardian—ex-SAS man John Richmond—called to say something had come up which took precedence, and he asked Amber to step in. His exact words regarding Ms. Hawkins had been enlightening: ‘She’s a nutter, but her money’s good.’ Amber smiled to herself as she remembered the conversation. Although she hadn’t seen him for over six months, the sound of John’s voice brought back fond memories of their brief but explosive relationship.

But she didn’t have time to dwell on it now. She had spoken to Ms Hawkins before venturing out, but the client was vague, saying only that her dear, departed husband had earned a number of enemies because of his business dealings, and despite him being dead, she feared for her safety.

As she surveyed the street, Amber’s spine tingled and she shivered. Clenching her fists, she narrowed her eyes and scanned the crowd but couldn’t see anyone staring back that might have given rise to the feeling.

With her concerns unfounded, Amber indicated they should

continue towards the large department store where Ms. Hawkins said she liked to shop.

The automatic doors slid open as they approached and they stepped inside.

Ms. Hawkins shuddered.

“It’s nice to get out of that chill wind,” she said, uncoiling the snakelike scarf from around her neck.

Amber nodded and scanned the shop. Racks of clothes stretched along aisles either side of the entrance, leading to separate display sections. Set out over eight levels, with each floor as large as a football field, a shopper could get lost for days among the items on display. Bright overhead lights illuminated the room, and scores of people wandered up and down the aisles, perusing the merchandise.

“Oh this is divine,” Ms. Hawkins said as she fingered a blue cashmere cardigan. “It would go just wonderful with your eyes.” She lifted the cardigan from the rail and held it before Amber.

Amber glanced at the cardigan and politely nodded. She hated shopping and would rather spend her time field stripping her large collection of guns, making sure everything was in working order.

“And if you’d just grow your hair out a bit,” Ms. Hawkins continued, “then I’m sure this dress would look heavenly.” She indicated a red floral, knee-length dress. “You have the figure for it. I would *die* to be so slim. Do you work out? Of course you do. Don’t get me wrong, your hair looks lovely short, but I think just a couple of extra inches would make all the difference.”

Amber knew the same was true of a few men, but she refrained from smiling.

As Ms. Hawkins wandered between the aisles, Amber walked behind her, slightly to her side, taking the best possible position to spot a potential hostile approaching from the front while still offering protection from behind.

She caught sight of herself in a wall mirror and did a double-take, the short black wig changing her whole appearance so that she hardly recognised herself. Her posture looked a little tight,

and she allowed herself to relax a bit. Despite her line of work, she knew she didn't look like a security consultant; with her sculpted cheeks and slim physique, she more closely resembled a model. Someone once likened her to Keira Knightley, and she guessed there was a similarity if you only glanced at her.

"What do you think of this?" Ms. Hawkins said, placing a beret on Amber's head.

"I'm not really a hat person."

"Rubbish, it looks wonderful." She teased out the edges of Amber's short, black fringe. "There—very Parisian."

Amber bit her tongue.

"How about I buy it for you?" Ms. Hawkins said.

Amber shook her head. "Thank you, but I really don't thi—"

Ms. Hawkins put her finger to Amber's lips. "I insist. It's the least I can do." She tugged the hat from Amber's head and kept a firm grip on it as she wandered down another aisle.

From what she'd seen so far, Amber surmised Ms. Hawkins to be a lonely old lady. She wondered whether her request for bodyguards wasn't more for the company than the protection.

"They do a wonderful lunch in the restaurant on the eighth floor," Ms. Hawkins said, turning the corner round a display rack. "What say we have a bite to eat, and then let's really go to town?"

As a rule, Amber, who kept her presence low-key, didn't get asked to dine with the client, but she knew Ms. Hawkins wasn't going to take *no* for an answer. Come to think of it, she did feel a bit hungry.

"Only if I can pay for myself."

Ms. Hawkins seemed to consider Amber's statement for a moment, then she smiled. "Come on then, follow me."

She let Ms. Hawkins lead the way to the lift situated on the far side of the room. If left to Amber, they would use the stairs through a door on the opposite side of the room, but she couldn't expect an old lady to walk up eight flights. Not that Amber would mind. Hell, she'd run up. She loved the exercise, and saw any opportunity to keep fit as a godsend. There was also an escalator

in the middle of each floor. Amber thought how good it would be to crank up the speed and try running up the one going down.

When they reached the lift, Amber pressed the call button and the door opened on a box capable of holding eight people at a squeeze. She ushered her client in and turned to stare out at the shop floor. As the lift doors closed, she noticed a figure snatch a dress from a rack of clothes. She only caught a quick glimpse, enough to identify the nondescript man as mid-thirties with short brown hair and broad shoulders. But a familiar hundred-yard stare caught her eye as he glanced across, which meant he would either make a good friend or a dangerous enemy.

She wondered what the man was doing looking at women's clothing. He didn't look like a transvestite—although she couldn't stake her life on it—and he didn't appear to be accompanying a woman. Of course he might be waiting for his partner to exit the changing room, or he might just be out shopping for his wife or girlfriend. But most men opted to buy flowers, chocolates or the usual unsuitable underwear designed more for titillation than comfort. What men knew about size never usually went any further than a woman's breasts, and they usually got that wrong, so a man out shopping for a dress made the hairs on the nape of Amber's neck prickle.

With just the two of them in the lift, Amber could smell her client's heady perfume. Amber hardly ever used scents herself, and she only applied enough makeup to disguise the bags that sometimes hung beneath her eyes. Fresh-faced, she saw little reason to disguise what nature intended with cosmetic slap, and she felt more at home in camouflage paint than foundation.

"Are you married?" Ms. Hawkins asked.

Amber shook her head.

"Sorry, I know it's none of my business. What you must think of me—"

Amber's lips curved into a faint smile. "I don't think many men would appreciate their wife following my line of work." The smile wavered as she remembered her break up with John—

when she'd chosen her profession over romance. She sometimes wondered whether she'd made the right decision.

The lift came to a shuddering stop and the doors slid open with a faint squeak. Amber stepped out first, glanced left and right, and then motioned Ms. Hawkins towards the restaurant on the far side of the room.

To reach the restaurant, they had to pass through kitchenware. The aroma of cooking food, rich with mouth-watering spices, was everywhere. Amber wondered whether the pots and pans were situated on the same floor as the restaurant for a specific reason—maybe to get those interested in cooking to eat before they made a purchase. The glass windows around the room offered a panoramic view of the surrounding city, the grey sky close enough to touch.

Just as she started to follow Ms. Hawkins, movement caught Amber's eye. She turned and saw a man moving her way from the top of the stairs—the man with the hundred-yard stare. To reach the top floor, he must have run up the eight flights, but he didn't appear out of breath. He gazed at Amber, and she saw his hand move towards the waistband of his trousers.

Sensing the imminent danger, Amber's pulse raced. Adrenaline coursed through her body. She positioned herself between the man and Ms. Hawkins, who, oblivious to the threat, continued shuffling towards the restaurant.

"Ms. Hawkins, get down," Amber shouted.

She didn't turn to see whether the client complied.

The man pulled a gun from his waistband. Amber couldn't be sure, but she thought it was a Heckler and Koch USP Compact.

*So much for John's claim that Ms Hawkins imagined the threat,* Amber thought. She should have acted upon her earlier assessment of the man, stayed in the lift and returned to the ground floor to escort Ms. Hawkins from the building.

Amber rolled aside, instinctively withdrawing her gun. Taking a bullet wasn't an option. She would be no use to her client dead.

The whiplash crack of gunfire rang out, and a bullet struck a saucepan near her head. Shoppers screamed.

Amber couldn't understand what the man was thinking, making his move in a busy store. It wasn't the best place to stage a hit—too many witnesses—unless the man was crazy or stupid, both of which seemed probable.

“Ms. Hawkins? Are you okay?” Amber shouted.

She heard movement to her side. “My goodness,” Ms. Hawkins said, crawling towards her.

“Stay where you are,” Amber said, holding her hand up as a signal to stay put.

Another bullet struck the pots and pans at her side, causing them to ring with a strange percussion sound. They swung to and fro as she stared through a gap in the aisle, scanning the area.

*Where the hell are you?*

Another shot rang out, but the acoustics of the room made the sound hard to trace.

She needed to pinpoint the man before she fired. Too many innocent people could be hurt otherwise.

Putting her cheek to the ground, she stared through the gaps under the shelving lining the aisles. She saw the shoes of people running towards the exits, but then about three aisles to her left, she spotted the sand-coloured boots of someone standing still, facing her.

It had to be the man with the hundred-yard stare.

A display of plates and dishes exploded over her head as another shot rang out, and shards of crockery rained down. A dish shattered on the tiled floor, sending slivers of porcelain flying like shrapnel. A number of the pieces embedded themselves in Amber's cheek. She ignored the pain, her senses working at hyper speed.

She turned, looked at the ceiling where the fire sprinklers blossomed. She knew the principle behind the sprinklers. Each sprinkler contained a glass tube filled with a liquid that expanded

when subjected to heat. When the tube broke, it allowed the pressurised water to push out the plug. She also knew that, unlike what was shown in most movies, setting off one sprinkler wouldn't activate the others—and one sprinkler wouldn't provide much of a distraction, but it might unbalance the man enough to give her a shot.

With ten rounds in the Glock, she knew it might take most of them before she hit the sprinkler above the man's head, then she might not have enough time to reload. In a shooting encounter like this, it wasn't the first round fired that won the engagement, but the first *accurately fired* round. She needed a clear shot, so it was a risk she was going to have to take.

"Stay down," she said to Ms. Hawkins. "I'm going to try to draw the man out."

"Be careful, dear," Ms. Hawkins said.

Adrenaline coursed through Amber's veins, supplying her with added strength. She took a deep breath, steadied herself, then she stood up, aimed at the sprinkler above where she had seen the man standing, and fired seven rounds. The gun kicked in her hand. She saw the man in her peripheral vision, heard the bark of his gun as he returned fire, and she dropped to the ground. After a moment, she heard the satisfying hiss of water raining down; thought she also heard a muffled voice say, "Shit," but she wasn't sure.

Although it wasn't empty, she ejected the magazine, letting it clatter to the floor. She inserted a fresh magazine into the well, using her index finger to guide it in, something she'd practiced until she could do it in seconds—blindfolded. With a round still in the chamber, she didn't need to release the slide, which made reloading that much faster.

Hoping the water distracted the man, she crawled to the end of the aisle, braced herself, rose to a standing position, used the shelf as a support, tensed her finger on the trigger and aimed—but the man wasn't anywhere to be seen.

Cursing under her breath, she scanned the shop floor. A crowd of people cowered in the far corner of the room, while

other people charged for the stairs, knocking others patrons out of their way as they ran.

The place looked like bedlam. Water from the sprinkler rained down, splattering a pile of pots and pans like an impromptu dishwasher.

*Where the hell are you?* Amber narrowed her eyes, tried to calm the racing thud of her heart. Gun clasped between both hands, she stalked through the aisles, scanning the faces of shoppers, trying to spot the target.

A deathly silence descended, as if everyone in the store were holding their breath in anticipation.

That's when she heard it. A slight click followed by the sound of hollow metal bouncing off the ground. The target was reloading.

Amber spun towards the source of the noise, and saw the man propped against a display cabinet full of crockery. With no time to hesitate, she aimed and fired two rounds.

The first bullet disintegrated a bone china cup at the side of the man's head. The second struck his right shoulder, knocking him back and twisting his body. Someone screamed. The man's left hand flew to the area of impact, staunching the flow of blood. He bared his teeth, grimaced, and dropped out of sight.

Amber couldn't lose the initiative. She ran along the aisle and found the man crouched on the ground, gun propped between his knees, trying to reload with one hand.

"Give it up," she said, aiming at the man's head.

The man glared up at her; his blue eyes looked haunted. He spat a wad of phlegm in her direction.

"Go to hell, bitch."

"This isn't worth dying over."

"Who said anything about dying?"

Before Amber reacted, the man launched himself towards her, using his legs as a springboard. He extended his good hand, fingers clasped like a claw, ready to gouge her face.

Acting on instinct, Amber fired a single shot. The bullet passed through the man's eye, leaving a vacant socket and putting

an end to his hundred-yard stare. For a brief moment, she saw straight through the man's skull as the bullet tore a chunk of bone from the back of his head. Blood and brain sprayed the ground, creating a macabre puzzle, and the man crumpled to his knees and then fell forward, his head smacking the floor.

Sweat beaded on Amber's forehead and her hand was shaking as she returned her pistol to its holster on her waist. Taking a life was never easy. But she had to put it out of her mind and concentrate on the client—had to act professional—so she turned and hurried back to Ms. Hawkins. As she reached the end of the aisle, she noticed Ms. Hawkins still lying on the ground.

"It's okay, you can get up now," she said.

Ms. Hawkins didn't respond and a cold stab of fear prodded Amber's stomach.

"Ms. Hawkins? It's safe. The man's dead."

She took a couple of steps closer and saw the pool of blood seeping from underneath Ms. Hawkins' chest.

"*Jesus.*" She ran towards the prone figure and crouched down at her side. Blood dribbled from the corner of Ms. Hawkins lips, leaving an exclamation mark down her cheek. Amber felt for a pulse, but couldn't feel one. The hit-man's bullet had found its target.

She bit her bottom lip. Took a deep breath. This was bad. This was *very* bad. She closed Ms. Hawkins eyes and rocked back on her heels. Death never got any easier to accept. She pictured her brother Simon in her mind, saw the rictus of pain etched across his face, the rope pulled taut around his neck, creating a second chin below his cherubic features, his body swinging below the landing, as though rocked by unseen hands, the banister creaking in sympathy. She never forgave him for committing suicide. Everyone had problems. If only he'd talked to her about them, they could have sorted it out.

The chatter of shoppers brave enough to venture from their hidey-holes brought her out of her reverie, then she heard the slap of feet heading her way and looked up in time to see armed police exiting the lift.

She knew she couldn't afford to be found at the scene. Unlike some other countries, it was illegal to carry a firearm in public in the UK.

She wiped the hint of a tear from her eyes, then stood and ran towards the stairs.

"Stop," someone shouted.

Amber ignored the command and dove through the doorway, banging her shoulder and losing her footing as she careened into the wall. Ignoring the pain, she picked herself up and fled down the stairs to the next floor.

She heard the sound of officers in pursuit, their footfalls echoing down the stairwell.

Pulse pounding at her temples, she crashed through the door on the next level, her gaze taking in the racks of clothing. While the ground floor comprised the cheaper clothes, this floor housed the more expensive designer brands.

The crowds on this floor didn't know what had happened on the floor above, and they continued shopping unconcerned. Amber dodged between the aisles, walking fast. She headed towards the changing room, picking up a couple of tops on the way. Once she arrived at the entrance, a teenage girl counted her items and gave her a plastic token with "2" imprinted on it.

Amber glanced back, biting her lip when she saw the police swarm into the room. She thanked the girl and hurried past her.

The changing room consisted of a short corridor with curtained-off areas along either side. Near the entrance there was a rack with clothes people had tried on but didn't want. Amber snatched a long blue coat from the rack and ducked behind one of the curtains into a small cubicle containing a mirror and a bench.

Looking in the mirror, she pulled off the short black wig and shook out her wavy, shoulder-length strawberry-red locks. Then she reached into the pocket of her jacket, took out a small penknife and cut the security tag off the sleeve of the coat.

She put the coat on, stuffed the wig in the pocket, slid the tag under the bench, picked up the tops, left the cubicle, and handed the tops to the girl on the way out.

Head bowed, she walked to the escalator and made her way to the exit before the police had the foresight to lock the place down.

Outside, police cars were parked haphazardly across the road. Amber kept her head down and walked around the corner at the side of the building; then she ran.

As fast as she could.

## TWO

Amber slammed her fist down on the wooden desktop, ignoring the resultant pain. The sound echoed around the room, made all the louder by the lack of fixtures and fittings.

“What the hell happened, John?” she snapped.

John Richmond leaned across his office desk and held his hands up, his swivel chair squeaking as he moved. “I think I should be asking *you* that question.”

Amber fought to control her temper, hands clasped together to stop her from punching out. “She’s a nutter but her money’s good,’ you said. ‘A rich old woman who got a little spooked after her husband died.’ Well I guess she wasn’t so fucking mad, was she?”

“Calm down. You’re a professional, so act like one. What happened is unfortunate. No one could have seen it coming. But don’t come in here barking at me just because things went bad.”

Amber shook her head. “*Unfortunate?* She’s bloody dead.” She ran her hands through her hair, exhaled loudly, took a deep breath, and collapsed onto the padded high-backed chair opposite John.

In the six months since she’d last seen John face-to-face he’d lost weight; his once-athletic body looked at least fifteen pounds lighter, making him probably about twelve stone. Either he’d

been working out too much, was ill, or something had affected him emotionally. And as he didn't look ill, that left only two alternatives.

His cheeks were sunken a little more than usual, eyes shadowed by his prominent brow, spiky brown hair gelled into place. He pursed his pale, narrow lips. She liked his lips, liked the feel of them crushed against her own, and despite her reservations, she still felt the original attraction that pulled them together.

She glanced around his office. Papers were stacked on top of a filing cabinet in the far left corner of the room and there was a general disorganised feel to everything, from the clutter on the desk to the jacket thrown across the back of the chair next to Amber. The only things that seemed organised were the photographs of John in military uniform adorning the walls.

Bands of light beamed through the long window behind John, creating a corona around his head.

Amber leaned forward. "So have you found out anything about the shooter?"

"So far, no. For all we know, he might have licked one too many stamps down at the post office."

"No. He was a professional. Not a competent one, but a professional all the same."

"Well we haven't got time to analyse it now. A situation's come up. It's time sensitive and it's going to require some finesse. But I promise—as soon as I get back."

"I want to talk about it now. Not when you get back."

John raised his hands in a placating manner. "Amber, I understand where you are, but you of all people should know that you shouldn't try to make sense of these things. Death is just a part of our line of work."

Amber bit her lower lip. She knew he was right, but she didn't want *him* to know that.

John smiled, and for a moment she saw the man she had fallen in love with.

"So what's this job you're going on?"

A slight twitch afflicted John's right eye. He put his hand in front of his mouth and coughed. "I can't tell you much as it's confidential, but the client's desperate, and they're paying a hell of a lot above the going rate. I'll be back tomorrow all being well, and we'll talk then."

Amber put her hands on the desk. As she did so, John reached across and grabbed her hands firmly but gently. He ran his thumb across her knuckles.

"I'm sorry it went bad. You know I wouldn't put you in a situation if I thought anything would go wrong."

Amber swallowed, felt her cheeks flush with colour as a spark of the old electricity flowed through her. Then John withdrew his hands and Amber stood up and walked towards the second story window, looked out at the busy street below.

"So how much is 'a lot above the going rate?'"

John shrugged. "I'm not certain of the exact details. All I know is that this job's going to make me a fortune."

Amber continued to look out the window. She knew John well enough to know he was lying. He wouldn't be going on a mission without knowing all the details. She turned back to look at him.

"You need some time off," he said. "You've been through the grinder today. We'll talk tomorrow—when I get back—if you want." He paused. Licked his lips. "Maybe, you know, we could go away together after this job is finished."

Amber saw a slight flush creep into John's cheeks. Was the old fire still there? Or was she mistaking his friendship for something more?

The mobile phone on his desk rang. He picked it up and accepted the call. "I need to take this," he said, covering the mouthpiece with his hand. "I'll be back in a minute." He stood up and walked out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Amber sat back down and put her feet up on his desk. Was there a chance they could rekindle what they once had? Of course she still had feelings for him, but in their chosen profession,

relationships were doubly hard to work at.

The phone on the desk rang. Amber looked to the door John had walked through, then at the phone.

Thinking it might be something important, she leaned forwards and picked it up. "Hello? John Richmond's office."

"Could I speak with Mr Richmond please?" the caller asked, a London accent detectable in his voice.

"I'm afraid he's busy taking another call at the moment. Can I take a message?"

The caller hesitated. She heard him breathing down the line. "Tell him it's Christopher Finch. It's important that I speak to him."

"Well like I said, he's busy. I can have him call you back."

"I can't wait. I've got a meeting to attend to. Do you work for him?"

Amber pursed her lips. "Yes, you could say that."

"Well tell him one of the men he's arranged for tonight's team has pulled out. We need to find someone else, fast, otherwise the job's off."

Amber drummed her fingers on her thigh. She knew the job must be something important, and if it paid as much as John said, he wouldn't want to lose it. Besides, she owed him. Despite targeting him with her anger for Ms. Hawkins' death, she knew the only person to blame was herself.

"As long as you don't have any complaints about a woman taking the man's place, then there is someone who could step in," she said.

"A woman?"

"Highly trained. Three years as a Specialist Firearms Officer with the London Metropolitan Police. Before that she served five years in the army. Now she works as a security consultant."

"And how can I get in touch with her?" Finch asked.

"You already are," Amber replied with a smile.

## THREE

By the time Amber arrived at the rendezvous point Finch had given her over the phone, darkness had smothered the light from the sky. The feeble glow of the moon illuminated the edges of baleful clouds overhead, but did little to lighten the surrounding countryside.

She knew she should have told John about what she'd done, but after what happened earlier, he might not be so keen on having her tag along, so she'd decided to keep quiet. Now that she was here, it would be too late to arrange for anyone else to take her place.

The potholed track leading to the farmhouse played havoc with the suspension of Amber's silver Audi TT, and she cursed each bump.

She saw Ms. Hawkins in her mind's eye, and chastised herself again for not preparing for the job, and for letting John convince her there wasn't any real threat. She should have known better. Her lapse in judgement and preparation had resulted in an unnecessary death. How could she have been so stupid? She had let both Ms. Hawkins and John down.

A couple of parked vehicles came into view, their bonnets peeking from the entrance of a dilapidated old barn. One appeared

to be a new black Range Rover, the other a silver Porsche.

She parked alongside the barn, switched off the ignition, killed the headlights, and exited the car. The chill wind made her shiver. Several oak trees surrounded the property, their branches creaking in the breeze like arthritic old limbs.

Beside the barn stood a couple of outbuildings, in which most of the glass windows were broken.

She walked around the side of the barn and headed towards the house, her feet squelching through mud. A faint light shone around the edge of a boarded-up window in a ground floor room. Although she couldn't see anyone, she had the distinct impression of being watched, much like the feeling she'd had before Ms. Hawkins' demise. She hesitated, peered around.

A glint of light caught her eye, and she stared into the trees where she noticed a figure standing, watching her. The figure held a rifle of some sort—telescopic sight twinkling—which meant they didn't feel the need to stay hidden, otherwise the gun would be camouflaged and the optics covered. She guessed the person had been monitoring her since she drove towards the house. She spotted another figure silhouetted against the night sky on the roof of the outbuilding. The presence of armed guards—however inept—meant the people involved weren't taking any risks.

From the location, she knew the 'job' would be something clandestine, otherwise there wouldn't be any need for the out-of-the-way meeting place, which she had found with the help of her car's GPS system.

The farmhouse appeared rundown and uninhabited, the windows boarded-up. She noticed a couple of tiles missing from the roof, the guttering collapsed on one side. A couple of aerials bristled on the chimneystack, next to a satellite dish. At a quick guess, and going by the size of the place, Amber thought there were at least three or four ground floor rooms, and an equal number of rooms upstairs.

Once she reached the building, Amber noticed that despite the structure's general dilapidated appearance, the front door

seemed new. The shiny screw heads on the boarded-up window beside the door also belied the rundown state.

Although hidden from the main road by a copse of trees, someone wanted to give the impression the building was abandoned, and to a casual observer, it might appear so.

Amber was unsure whether to knock. But before she could decide the door swung open.

“You must be Miss Redgrave, please come in,” the man standing in the hallway said, stepping aside. Amber recognised the voice—the man she’d spoken to on the phone.

“Mr. Finch,” she said, passing through the door.

He stood an inch or so shorter than Amber. His straight, shoulder-length brown ponytail accentuated his high forehead and the angles of his face, and the small dimple in his prominent chin looked like a thumb impression. Amber noticed an air of confidence about the man, apparent in his posture and expression, the thin gash of his lips a Plimsoll line on his face, which she guessed to be the only way to gauge his level of interest, as the rest of his face remained stoic.

“Next door on your left,” Finch said as he closed the door behind her. “Go straight in.”

The interior of the house kept with Amber’s assertion that the outside was a ruse, the smell of fresh paint irritating her sinuses. Decorated in neutral colours, blue with white skirting boards, the nondescript hallway wouldn’t look out of place in a newly built property, like any of those estates springing up all over the countryside.

Quiet chatter bubbled out from the room to the left. When Amber walked in, the occupants fell silent.

She recognised a couple of faces. Barry Adams, his bulky frame filling the leather chair by the boarded-up window, trademark Havana cigar glued between his lips. Amber had worked with Barry in Iraq, where the need for private security contractors meant there were rich rewards—rewards that far outweighed any risk involved. She didn’t know a lot about Barry’s history, but she remembered

he used to be a member of the Parachute Regiment, the Airborne infantry element of the British Army, and was a good man to have on your side. She recognised another face: Lars Andersen, an ex-French Foreign Legion soldier built like a bull. She'd worked alongside Lars while protecting visiting dignitaries from Saudi Arabia. With his blond hair and chiselled Eastern European good looks, he could pass for a model. He stared at Amber, his blue eyes unfocused before he seemed to recognise her.

Both Barry and Lars nodded a greeting, the former raising his hand in recognition. But there was no sign of John, and her heart sank a little.

Amber did not recognise the other four men in the small, square room. One man sat in a chair at a long pine table cluttered with papers. He had a pockmarked forehead, black hair and almost toad-like characteristics. A nondescript man leaned against the wall on the left. Instantly forgettable, he would blend well into a crowd. The other two stood at the back of the room. One was a Slavic-looking man with piercing blue eyes, and the other was a bald man with a scar running through his lips that gave him a down-turned expression.

The room itself was decorated in magnolia, modern. Numerous up lights created warm illumination on the ceiling. The furniture consisted of two brown leather chairs. The long pine table was covered with a set of diagrams and maps. Nine metal high-backed chairs sat pushed underneath the table. The blank screen of a television inlaid in one of the walls cast a dark reflection of the room.

"Big Red, I didn't expect to see you here," Barry said, exhaling a cloud of cigar smoke. An ashtray rested on the arm of the chair at his side.

"You know what they say, Barry. You can't keep a good woman down."

"This is bullshit."

Amber turned to face the speaker: the tall bald-headed man with the scarred lip. He had a can of beer in his hand.

“I don’t work with women,” the man said, glaring at Amber.

Barry removed the cigar from between his lips. “Calm down, Eddie. Big Red’s on the level. She knows the score.”

“Bollocks. Women are only good for two things. No, make that *one* thing. Half of them can’t cook for shit, which is why all the best chefs are men, and I’m not having a piece of skirt watching my back.”

Amber stared at Eddie and smiled. She’d endured more than her share of egotistical men during her career. “Well, having one use is better than having none.”

Eddie stood up straight. “What are you saying?”

“I should think that’s obvious unless you’re as stupid as you look.”

Eddie squeezed the can of beer in his hand and foam poured over his fingers. “You cheeky bitch.”

“Gentlemen—and ladies,” Finch said, walking into the room. “We’re all professionals here. Let’s try to keep it civil.”

“Professional? She’s a woman.”

Amber didn’t need this shit after what happened this morning. “Although Dome Head’s powers of perception are uncanny, you’d better tell him to keep a lid on it.”

Eddie narrowed his eyes and glared at her. “No woman tells me what to do.”

“I’d be surprised if any woman would want to come close enough to try it,” Amber said.

She noticed the other men in the room watching with interest. They looked the sort to take bets on the outcome and, apart from Barry and Lars, the wry grins on their faces said they wouldn’t be betting on Amber.

Barry guffawed, spewing a cloud of smoke from his mouth. “I think I’d quit while you’re behind, Ed.”

“Stay out of it. This is between her and me.”

“On your own head be it.” Barry tapped ash into the ashtray and settled back in the chair.

“Can we get on with the reason why we’re here?” Lars said.

Finch clasped his hands behind his back and walked to the far side of the table. "Of course. My name's Christopher Finch. I work for...well, considering the circumstances, someone who would rather remain anonymous for the time being."

"Circumstances?" Amber said.

Finch motioned towards the table and chairs. "If everyone would like to take a seat, I'll fill you in on the details."

Barry pushed himself out of the chair and strutted across to seat himself at the table. The other occupants of the room did likewise. To her dismay, Amber found herself sitting opposite Eddie.

Finch sat at the head of the table, fingers tented on top of it. "I'm not going to beat around the bush. My employer is a wealthy businessman, and his two children have been kidnapped. My employer received a ransom demand for fifty million pounds for their safe return."

Eddie whistled through his teeth.

"Then I take it your employer doesn't want to negotiate," Amber said.

"Precisely. He feels that if he pays the ransom, then the kidnappers will execute his children."

"Based on what?" she asked.

Finch paused, his expression deadpan. "There was a similar incident a few months ago. It was all kept very hush hush, but a child was kidnapped from a private school in the Home Counties. The kidnappers requested that the parents not inform the police, otherwise, they'd kill the child. Taking the kidnappers at their word, the parents delivered the money to the location they were given. In return, they got their son back. Unfortunately, he was delivered in two pieces."

"The cruel bastards," Barry snarled.

"That's the reason you're all here. My client has instructed me to organise a rescue operation for his children before it's too late."

"Just like that," the nondescript man said. "And where are we supposed to start looking?"

“Before I go into details, I need to know that nothing I say now will go beyond these four walls.”

Something didn't feel right about this. Amber tried to put her finger on what it was, but couldn't pin it down.

*Why fabricate the building to look abandoned? Who owned it? Why were armed guards posted outside? Wouldn't it have been just as easy to convene in a room in a hotel?*

She wondered whether the morning's fiasco had heightened her anxiety. Noticing Finch staring at her, she nodded. “Mum's the word.”

“Speed is of the essence, so everyone who accepts the mission will have to leave tonight.”

“Tonight?” the man with the pockmarked forehead said.

“The kidnappers have given my client twenty-four hours to gather the money. Almost twelve hours have already passed. When the time's up, they are going to ring to arrange where to drop the ransom. We need to act before that call is made.”

“Who's to say the kids aren't already dead?” Amber said.

“That's a risk my employer is willing to take. If any of you don't wish to participate, then I suggest you leave now.”

No one moved.

“Excellent,” Finch said. “My employer threw some bait into the water, and we managed to get a bite. With such high-profile kidnappings, the kidnappers would have difficulty keeping their movements secret, but when someone offers a large sum of money as an incentive, you can virtually acquire their life history.” He picked a remote control up off the table, pressed a button and the lights dimmed. He pressed another button and the television burst into life.

“These are the children: Robert and Lindsey,” Finch said as the pictures of two kids flashed across the screen. “The girl's twelve and the boy's ten.”

Amber fidgeted in her chair. They were cute. Both blond-haired with big, toothy grins. It sent a pang of anger through her to think they'd been kidnapped.

The screen went white before another picture appeared, showing a soldier with a mean glare. A series of shots followed, all of men in military garb.

“These are the most current pictures of the kidnappers that we were able to acquire. They are all extremely dangerous.”

“So why not just inform the police and have them round the kidnappers up?” Amber asked. “They have people trained for this sort of thing.”

The television screen went black and the lights came on.

“Hey, big mouth, are you trying to lose me my job?” Eddie snapped.

Finch held his hands up. “In normal circumstances, you’re right. But my employer is not a happy man. He wants the kidnappers...how shall I put this...eliminated.”

“So this isn’t a rescue mission,” Amber said, “it’s a hit squad.”

Eddie grinned. “What’s the matter, babe, you squeamish? The sight of blood make you feel ill? I knew this was no job for a woman. They haven’t got the bottle for it.”

Amber stared across the table, the blood draining from her face. Her fight instinct kicked in and she felt her heart pound. “If you’ve got a problem with me, then I suggest we take it outside,” she said, trying to keep her voice calm.

Eddie leaned back in his chair and laughed. “You? fight me? I don’t fight women—all that scratching and hair pulling.” He looked around the table for support.

“Why not? The way you act, you’re more female than me.”

Lars chuckled. The nondescript man laughed.

Eddie sat up straight. “If you weren’t a woman, I’d—”

“You’d what?” Amber asked.

Finch shook his head. “Can we please concentrate on the task at hand? Lives are at stake. It doesn’t serve any purpose fighting amongst ourselves like children.” He paused. “Perhaps you’re not the professionals I thought you were.”

Eddie grunted and took a drink from his crumpled can of lager. “I’m the best you can get.”

Finch stroked his chin. “Well, I hope your nickname of Crazy Eddie has more to do with being passionate than being foolish.”

“I’m passionate all right.” He stood up and thrust his hips forwards. “One hundred percent love machine. You ask any woman I’ve slept with.”

A couple of men chuckled.

Amber rolled her eyes. She thought she would be hard-pressed to find any woman to back his claim up. “He didn’t mean passionate that way, dumb nuts.”

Eddie glared at her. “I know that. Can’t you take a joke?” He sat back down.

“If we can get back to the details,” Finch said. “From the information we gathered on the kidnapers, we’ve ascertained there are at least seven of them, all of whom have military experience, so we’re not dealing with amateurs. These are professionals—men who will shoot first and ask questions later.”

“What sort of military experience are we talking about?” the man with the pockmarked forehead asked.

“From what we know, these men were together in the army. When they left, they used their experience to plan these high-profile kidnappings, realising their talents could be put to monetary gain.

“They’re holed up in the remote, abandoned lead mining village of Kilnhill. If you’ll look on the table in front of you, you’ll find plans for the town which we managed to obtain from library archives.”

Amber opened the plans, which turned out to be an ornate old ordinance survey map, drawn in pen and ink. An area called Burnham Forest surrounded the village. Other names on the map included Peatland and Bogside written in stylised script. Hills averaging a thousand feet in elevation surrounded the area. There was also a modern version of the map, which didn’t show the village of Kilnhill at all.

“So is the village still there?” the Slavic-looking man asked.

Finch nodded. "From what we can gather, it's fallen into ruin, but there are still buildings left intact."

Lars leaned forwards and studied the plans. "Looks pretty remote. What's the insertion plan?"

"As you can see, the area is surrounded by trees and the landscape is rugged, which is going to make progress difficult. Insertion is going to have to be by helicopter, with the landing zone about ten miles away from the target."

Amber looked up from the maps. "*About* isn't much good. For an operation like this, details need to be accurate."

Finch leaned across and prodded his finger at the map. "This circled area is the landing zone. As you can see, there's a river running almost all the way to the village."

"What about that road?" Barry asked, indicating a snaking line on the map.

"We expect the road, which is more of a track, to be monitored. It's not an option."

"What about this marshland?" Amber said, indicating an area on the map to the west of the village. "Your landing zone means we would have to traipse through the marsh."

"Yes. I think it will be the point of least resistance. If the kidnappers get wind of the rescue operation, they will figure the road to be the probable point of entry. They won't expect anyone to come in from the rear."

"I don't mind doing a bit of rear entry work," Eddie said with a smug grin.

"I presume you mean on men," Amber said, "as I doubt any woman would let you eat her shit, never mind prod it."

Eddie bristled. She saw him clench his fists. A couple of men laughed.

"Back to the mission," Amber said before Eddie responded. "Is there any reason to assume the kidnappers would be expecting a rescue operation?"

Finch shrugged. "One should always assume the worst case scenario."

“Which is?”

“That they know about the plan and have fortified their defences, or that they have withdrawn from the site, or that they have already killed the hostages.”

Amber sat back and gazed over the maps. The terrain looked terrible. The forest and hills provided plenty of ambush sites, and the marsh would slow them down. Warning bells went off in her head. Although it might mean it would put the mission in jeopardy, after the Ms. Hawkins debacle, she wasn't about to commit herself to anything she didn't like the look of—not when she didn't have the time to plan ahead.

She stood up from the table. “I'm sorry, Mr Finch, but I think I was wrong. I'm not the right person for this job, so if you'll excuse me.” She turned to walk away.

Eddie clapped.

“But—Miss Redgrave, we haven't gotten down to the nitty-gritty yet,” Finch said.

Amber shrugged. “I think I've heard enough.”

“For someone with your weapons training and military experience, this would be right up your street. I did a check on you. I was impressed enough with your credentials that I want you to head up the team.”

“No way,” Eddie said. “I'm not having a woman tell me what to do.”

She ignored Eddie and looked at Finch. It would be good to accept—just to rub Eddie's nose in it. But it wasn't worth the hassle. “I'm sorry. I guess I'll just cut my losses and run.”

“Yes, losses to the sum of one million pounds.”

Amber rolled her shoulders. “Shared out between however many are onboard, it's not worth it.”

Finch frowned. “I think you've misunderstood. That's one million pounds—each.”