

REBWAR

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THE CONTACT

OLS SCHABER





## ONE

Rebwar was waiting for the traffic light to turn green as rain tapped on the windscreen, splitting the colourful London city lights. In the back seat were two passengers, each one looking out of the window into the busy street, which was lined with colourful shop windows. The wiper flicked over the fractured green light and Rebwar pressed the accelerator. As he looked into the rear-view mirror, Clive, his handler, stared back. Clive was balding, with a white moustache, red-faced, his blue eyes darting around. Rebwar had come to know his nervous energy: today there was enough to turn any stomach. Rebwar's detective gut was still puzzled by this man. There were to be no personal relations with your handler. Just a simple exchange of services. But that wasn't what Clive was about. There was nothing easy about him. Rules didn't apply to him; they were mere decorations.

Rebwar turned into Drury Lane. There was no particular destination: he just had to drive Clive around with his clients. Today, the client was Oran, and he too was filled with nervous energy. He tapped everything he touched

and his sharp eyes didn't fix on anything for too long. Rebwar's first impression was of a lost man, desperate and lonely. Clive liked vulnerable; it was a quality he sought out.

Oran was talking to Clive. Rebwar detected a foreign accent.

'You find anything? Dirir is his name. From Africa.'

Clive nodded, giving a glance and looking back outside.

'Can I smoke?' Oran looked at Clive and then to Rebwar, who nodded and lowered his window for him. Oran shaking, lit up. 'He's making trouble for the boss. Dirir not an honest man. Not honest.' And he shook his head. 'Always wants me to transfer less. I know he is stealing from the boss. You find something?'

Rebwar pulled up to another set of traffic lights. Rain was now creating a colourful mosaic in front of him only to be interrupted by an intermittent wipe.

'You... Crazy man... CRAZY!' said Oran.

Clive opened the door and walked out, slamming the door shut behind him.

'*Kahretsin!*<sup>1</sup>... I am...'

Rebwar turned around to see Oran's shocked face staring down at his stomach.

'*Adam! Aman tanrım?*<sup>2</sup> He breathed in and held a grunt. 'Help...'

Oran's white shirt was turning red. Cars honked behind. Rebwar drove ahead, looking into his rear-view mirror and looking for Clive.

'What's he want?' He groaned. 'Crazy! Man fucking crazy. Why he?'

Rebwar looked around him; he had turned into a quiet one-way street.

'Stop car!' said Oran.

Rebwar's knuckles were white. He steered into a parking space.

'No hospital, understand?'

Rebwar turned, undid his seat belt and turned on his seat to face Oran. 'You need it. You're going to bleed to death.'

*'Intikamımı alacağım!'*<sup>3</sup> Oran's eyes flicked to focus on the knife's black plastic handle, which was sticking out from the left side of his stomach. The red stain was quickly expanding over his white shirt. He carried on swearing, took out a white handkerchief and groaned.

'Hey no! You have to keep it in. I'll call.' Rebwar showed him his phone. 'OK? Call for help.'

Holding onto his wound and breathing deeply Oran said, 'No! No police.' Rebwar knew what was coming next. The knife fell onto the back seat. Oran held his stomach and shouted his pain away. Rebwar had been knifed a couple of times in his life. He recognised that cry. Stomach wounds were nasty. From its position, Clive had either missed or tried for a flesh wound. The knife was a short one and probably from his kitchen.

Oran breathed hard and said, 'You can ask Clive for the cleaning bill.' Oran grimaced. 'You tell him that I will revenge him.' Oran opened the car door.

'Oran, we need to call for help. Yes?'

Oran tried to laugh. 'So insurance can pay.' He breathed in again and swung his two feet onto the pavement. 'You all the same. I know people. Tell Clive.'

Rebwar got out of the car and went over to stop Oran. He pushed Rebwar out of the way and stumbled on. The rain fell like needles and Rebwar sought shelter under an archway. He took out his phone and called Clive. It rang and went to voicemail. He took a breath and was about to

leave a message filled with questions and anger. He dropped the call and swore. Took out a Marlboro box, snapped the filter and lit it. He looked down the street; Oran had gone. He hadn't seen that coming and who could calmly walk away with a gut wound, bleeding and in shock? Apart from a few people darting from cover to cover, the street was empty. It was lined with modern offices, flats and a coffee shop at the end. Only a few windows were lit, the rest was dark, one or two cameras, but all pointing at the entrances.

Rebwar opened the passenger door. The seat was covered in blood. He took out a handkerchief and took the knife. He had to get the car cleaned up and ready for tomorrow's shift. Clive was costing him and there was no point in billing him, he'd had to do overtime with Uber to keep up within his overdraft.



Rebwar sat outside under a green canopy at the Shishawi on Edgware Road. It was his local, a place where he could find some home comforts or close enough; at least Turkey shared a border with Iran. It was where Berker his Turkist friend worked. Rebwar sipped the strong, sweet Turkish coffee and he noticed that the ashtray was full.

He checked his phone for messages. Nothing. He had a typed up message ready to send to Clive. *Call me! What were you...* it said. Rebwar was convinced that what had just gone down was not Plan B business. A shady organisation who had approached Rebwar and had asked him to be a courier. He had no one else to call.

'Hey, want another one with those smokes? You know vaping is cheaper. Unless...'

‘What?’

‘Rough night?’

Rebwar looked up. It was Berker, greying, thick moustache with stubble. His black eyes stared. ‘Hey, Berker! My mind was wondering.’ Rebwar closed his eyes. ‘Long day. Too much traffic.’

‘Something stronger?’

Rebwar nodded.

‘My sister is coming to town,’ said Berker. ‘She needs a guide. Pretty and likes older men.’

Rebwar tapped his ring finger onto the wooden table.

Berker smiled. ‘I won’t say anything. You have a wife?’

‘Get me that drink. Make it a double and whatever is nearest.’

Berker exchanged ashtrays and went back into the restaurant. Rebwar thought back to Oran and what he had been saying in the cab. About some guy called Dirir that Clive was supposed to be looking into. Clive had used Rebwar’s car as a meeting place before, taking his clients around the London streets. All of them vulnerable and looking for some help.

Rebwar’s phone rang. He let it ring for a few more moments, the number flashing on the screen.

‘Clive, Wh—’

‘Where is he?’

‘He’s gone.’

‘What do you mean gone, dead?’

‘You should have...’

‘Is he still in your car?’

‘No.’

‘Stop with the suspense, you idiot. I need to find him. Is he dead?’

‘He left the car.’

‘Why the fuck did you let him do that?’

‘He wanted to go.’

‘Wanted to go? Stop being an idiot. Look, Rebwar, and listen to me very carefully. Find him.’

The phone went dead. Rebwar looked at the screen, took a drag on his cigarette and swore. He felt like a pet trapped in a soiled cage. He had invested too much. If he handed himself in, there was the risk that they would send him back to Iran. That wouldn’t be fair on his family. He had promised them a new life. And this one was better than a jail, which was what was waiting for him back home. Berker returned with his drink, a round glass of cognac. He downed it, felt the burn and heat like a slap. He got up and left some notes on the table.



Rebwar retraced his drive to jog his memory and find Oran. It was like searching for a ghost. What was Clive expecting, some kind of miracle? Anyone else would have told him where to go, but Rebwar didn’t have a choice. Clive would threaten him with jail, deportation, exploitation and anything else that came to him. This had to be what one of his passengers meant when Rebwar heard him refer to being between a rock and a hard place. It felt like that. He turned down Short’s Gardens, where he had parked up – his last sight of Oran. There was no police tape or any other sign of a crime. The blood had long been washed away by the rain. He parked the car and continued on foot. He remembered Oran walking down to the end of the street. The rain had stopped, only reflecting puddles were left as a reminder of what had happened.

He should have stopped Oran. His confidence had

surprised Rebwar; he hadn't expected such a reaction. Rebwar knew he wasn't going to find Oran slumped in a dark corner, but he carried on looking. And why had Clive stabbed Oran and then asked him to look for him? A mad moment? A visceral emotion? It was something that just didn't make any sense. But then so much about Clive didn't. Rebwar hadn't known him for that long. It was after Plan B had approached him with an offer to work for them. A few weeks later, Clive turned up at his front door. It had spooked his wife, Hourieh, and son, Musa. Both of them questioned him till he had to give them an inch of truth. That was the trick all good thieves used: hide a nugget under your face and lie. Rebwar had told his wife and son that Clive was a man from the government, who had come to check on them in order to sort them a visa. What Rebwar hadn't told them was that he was working for Clive as a courier.

The job had taken on a bigger role that wasn't in the original brief, far from it, and that was what made Rebwar suspicious of Clive. And the fact he was now trying to find a trail of blood on some pavements made him nervous too. As former policeman he had searched out plenty of suspects it was more about where this metaphorical path led to. Yes, Clive had asked him to do this but was Plan B aware of it? To the left of Short's Gardens was a '70s block of flats with a green Camden Council plaque in front. Rebwar recognised the plaque: his tower block was run by them too. Along the red bricks were a few light traces of blood where Oran had no doubt reached out for support. Rebwar followed the blood around the block until he got to a big intersection with a little park in the middle. To his right was the Shaftesbury Theatre running a musical called *Memphis*. It was a busy area with buses and cars running in

all directions. He stood there, watching for patterns and wondering where Oran would have gone.

He took a left and looked for a bus stop. The closest one he could find was by a church. He noted down the bus numbers and looked around for any other bloodstains, but there were none. Rebwar checked his watch and noted the time: 9:23 pm. Shops and offices were closed; there wasn't anyone to ask for more clues. It was London, you could trip over and if you got back up with a bloody nose, no one would come over to help. Just a drunk on his way home, they'd assume. Rebwar dialled a number.

'Raj.'

'Uncle...' A crunch of crisps. 'Wait, wait, don't tell me! You need a favour.' Raj let out a high-pitched giggle, not too different to a squeaky toy.

'Hungry?'

'Huh, yes, KFC?'

'Send me the address, and I'll meet you there.'



It was Raj's local. He had the loyalty app and the staff knew him. He could basically get anything out of them. Rebwar wasn't a fan of the fried chicken craze that was taking over every London high street. He preferred his local cuisine, something in which he could at least taste some kind of provenance or talk to a waiter about. Musa always nagged him to take him to some fast-food chain. He did so reluctantly; it was a bargaining chip.

Raj was already sitting with a selection of buckets and paper-wrapped food and sucking on a red straw. He smiled at Rebwar. He could hardly fit into the plastic cubicle. His XXXL t-shirt struggling to keep his belly covered.

High from his fast food, Raj giggled again. ‘You can pay at the counter.’

Rebwar got his wallet out. ‘Do I need to get—’

‘More chips.’ Raj moved some buckets around. ‘And ketchup.’

Rebwar walked over to the cashier. She was a small Asian woman, her badge said *Meeja*. ‘Chips?’ she asked with a smile.

‘Yes, and a coffee. How much for?’ He pointed to Raj.

‘Twenty pounds and fifty pence and that includes the discount voucher.’ She passed over the card machine.

Rebwar handed over a twenty and a pound.

She looked at it and called her manager over. He took out a pen and swiped it across. Nodded and handed it back.

‘Rare are they?’

‘Fakes, a lot of them. And it comes out of my pay.’

The man with the greasy hair nodded at *Meeja*, turned and walked off to the back of the restaurant.

Rebwar returned to the table where Raj had already demolished half his meal.

‘So, Uncle...’ He took a large mouthful out of a chicken leg. ‘What’s the crack?’ He masticated. ‘The news?’ He giggled. ‘Slang, Irish.’

‘Yes.’ Rebwar sipped his coffee. There was a lost coffee bean in there, but it was more of a homeopathic experience. ‘Do buses have CCTV?’

‘Uh, yeah, but not always in working order and there are many buses, in case you hadn’t noticed.’

‘OK, I have a window... 8:15 pm to 9ish, a couple of hours ago.’ Rebwar got out his mobile phone and showed Raj a picture. ‘These three routes.’

‘I can make a list of those buses. That’s easy, but...’ Raj looked up and took another bite of his chicken leg. ‘I... but...’

He stopped eating. ‘But getting that video...’ He swallowed. Rebwar could see the lump travel down his thick throat. It reminded him of a pelican. ‘It’s what they do with the footage. If it’s uploaded to the cloud then, yes. If it’s on a drive in the bus... Well, that would be fucking boring and retarded. But I’m sure they’re not running with the latest tech. I mean it’s the Tf<sup>4</sup> and buses. They don’t even have fucking wifi. Did you lose something?’

‘You could say that. Can you check if there were any incidents along the route? Like a man needing some help?’

Raj took out his mobile phone and tapped it with his thumb. Rebwar sipped from his cup.

‘No, nothing out there yet... I’ll set up a tracker for it. What’s the dude’s name?’ Raj’s eyebrows raised.

‘Or— Oran or something.’

‘Mobile?’

Rebwar shook his head.

‘Uh, fuck, is he some kind of agent or something? Passenger? Of course not... Who gives you these jobs? OK, don’t ask, I know. Yeah, Yeah.’

Rebwar looked out of the window at the traffic passing by. Was there a reason why he didn’t give Raj any info? For his own protection? Although from what? But Raj was a good kid, and he trusted him.

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1. *Fuck!*
  2. Man! Sweet Jesus.
  3. I am going to get my revenge.
  4. Transport for London

## TWO

Rebwar had tried to sleep on it but he lay wide awake in his bed. This wasn't his assignment and not his pay grade. But he couldn't let it go. He actually felt sorry for Oran. From what he had picked up between Oran and Clive, Oran was being asked to fiddle some transactions at the money exchange where he worked. If only he had been paying some attention. He was acting the taxi driver and not really taking in what they were saying. This was very unlike him, but it had been a few years since he'd snooped on people's conversations and thoroughly scrutinised them.

Rebwar looked up at the white painted ceiling, which had a dark yellow haze from the London night sky. His digital watch read 3:37 am. His wife Hourieh was snoring away on her side, facing the door. He wanted a cigarette but hesitated, because Hourieh would wake and ask for one too. He put one in his mouth, sucked on it and remembered one of his first cases, a burglary. It was a hot summer, and they had rounded up the usual suspects for the family. Rebwar smiled and lit up. Hourieh stirred and turned. Rebwar took another draw.

‘Husband, pass me one.’

Rebwar passed his cigarette and lit another one.  
‘Remember the Shirdel case?’

Still holding her lit cigarette, Hourieh pulled herself up to rest on the light pink headboard. She brushed her dark hair from her face and took a drag. ‘Husband... That was...’

‘Twenty years ago. One of the first ones.’

‘Why do you ask?’

‘Made me laugh. And I just read that the old man had died.’

‘Remind me.’

‘Got called out on a Sunday. We were supposed to go and see your parents for lunch.’

Hourieh laughed. ‘And I had to explain to *Baba*<sup>1</sup> how you were doing an important job, rest his soul. “Should have stayed in the military,” he kept telling me.’

‘He never got over that.’ Rebwar stubbed out his cigarette and passed the ashtray. ‘The whole family was there in front of an empty safe. Father, Mother, daughter and the son-in-law. No traces of a break-in. Should have taken all of them to the station. But, no, the boss said it was burglary.’

‘But it was, wasn’t it?’

‘Yeah, but none of the stories matched up. And I got told to match them up. Banu, the daughter, said her husband, Turan, also the son-in-law, had to go into work in the morning. The old man said everyone was at home. But the mother said he was asleep. They must have known that their stories didn’t add up. But none of them wanted to accuse each other.’

‘Of what?’ Hourieh flicked some ash off her nightie.

‘Of one of them doing the robbery.’

‘But that never came out, did it?’

'I thought it was Banu and Turan. They had access. And then I thought it could have been insurance fraud. The family needed money.'

Hourieh turned her head. 'Oh, the little shits! Why?'

'The young couple?'

Hourieh nodded.

'Wanted to run away.' Rebwar lit another cigarette with the dying butt. 'And they did. Killed in a car crash a couple of months later at the Turkish border.'

'And they did it?'

Rebwar nodded. 'Running away. A confession from a gangster, who was in jail. And the amount he stole from them was pretty much the same as what the pawnshop had paid out.'

'You found the jewellery. Could have kept some for me.'

'Hey, we're not all crooked. We got gifts.'

Hourieh looked at one of the rings on her fingers. 'And I bought those with my money.'

'It was a contract killing, too. That's what I never understood. Why kill that couple? For what? And then I decided that the killers had got it wrong. And it all went quiet.'

'And?'

Rebwar picked up the *Hamshahri*, Teheran's most popular newspaper. 'Mr Shirdel, the father...' He unfolded the paper and pointed to the article. 'Godfather of the D-teens gang. And I interviewed him like he was a victim. The most humble, unassuming man. *Ey kalak pedar sag*.'<sup>2</sup>

Hourieh's head was down reading the article. '*Operated in Teheran's southern districts D9 to D18*.' She tutted and folded the newspaper. '*Protected by the British and the Americans*.'

'He had protection.'

'And he killed his own daughter.'

'And the son-in-law.'

'Lucky my father didn't kill you.'

'Sure, he was thinking about it.'

They both laughed.

'Karma then. Don't you think we should get a safe?'

Hourieh asked.

'For what? To put Musa's video games in. It's an old story, they're not going to come here.' And Rebwar lit another cigarette.

From outside the door, they heard a muffled voice.

'Musa, go back to bed.'

'Son?' The door creaked open. 'Football this weekend? Polis are playing, we can listen to the radio.'

'Yeah, sure whatever. Oh, only if you sort out the internet.'

'Internet. But it's OK?'

'Can't listen to music.'

'Yeah, husband, he keeps asking me, but I have no idea. Blink, blink that's all it does. And he, bla, bla, in my ear.'

'And we then listen, OK?'

'Yeah, whatevs.' Musa closed the door.

Hourieh got up, put on her tiger-patterned dressing gown and went out of the room.

Rebwar carried on thinking about this new case. He had to get into Clive's office. There had to be more clues about him and Oran.

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1. Dad
  2. Devious son of a dog

## THREE

Rebwar was parked on Humber Road in North London, looking at Ionna House, a rectangular bricked building with two floors of square windows facing the street. Behind it was a series of smaller units that had garages and other small businesses all behind a grey spiked fence. The whole area had a selection of purpose-built offices and small warehouses. Vans and lorries kept honking at each other for space. Clive's office was in one of the units. He had mentioned his company many times before and plenty else. There weren't many secrets with Clive, which seemed a very strange trait for a private detective. He couldn't keep anything quiet for long. Whether it was true or not, was another matter. But he spoke mostly about him and his interests. Rebwar had been curious about his office and he had imagined it many times. Untidy, piles of files, a bin full of fast-food wrappers, takeaway coffee cups, unread mail and the odd certificate in a cracked frame. It was 8:40 am and either Clive was lying unconscious on the office floor or in his bed with his clothes on.

The unit had two storeys and had seen better days. The

whole area looked like it had been waiting for a demolition order. Grime stuck onto everything. Cracks with weeds growing, cracked paint, cracked concrete, cracked windows, it was as if it was deliberate so you couldn't see who was in. Rebwar pushed the front door, which was bowed and hadn't closed properly since someone had stopped caring; it dragged on the worn carpet. From the door buzzers, there were six offices. Private Detective Services was on the second floor. Rebwar smelled the hallway, it had a damp tang and he sneezed. The stairs were bare concrete and led to a landing on the first floor.

Private Detective Services was the second door next to an empty office with a door missing. It had been kicked in and its hinges ripped off. Rebwar looked in and saw the door lying on the floor next to a desk and a broken chair. Paper and empty files filled the rest of the messy room. He went over to Clive's office. There was a padlock on the door. It too had been kicked in but patched up with white tape. The lock was a number combination; it was either going to be easy or be broken. He thought of some three number combinations that Clive might use. On the third try it opened, 101, something he used with his clients to describe his hate for people's habits or appearance.

The office was pretty much how he had imagined it, only a little tidier, the piles were at least symmetrical; it was as if someone with OCD had been there. They can't have been there for long. A client, maybe? Rebwar looked through the unopened mail, bills and junk. He went over to the bin and emptied it onto his desk. Among the food wrappings were a few crumpled pieces of paper with numbers, names and addresses. He took them all. There was a computer screen on the edge of the table. The keyboard was

hanging off the desk. Rebwar hit a few of the keys and moved the mouse around. A dark screen stared back at him.

He called Raj and left a message to call him back, then went over to some shelves with cardboard boxes. It was a mess of old files taken from Clive's police days. Rebwar took some photos with his mobile and his phone rang.

'Raj...'

'Uncle...'

'Yeah. Still awake? I'm in an office and—'

'There's a computer.' He giggled. 'Can you remember... Scrub that, describe the box, some kind of writing.'

'A black screen and a mouse thing.'

'No box? Look under the desk.'

Rebwar bent down but could only find some empty takeaway cups and more paper. 'No, no, Loose wires.'

'It's been nicked.'

Rebwar looked around the small office. In one corner was a pile of brown cardboard boxes. He moved them and opened them. In one of them was a black plastic box with HP on it. 'HP?'

'The sauce? Joking. Just pulling your chain, Uncle.' There was a moment of silence. 'Lost, huh. It's a computer, Uncle. Just take it and I'll play with it later.'

The other boxes had books and more files. There were evidence bags with articles of clothing and photographs, plus some old case files. Rebwar took more photos. Closed the box with the computer and took it. As he was about to leave, he heard male voices downstairs. One of them was asking for Clive's office. Rebwar put the box by the open door, walked out and headed for the toilet opposite.

The light flickered on. The cubicle was dirty and unflushed with no toilet paper and a newspaper from last month. Rebwar heard the man walk up the stairs and stop.

He waited for him to walk again and then peeked out of the door. He had dark hair and wore a light green t-shirt, a denim jacket and jeans. He closed Clive's office door behind him. Rebwar looked at himself in the cracked mirror and with his fingers combed back his dark hair. He put on some sunglasses and a stuck-on thick moustache. Back Iran his colleagues would always joke on what costume he would come up with. It had become a habit to take moustache with him. He took out a flick knife and rushed into the office, taking the man off guard. He held the knife next to the man's throat and flicked the door shut with his left foot.

'No stupid moves.'

The man's face was frozen. His dark deep-set eyes stared at Rebwar. He searched the man's pockets, threw a wallet onto the desk, a phone, some cash, and dropped some tissues onto the floor. 'What are you doing here?'

'Clive?'

'You came looking for him?' Rebwar pressed the knife into his throat.

'Clive, I've got a job for you. Really, I do.'

'You've been sent. Why did you ask for directions?'

'I'm looking for Clive. Got a job.' He swallowed. 'Really, mate.'

Rebwar kicked the back of his legs and the man fell onto his knees. He grimaced at the impact. Rebwar went over to the desk and took his wallet. He looked through the bank cards and driving license. Fadil Tekin, DOB 12 April 1993 and a London address. He looked at his picture and the man in front of him. He looked a bit older. Tekin moved his leg to get up.

'Don't move. You're not a client. No client sneaks into an office looking for something.'

Tekin was taller than Rebwar and thinner. 'Mate, listen to me. Call Clive. Go on. I swear.'

Rebwar carried on looking through the wallet. He took his phone and went over to him.

'On your mother's grave? You call him.'

Tekin hesitated but took the phone. He dialled and looked at Rebwar while it rang. 'Clive, Clive, yeah mate... yeah, yeah.'

Rebwar grabbed his phone from him. 'Who's this?' There was no one on the other end. Rebwar smacked Tekin. 'Who sent you? Money Exchange? Oran? Plan B?'

Tekin's eyes blinked and looked to the left.

'Plan B? What's your role?' For a moment Rebwar wanted to show his cards, but he knew well that one of the rules was not to mention Plan B. Rebwar got some zip ties out of his jacket.

'Look, mate, I'm supposed to be giving a message to Clive. OK?'

'You can tell me'

'*Personally*, that's what they told me. *Only to him personally*. I can't.'

Rebwar grabbed his left wrist, turned him around and grabbed the right. Before the man could protest, both of his hands were zipped. It pinched his skin and he flinched.

'Are you going to call the cops? Tell them what?' Said the man.

Rebwar pushed him into a chair.

'Come on, mate. Just go and get Clive.'

Rebwar tied his legs together and his hands to the chair.

'You're joking, right? Fuck sake. I'm the messenger, mate.'

Rebwar swung the office chair around. 'Tell me the message and I'll release you.'

Tekin looked at him, staring into his eyes. Rebwar went over to grab the brown box with the computer. 'You can tell him yourself when he comes by. Oh and tell him he's got a virus on his computer and I'm taking it to get it fixed.'

'Call him, hey? What's your name?'

Rebwar closed the door and padlocked it.

## FOUR

He was on Great Portland Street where a money transfer business called Quick Exchange was squeezed between an office entrance and an aquarium shop. The name matched one of Clive's crumpled notes that Rebwar had found in his bin. He knew of these little booth-like services and used one of them to send money back home. The one he used was Persian Capital and had been recommended by one of Hourieh's friends. These places were dotted around London and offered different grades of legality. This one he put at fifty-fifty. He hadn't heard of them but if they were somehow involved with Clive or a client... He went into a newsagent's that sold cigarettes, international mobile sims, snacks, drinks and newspapers, and asked the short, dark-skinned man for some cigarettes.

'How much?'

'Nine quid, sir.'

'That's more than my rent back home.'

'Did you live with your parents?'

Rebwar passed him a twenty-pound note and held it there on the counter. 'Oran? Have you seen him?'

‘Oran who?’

Rebwar looked around him. ‘I need a transfer... for my parents. He does it for me, usually.’

The man’s brown eyes darted around, checking Rebwar.

‘Go and ask next door.’

‘I only trust Oran.’

‘They’ll tell you next door.’

‘Wanted to ask you. You know him, no? He buys cigarettes or does he prefer to roll them?’

The man tidied his counter.

‘You give him discount?’

The man looked away and smiled. Rebwar put a tenner on the counter. The door jingled, opened and a woman with a pram came in.

‘Have you got a toilet?’

Rebwar looked back onto the counter; the money had gone.

‘In coffee shop, down the road.’ The man pointed in the direction.

‘It’s out of order.’ And it was followed by a big sigh.

‘Restaurant? Or big shop on Oxford Street.’ The woman reversed out. He looked at Rebwar. ‘Take cigarettes.’ Rebwar looked at him, waiting for another offering. But he just kept staring.

‘Is he OK?’ Said Rebwar.

The man walked off to a corner of the shop and flicked his head. Rebwar came over.

‘You police?’

Rebwar shook his head. ‘Back home I was. Now taxi driver. I am worried about Oran. Think he’s in trouble.’

‘Not seen him for a few days.’ And he looked above him. There was a camera pointing at the door. ‘I have called him and texted. But no answer.’

‘Can I have his number?’

The man showed him his mobile with a number. Rebwar wrote it down on a little pad and handed the man a cigarette. The man looked up, crossed his heart and kissed a cross that hung from his neck.

‘Inshallah, I shall find him.’ Rebwar left the little shop.

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Rebwar crossed the street, lit a cigarette and looked over at Quick Exchange. He saw a young black man wearing a hoodie walk in. Rebwar crossed the road and followed the man in. Inside was a teller with a metal screen in front and thick mirrored glass around it. Stickers and flyers were dotted around, advertising their exchange rates. On one side was a row of old worn fabric seats. The man had taken off his hoodie. He was thin with crooked teeth and he bent down, trying to speak to a woman behind the security glass. His hands were swaying around and he kept looking over at Rebwar.

‘Get me Oran. It’s been three days... Yeah. Sorry? No, not good enough, ain’t gonna cut it.’ The woman’s voice hardly made it out of the small opening. ‘Get me the boss, Yeah... When?’

Rebwar put on some reading glasses and picked up a flyer that was in a box by the window.

‘Fuck’s sake!’ said the man. ‘I’m going to take my business elsewhere. Understand?’ And he turned around, trying to get Rebwar’s attention. ‘Shit service. Yeah, customer service. You heard of that? Losers. Yeah.’

The man left, with his large white trainers. He held the door and looked back at the woman. He clicked his tongue and shook his head. Rebwar watched him walk across the

street, folded the flyer and followed him. The man had his hoodie back on amidst a trail of smoke. He was darting from left to right and looking around him like a fly was following him. The man stopped at the end of the street by a pub and lit another cigarette with the leftover butt. He looked around him.

Rebwar walked into an Italian restaurant, went over to a coat stand by the entrance and took a black-rimmed hat. He smiled at a waiter and pointed at the hat as if he'd forgotten it. He walked out and put it on, flicked the jacket collar up and put on some sunglasses. The hooded man was still there and looking at his phone. Rebwar walked past him, went into the pub and up to the bar. He ordered a pint of Stella Artois. Rebwar looked back and could see the man pacing around a traffic sign.

The barman asked Rebwar for five pounds and fifty pence. Rebwar looked at the five-pound note he had put down. He repeated the price. Rebwar looked at the fancy glass, with its stem. For a moment, he wondered what he had ordered. He found a pound coin and signalled with his hand to keep the change. The man took the change without a reaction. Rebwar sipped his drink and looked out onto the street. He sipped it again, wondering what the fuss was about Stella Artois. He looked at the glass.

'The finest wife beater,' said a man next to him.

Rebwar looked at him, a big red-faced man in an ill-fitting suit. He laughed, gulped down the rest and ordered another one. By the door were a couple of men smoking and holding their pints.

Rebwar walked out onto the pavement and asked for a light from an old man who obliged. He overheard the man say into his phone, 'Man, where are you? Got a sitch' going on'

Rebwar drew on his cigarette and faced the window where he could watch the hooded man's reflection.

'Oran? Yeah he's not been seen... Yeah, fuck! That's what I've been saying, brov.' He turned around and looked up. 'The blue post...' He walked around. 'On Newman... And yeah on me.' He paced around the pole and scratched himself.

Rebwar carried on sipping his beer like it was a fine wine. The hooded man whistled down the street and flicked his head back. A short sharp whistle responded. Rebwar put his pint on a window ledge. Another hooded man approached, his trousers sagging just below his underpants. He too was thin and black but had a small goatee that he kept pulling.

'Hey, Dirir.' They exchanged a complicated handshake that Rebwar instantly forgot. 'Man, it's going down. Yeah. Rad, yeah. What's the shake?'

Dirir looked away, not listening to him.

'Dirir, man.' He clicked his tongue and pulled his goatee. 'Habid not going to be happy. He's been asking questions. Man, he asked me...'

Dirir looked around him and both men walked off. Rebwar took his pint and sipped it, looking down the street. He had only drunk about two fingers' worth and he hesitated to take a large gulp. Not for the taste but for the principle of having to leave such an expensive drink behind. He walked off after them down Newman Street towards Oxford Street. It wasn't long before he noticed the two, hunched up, looking down and swaying side to side as if there were some puddles to avoid. They were on their guard and Rebwar dropped his hat in a bin just before crossing Oxford Street.

Rebwar stopped as Dirir's friend watched a girl walk

into a Harmony sex shop on the corner. The friend tugged on Dirir's hoodie to get him to follow him into the sex shop but Dirir thumped his arm and swore. They walked on down a little alleyway between a large building site and a row of bricked buildings with offices. It was a cut through into Soho and the alley was just wide enough for two people. They tried to walk down side-by-side but got adverse reactions from the opposite direction. Rebwar watched them negotiate their way. This was their neighbourhood or at least they knew their way around it. He followed them down to the bottom of Greek Street to a minicab rank between two corner pubs, something that during the day looked like a boarded-up door.

A little yellow flashing light was above the sign. *Phoenix Cabs* was written on a yellow sign with a mobile number. The two of them stood by the makeshift yellow counter that was inside the small space. Rebwar saw a smiling man stand up from behind it. He was white-haired, fat and had a scar running down the side of his face. It contrasted with his happy demeanour. The two men greeted him with a respectable bow. Rebwar passed the little setup and stopped by another pub. He went inside, put on his reading glasses and looked at their selection of beers.

A young blonde girl with a tight-fitting top asked what he wanted. Rebwar noticed her bra was a little too tight and was biting in the sides. He looked at the taps and read the names of beers: Old Rosie... ESB... Carlsberg... Frontier... The girl held one of the taps like she was holding herself up. He smiled, but she looked over to some of her customers who looked back at her like there was some kind of secret code.

'Visiting London?'

'Yes, nice city. What would you recommend?'

‘Ale or lager?’

Rebwar looked at the pictures and logos.

‘Ever tried an ale? You can have a taster.’ Said the girl.

Rebwar looked at his watch. She was staring back, waiting for him to make a decision. He looked back at her, hesitating.

‘What would your father have?’

‘You mean grandfather... only joking. This one, I’d say. Likes his bitters, bit like him.’ She pulled the big wooden handle back as if it was a water faucet in a desert. ‘Only joking! Sure you’re a sweet bloke. Like all my customers here.’

It took about four to five draws until she had filled the pint glass. Something he hadn’t expected. She put the dark drink onto a mat on the bar. It had the colour of tea and had a small foamy head. Like dirty dishwater.

‘That’s an ESB... An ale... Something from the last century. Takes me back.’

Rebwar put a ten-pound note down. She took it and gave him a fiver back with some coins. He left the coins. She watched him sip it. It was full of strange flavours. Nothing like he was expecting.

‘An acquired taste, I’d say.’ Said the girl.

‘Want one?’

She shook her head. ‘But if you’re offering.’ And she looked behind her.

Rebwar put the fiver back on the bar. Her eyes kept looking back. He noticed the blackboard. Large Malbec £6.75. Rebwar put a ten-pound note on the bar. He sipped the beer again. It wasn’t any different. The same stale taste. Like something was off, but he didn’t want to offend her. She laughed.

‘Lager?’

Rebwar smiled and nodded. 'Have you ever used Phoenix Cabs?'

'Are they the lot just behind us?' She passed a pint glass, and she leaned in. 'They feel dodgy. You know, always checking me out. Nothing against them but a bit tired of being judged. Understand? But be my guest.'

'Thanks, I'll stick to the black cabs, then.'

Rebwar took his pint outside and stood by one of the benches. He could see the boys hanging around on the pavement smoking. He sipped his pint and watched them. It was an interesting operation. One of them would look after the booth and another two to three boys would organise the drivers who would be waiting in one of the side streets. They couldn't stay parked for long as they were shooed away by the parking wardens. There was the occasional heated argument. Then it was the job of one of the boys to come and distract a warden. Dirir looked like he was in command of the booth, handling the money. They all looked similar, probably from somewhere in North Africa. They all chewed quat, a light narcotic which he had dealt with back in Iran.

## CHAPTER 5

Rebwar was sitting outside at the Shishawi and the sun was trying to warm his face but it was being interrupted by white passing clouds. He folded his *Metro* newspaper into small squares so it wouldn't be blown around. He'd barely read an article about eight countries that had at some point in their history banned Christmas, the USA and UK being two of them, when his phone rang. It was the burner that Clive had given him. He picked it up.

'We need to meet.'

'Did you—'

'Golden Square in Soho, I'll find you.'

Blunt and to the point, but that was Clive. When he needed something, you were told. Rebwar had been expecting an agitated Clive, as he hadn't really disguised his appearance to Tekin who could have easily described him well enough for Clive to guess he had been in his office. Or hadn't Tekin been back there? Someone would have heard him. Rebwar gathered his newspaper, cigarettes, mobile and left a couple of pound coins.

Traffic was dense in the little one-way streets of Soho and he had to wait for a delivery truck to finish unloading. Clive knocked in the back window. Rebwar nodded and unlocked the doors.

‘What took you so long?’

Rebwar checked him out in the rear-view mirror. Same clothes as last time they had met, black leather jacket, fading blue shirt with a dirty collar. He had put on some cheap aftershave which stung his nose. His stubble was nearing a beard and he kept scratching it.

Chewing gum, he said, ‘Keep moving.’ He looked around him. ‘What’s going on here? Some kind of demo or conference.’ Clive itched his scalp and checked his fingernails. They were unkempt and dirty.

‘London...’

‘What was that man’s name?’

‘Tenkin?’ Rebwar drove on and glanced at him the mirror.

‘Oh, forget about him. Didn’t happen, right. Just didn’t happen.’

Rebwar took a few breaths to think. How could he simply brush that under the carpet? He wanted to press him, but he couldn’t. Clive had set clear boundaries of no questions.

‘So,’ said Clive. ‘I need you to take this packet to this address.’

‘Just that?’

‘Yes, just fucking that. All right. Stop the car.’ Clive got out and held the door. ‘Get on with it, and I’ll be touch.’ He slammed the door.

Rebwar didn’t even manage to ask him for payment. He

reached into the back seat and took the small plastic-wrapped package. It was sealed shut and had no branding or address. That was on a folded piece of paper, *24 Red Lion Street WC1*. He carried on driving out of Soho and turned onto Soho Square. Someone knocked on the back window. It was Dirir, waving at him to open the door. If it had been anyone else, he would have ignored him. Rebwar lowered the passenger window. Dirir's thin arm reached the inside latch and opened the door. He sat next to him with a knife.

'Drive, Yeah, get me? Yeah.'

Dirir's eyes were bloodshot and darting around like lost marbles.

'OK, calm, calm. What do you want?'

'Uber? Yeah? You Uber driver?'

'Yes.'

'You stay away from my hood. Understand? Yeah? This my hood. My streets.'

'OK, OK, I don't have a passenger.'

'You took me. Don't come here again.' And Dirir put the knife close to his gut. 'Understand?'

'Are you Dirir?'

Dirir's eyes centred on him.

'How you know me?'

'Yussuf asked me if I wanted to drive for you.'

Dirir's jaw twitched. 'Yussuf, Yussuf. I don't know of anyone called Yussuf.'

'Tall guy, with a white hat, wears Hilfiger jacket.'

'Ah, Yussuf, yeah man Yussuf.'

A car honked behind them. Rebwar drove on.

'He asked me to drive for you.'

'Did he? Man.'

'He says you give good deal.'

Dirir leaned back, still holding his knife. With his other hand, he wiped his face.

‘Why you so cool? Huh? You in the hood?’

‘The hood? Gang? No, no just from Iran. We have a lot of trouble over there.’

‘Uh, OK. Cool cookie. That’s what I call you. You have name?’

Dirir relaxed into his seat. As Rebwar’s partner Farruk had always told him, it’s harder to kill someone you know. ‘Farruk,’ he said, testing out his theory.

‘Nice to meet you. This your car, yeah?’

Rebwar nodded.

‘Good, good. Seven per cent and you pay for gas and insurance. And an extra hundred which you need to make through tips. OK?’

Rebwar whistled. ‘Hard bargain, my friend. So what do I take home?’

‘If you stick around we can make profit with special clients? Understand, Farruk?’

‘When do you want me to start?’

‘Give me number.’

Rebwar gave him the burner’s number. Dirir put his knife away and got out of the car. Rebwar carried on to the drop-off where he delivered the package. Before the stabbing, which apparently didn’t happen, these were the kinds of jobs he’d done for Plan B. He was a courier, taking packages, passengers to destinations. Rebwar texted Clive with the confirmation that he had delivered. He added *payment?* at the end of his message. He hadn’t had any of that for a while or the hint of a Visa.

## CHAPTER 6

Rebwar was having his tea at home on a corner table in their kitchen. Hourieh had made one of his favourite dishes, Khoresh Bademjan, which was lamb and aubergine stew. He knew she wanted something or wanted to chat about something. Give a little and take what you can get. Musa was in his room, playing some video games. Rebwar had tried to play FIFA 2014. Each time he'd tried, it ended with Musa shouting at him in frustration. He had even tried to watch him, but that annoyed him too. So he left him alone in the hope that he would accompany him to a real game. Hourieh served the meal. She had either nibbled while making it or eaten with Musa. She lit up. 'Husband, how's the job going?'

Rebwar cut into the meat and took a bite. And let the taste fill his mouth. 'Nice Khoresh, wife. Feeling the stress disappear.'

'What do you think about a new job? Hourieh sat down.

'It's a good job I have. And I like it.'

'Yes, but my friend, Mishmish, she's looking for a driver. Airport jobs. Good money. VIP, she said.'

‘Sounds good, Pass me her number and I can call her.’  
He lit a cigarette. ‘What else?’

Hourieh twisted her hair around her index finger and looked down. ‘You know that tea set that went missing in the move. I have a replacement, and my friends are coming over. I need to make a good impression. Especially if we want better jobs. What do you think, husband?’

Rebwar scooped some couscous and mixed it into the sauce. ‘How much?’

‘Five hundred.’ She looked at him and drew on her cigarette.

It could be true or not, but it was more about the principle. It was a price worth paying. He wiped his face. ‘Can we afford that?’

‘When you take that new job, we will.’

‘Ah, lucky you cook well. How’s Musa?’

‘Oh, only playing. Can’t talk to that boy. Maybe you should try.’

‘Maybe we need to give him a present too?’

‘And reward him for what?’

‘He’s been good, no?’

Hourieh got up and opened the window to let some smoke out. ‘Beer?’

Rebwar chewed and swallowed. Hourieh was already opening two small beer bottles and took a sip from one of them.

‘He’s not been that good.’

‘My desert flower. He’s a good kid. I see bad kids and—’

‘Husband, he needs to step up.’

Rebwar laughed. ‘Did you hear that in the playground?’  
His phone vibrated and he flipped it open. Two texts. He laughed at Hourieh. ‘I’ll call this friend of yours, OK? And yes, go and buy that tea set and be a proud Ghorbani.’

Hourieh got up and gave him a kiss on the lips. 'I love you, husband. You will see how proud you will be of us.' She put her hand on her hip and looked up. 'OK, I will make a list.'

Rebwar looked at the two text messages. The first one was from Clive. *Nice one... fat chance* followed by a thumbs-up emoji. Rebwar deleted it. The following one was from Dirir. *10 at office D*. Rebwar looked at the clock on the kitchen wall. It was 9:09 pm. He took his key, wallet, phone and took a large gulp of beer.

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Rebwar arrived on Greek Street as the pavements were spilling over with crowds of drunken people, all shouting after each other. The occasional rickshaw bike meandered by with a stereo pumping out a lost tune. Rebwar locked the car on a parking space that was for residents. He walked over to the booth of Phoenix Cabs. Dirir was behind the creaking wooden desk. He got up and greeted Rebwar, tried to make some hand gestures that were lost on Rebwar.

A balding black man in an ill-fitting suit arrived. What was left of his curly white hair made a neat horseshoe around his head. He pushed himself into the booth with Dirir.

'Phone,' he asked Dirir who looked for it under piles of papers and letters. 'Call it.' Dirir rang it and passed the phone to him. 'Go, go and find rides. Go.' Dirir got out of the booth and reached in his jacket for some quat to chew on.

Rebwar felt some friction. He leaned back onto the wall.

'Habid speaking, yes...' Said the balding black man.

‘What do you mean it doesn’t add up? I have sent all the statements and...’

Rebwar looked into the booth and saw Habid scratching his neck.

‘Yes but I have to sell. It’s a good offer, understand?’

‘Farruk!’ It was Dirir calling him over the road. ‘I’ve got a woman that needs a ride to Camden. Thirty quid. OK?’

Dirir whistled and a tall black man turned and walked over. Rebwar recognised him, it was the man Dirir had met up with in the pub.

‘Hey, see who’s here.’

He looked at Rebwar and didn’t react. Dirir looked at both of them, watching their reaction.

‘Hey! Man, thanks for the job offer! See I took it. Your brov here convinced me.’

Rebwar grabbed Dirir by the shoulder and brought him closer. The man smiled but didn’t know what to say, Rebwar reminded him.

‘Farruk.’ He shook his hand. ‘You good man. Now working here. Good, no!’

‘Wicked, bro. Yeah, yeah. Nice one. Have your ride here.’ And the man walked over to talk to a woman who was propping herself against a brick wall. She was large, and her tights had pulls. The man pointed over at Rebwar and she stumbled over. Her eyes barely registered where she was going. Rebwar wouldn’t have taken her if he’d been driving for Uber. For sure, a three-star client possibly banned.

‘Take me, man. Take me. Home.’ And she hiccupped.

‘This way. Smoke?’

Her hand waved in front of her face. He walked slowly, waiting for her to catch up. She kept going to a wall to keep herself steady. Rebwar could see Dirir laughing by the booth and fist bumping his friend. Probably betting on

whether he'd have to get the car valeted by the end of the journey. She sat down and, as soon she shut her eyes, she collapsed.

'Camden? Hey! Camden?' Rebwar turned around and tried to shake her awake.

'Home, tak... Yeah, Camden...' Her eyes closed again and she dribbled down her jumper.

Rebwar started the car and drove off slowly. By the time he got to Camden, she had begun to moan. Her eyes were rolling around, and there was a deep sigh. Rebwar pulled over opposite Mornington Crescent Tube Station. He opened the back door and she nearly fell out. She moaned a bit more. Rebwar spotted her skirt had a wet stain.

'Get out!' he shouted. 'This... Hey! Get out.'

'Are we here? Fuck, great ride...'

'Hey, you've...'

Rebwar grabbed her handbag. A couple walked by and stared at them. More people exited from the Tube station. Rebwar looked through her handbag and found a driving license with an address. Rachel McCloud with a Leeds address.

'Where do you live?'

'Here.' And she laughed. 'Let's dance. Hey. Everything is spinning.' And she threw up.

Rebwar looked around. He grabbed her and put her on some steps in front of an office building. His shoes and trousers were covered with her dinner. He swore to himself, went over to get a bottle of water. He used it to clean himself. He left enough for her and passed the bottle over.

'Hey, do you have friends here, Rachel McCloud? Hello, Rachel?' He got her phone out and showed it to her. 'Can you call home?' The phone rang, *Jim*, flashed on the screen and Rebwar picked up.

A high-pitched man's voice called out, 'Rachel?'

'This is her phone.'

'Oh, fuck... is she dead?'

'No, but close. Drunk. Very drunk.'

'Shit, she's done it again. Hospital?'

'I'm at Mornington Crescent Tube.'

'Oh, you are?'

'Taxi driver.'

'Ah... Take her to my address.'

Rebwar looked at her. 'She's not going back in my cab.'

'What?'

'She's not going back in the car. She's made enough of a mess. You come here and get her.'

'Oh, all right. I'll... let me think. Can I order another cab?'

'No, she's too drunk. No one is going to take her. She's made a mess. Understand? A mess.'

'Oh, right. OK. But I...' The man hung up.

Rebwar swore and snorted. A few minutes passed till a text pinged. Rebwar read it. *Is he still there? Call me.* Rebwar couldn't access the screen. He got Rachel's index finger and unlocked the phone. He called him.

'Rachel, Rachel. Thank God you're all right... Oh...'

'Jim, you come and get her now. I'm going to leave her here. And if anything happens, it's on you. And then I will find you and tell everyone what you did—'

'Fuck... I... can't leave. Please take her to her house. I can't... My... you understand... my cat is here and I can't leave her.'

'And? Your friend needs your help. You idiot—'

'Who's that?' Rachel looked up at Rebwar.

'Your friend, Jim, he doesn't want to get you.'

'Who? I want to go home. Now!' Her head slumped down.

'Listen, I am going to take her into Mornington Crescent Tube Station and leave her there. You can get her or not.'

After almost literally dropping her off at the station, Rebwar drove back to the minicab rank. On the way, he got a message from Berker who told him to call him back. Dirir knocked on the window and slid his thumb and index finger. 'Man, your cab stinks. Need to get that sorted. We had a bet.' And he laughed. 'Our cut is forty?' And he stood there with his hand out waiting.

Rebwar got his wallet out and gave him two twenties. And waited for him to react.

'Get out of my face and come back same time tomorrow.' Dirir walked away back to his booth.

## CHAPTER 7

Rebwar was at Swiss Cottage Tube Station and had just followed Habid, the boss of Phoenix Cabs, to a pedestrian crossing facing Ye Olde Swiss Cottage, a pub. The area was a crossroad of busy through roads with an island that had a cinema, businesses, flats and the pub that wouldn't have been out of place on a Swiss mountain. Rebwar lit up and waited for Habid to cross. From the phone conversation, he was having problems selling his business. Also, Raj had managed to retrieve a little information from the damaged computer; Clive's browser history showed that he had accessed Companies House website. He had looked into the Phoenix company, so there was some kind of link between Oran and Habid.

Rebwar stubbed out his cigarette and followed Habid. Inside, the pub walls were wood-panelled with a collection of randomly hung old photos and cheap paintings. There were velvet-like sofas and chairs on a red patterned carpet. It felt old but surprisingly clean even though the light had a warmth that lulled you into submission. Habid had sat down around a large round table. There were another three

men who were wearing black suit jackets and shirts. Rebwar guessed that they too worked for cab firms; there seemed to be an unofficial uniform, which after a day's work always looked a little scruffy – loosened tie or discarded, half-out shirt, rolled up sleeves and a few coffee stains.

There were no beers or wine on the table, only tea and glasses of water. Rebwar went up to the bar to order a beer. The group looked like they knew each other. One of them had an Arabic newspaper that Rebwar didn't recognise. They all spoke English to each other, which surprised him. They were all from North Africa, although Habid was from Ethiopia. Rebwar found a table with a seat just within earshot of them. He found a copy of the *Evening Standard* on another table and took it. He browsed through the headline: *MPs vote overwhelmingly for a referendum. 544 to 53 in favour of the bill.*

The men's gossip seemed mostly to do with where the cheapest petrol station was or if there were any new roadworks, nothing to give Rebwar a lead. Then a short, suited, fat black man came in. He was out of breath and made a beeline for Habid.

'Habid, good to see you. Sorry for the delay. Tube trouble.'

The other three men got up and shook his hand.

'This is Javid, he's giving me advice.' Habid got up. 'Tell me.' And both men walked around the corner.

Rebwar folded his newspaper, took out his box of cigarettes and left his pint. Outside the pub were benches on all sides. Habid and Javid were both smoking and sitting on one of them. Rebwar found a space close to some stairs where he could be out of sight and hear them.

'My friend, you need to find your leak. The buyer is not going to take the numbers at face value. I have—'

‘Javid, we must find a way. I need to sell. This man wants it done by the end of this week. He has cash. Cash! Javid.’

Javid ran his hand through his thinning white hair and got a document from his coat and put it on the table. ‘You’ll have to negotiate with my friend. Do I know this buyer?’

‘No, no he’s not from here. I think he’s Turkish.’

‘Habid...’ Javid drew on his cigarette. ‘It’s above board? You know they’ll go after you if they think it’s fishy. How long has he given you?’

Habid held his hand up and showed him four fingers. ‘I need... I want to retire, and Dirir is a good boy, but a boy. He did ask me what was going on... and his mother called me too.’

‘Your sister? What business does she think...’ Habid looked away and swore in his language.

Javid lit another cigarette and said, ‘What did you tell her?’

‘Keep out of it, and she threatened me.’ Habid put his hand on Javid’s shoulder. ‘Sorry, old family business. That’s why I want out of it. I’m tired of their bickering and they know there is money. Vultures, the bunch of them.’

Javid leaned in. ‘I can ask around if you want. You know, quietly...’

Habid looked around him and leaned in. ‘The man is Turkish and—’

Rebwar’s phone rang, the two men looked over and Rebwar picked up the call. ‘Yes, hello... Ahh, my desert flower. I was going to call you.’ Rebwar walked away from them. ‘Yes, yes, coming for dinner...’ He had been spotted and couldn’t hang around for the rest of their conversation. But Rebwar had an idea about what was going on.

## CHAPTER 8

Rebwar had missed his dinner to meet up with Berker. He'd called him to say he had a tip about Oran and they had to meet. His belly was gurgling away and thinking of the green bean stew that Hourieh had been preparing. The smells still lingered, and he could taste it. She had talked about it since she had found all the missing spices. As he sat down outside the Shishawi a text flashed up, it was a picture of the stew. He could feel his hunger tug at his thoughts. He lit a cigarette and drew the smoke. It helped. It was just past 7 pm, and food was being ordered, Shishas lit and drinks served. Berker gave Rebwar a quick glance with a smirk, his thick dark moustache just lifting. More people came into the restaurant looking for tables. A mix of tourists and Arabs filled the restaurant. The music was something he recognised from his previous visits, a loop of vacant Arabic music that hadn't made it to Iran.

He found a discarded *Evening Standard* on the next table and flicked through the headlines that would be forgotten by the next day. On the fifth page, a story caught his attention; a stabbing in Covent Garden, gang-related

they said but no suspects, though they were appealing for witnesses. There was a number to call. Rebwar was sure he and Oran had been spotted on some CCTV. The story ended with statistics on how knife crime was rising and austerity was to blame.

‘What can I get you?’ Rebwar looked up. It was Berker.

‘A coffee and some information. As a starter.’

‘I’d recommend the mezze.’

Rebwar showed him the story in the paper.

Berker laughed. ‘You didn’t quite make it. Coffee and a story then.’

Rebwar folded the newspaper and nodded. Berker picked up the paper and tucked it under his tray. He wiped the table with a rag and went back into the restaurant.

Rebwar looked around him. Traffic was now crawling down Edgware Road under the setting sun. He wondered why Clive hadn’t contacted him about Oran, or why the police hadn’t for that matter. For a moment, he thought of calling Clive just to see what he was up to. He was also missing someone to bounce ideas off. Back in Iran, he’d always had a colleague, but now he was a lone taxi driver. He kept reminding himself that this was a better life. Everyone was safe or safer.

Berker returned with a coffee and the same newspaper. He looked out onto the street. ‘He’s at that address.’ And he left before Rebwar could say thanks.

Rebwar unfolded the newspaper and found a folded piece of paper. He read it, downed the coffee and left with his belly still gurgling.

It was 11:23 pm by the time he got to Rodwell Road in Dulwich. Rebwar had decided to spring a plan. Clive, Dirir, Habid and Oran were all somehow linked. If he didn't do something about it, he might well end up a victim in this sorry story. He was already surprised that there hadn't been more repercussions over the stabbing.

The two-storey house had been converted into flats. The metal box by the door had four round buzzers with stuck-on handwritten names next to each one. Rebwar buzzed the third one and waited for a minute or two. No lights or noise. He held the button down for a few moments. Slow footsteps shuffled closer to the door. Oran opened the door, his small eyes struggling with the light. Rebwar stepped back to let the porch light show his face. Oran's eyes widened. He was wearing a hoodie with an NYC logo and a grey tracksuit with flip-flops. He held his belly where he had been knifed.

'Rebwar? Uber guy, right?'

He nodded.

'Come to finish the job?'

'Yes, but not you. You have a meeting.'

Oran tried to laugh, but his wound stopped him and he tried to breathe in slowly. 'Clive? He's on borrowed time.'

'Dirir.'

'The boy?' Rebwar handed Oran a cigarette, and he lit it for him. 'How you find me?'

'I have sources... You buying Phoenix?'

Oran blew some smoke. 'You looking for a job?' He stepped out of the door. 'What's all this about?'

'Like I said, Dirir wants to meet and I'm going to take you there. What have you got to lose?'

Oran tried again to laugh. 'With you, quite a lot of

blood.' He stared at Rebwar. 'You intrigue me. What are you doing with Clive?'

'Let's just say we have a common interest regarding him.' Rebwar stubbed his cigarette on the entrance mat.

'Why should I trust you?'

'You are going to have to.'

'I'm not a gambler.'

'You trusted Clive.'

'Good point and another reason not to trust you.'

Rebwar got out his phone and showed him a picture of Javid and Habid at the pub.

'Yeah, and?'

'He wants to sell.'

'And...' Oran walked down a small path to the pavement and turned around. 'You want a cut. Like Clive?'

Rebwar shook his head. 'I can help.'

## CHAPTER 9

Rebwar exited the North Circular and headed towards two derelict office blocks. The heavy metal gates were open and he drove up to the building that was closest to the dual carriageway. The former Unisys towers had seen better days; dark, dirty, cracked windows, boarded up entrances was what it presented to the passing night traffic.

‘Neutral ground?’

Rebwar parked in front of the main entrance. Graffiti and tags greeted them. He got out of the car and walked over to the door. It was ajar. Oran followed slowly, hobbling and looking around him.

‘Hey! Lift working? I have an injury.’

Rebwar walked into the large lobby and got a torch out. It was filled with spilt out boxes and broken furniture. There was a white spiral staircase that led to the second floor.

‘What is this place?’ Oran went up to the lift, the metal doors were open and he looked in to see an empty shaft.

Rebwar walked up the stairs. Traffic noise flowed in through the cracked windows

‘Hey, I’m not going up there. Where’s Dirir?’

Rebwar shone the light into his eyes. Oran held his hand up.

‘What’s going on here? Call him.’ He crossed his hands. ‘I’m staying here.’

Rebwar carried on up. Oran watched him walk up the stairs then walked reluctantly after him. Rebwar followed the dark brown carpet up another flight of stairs. The building hissed as the wind groaned through the broken windowpanes. He heard panting behind him; Oran was following. He got to the fourth floor and took a deep breath. It was a large empty space interrupted only by small columns and had views of its sister building and the North Circular. Coloured computer cables littered the floor like intertwined snakes. Empty grey metal boxes completed the picture of a once busy office floor. Dirir stepped out from behind one of the columns. His hoodie hiding part of his face. He smiled and nodded. Outside, a car pulled up. Rebwar went up to the windows and looked down. Clive stepped out of a silver car that was parked next to his. He checked his jacket pocket. A gun, probably.

‘Hey, man. Is that you, Oran?’

There were slow strides followed by an empty box bouncing down some steps. Dirir walked back and reached behind his back to draw a knife.

‘Dirir! What you want?’

‘Hey, bro. Where you’ve been? Been lookin’ all over.’ Dirir stepped towards Oran, tripping over some coloured cables. He kicked them out of the way.

‘You asked me here. Yes?’ Oran waited for a reaction.

Dirir looked back at Rebwar. ‘Hey!’ He sucked his lips. ‘Taxi man. You called it. Yeah?’

The two looked at him.

Rebwar took out a cigarette, lit it and offered them one. Neither reacted. Rebwar leaned back against the window.

‘So!’ Dirir walked over to Rebwar with swagger, glint of a blade catching the street lights. ‘What’s the low-down, brov? You’ve brought us here. Right?’

‘Ahh. Not too late then!’ Clive’s voice echoed over the empty office and he puffed and took a deep breath. ‘So. Here’s the party.’

Both turned around.

Then Dirir pointed the knife at Rebwar. ‘You! What the fuck?’

Oran pulled out a knife.

Clive walked around the wires. ‘What’s the saying?’ He pulled out a gun from his coat pocket. Rebwar watched the cocky smile he had seen so many times in his rear-view mirror. ‘Shall we chat? Who wants to start?’

‘Why you knife me?’ said Oran, pointing his blade at him.

Rebwar watched Clive’s face; it was a question he wanted to know the answer to, too. Clive glanced out of the window and looked back at Oran. ‘To get to you.’

‘But I’m... client?’

‘Yeah, but not really, are you?’

Dirir stepped towards them. ‘Hey!’ He stepped around some desks and chairs. He made a few attempts to say something but kept swallowing. Then he got some quat out of his puffer jacket and chewed on it.

‘What you saying?’

‘You want to muscle in on Phoenix Cabs. You’re making a hostile takeover.’ Clive pointed at Dirir. ‘He’s trying to put one over you, matey.’

‘What?’

Rebwar drew another deep breath and waited for his moment.

‘Clive, they blackmail me,’ said Dirir. ‘Use me to transfer money. He is crook.’

‘Yeah, that was the story you wanted me to believe. What were you expecting? For me not to find out. Who called this?’

Oran and Dirir looked at Rebwar.

‘Fucker.’ Dirir spat onto the floor. ‘Shouldn’t have trusted you, should I?’

‘Hold it, cowboy.’ Clive pointed the gun at Dirir.

Rebwar saw it catch the light. It was a small pistol, one of those you could carry in a handbag, probably taken from a client of his. Clive held it like it was a cup of coffee, and waved it as if it would squirt some water. Rebwar doubted he had ever been trained to handle weapons. You either trusted them with your life or feared them. This was neither. Rebwar used the butt of one cigarette to light another.

‘Rebwar, I think it’s time to tie these losers. Cable tie them.’

Rebwar took another draw and exhaled.

‘Hey! Get on with it, matey. Not paying you to lounge about.’

Oran and Dirir both took a few steps.

Clive pointed the gun at Oran. ‘Don’t even think about it.’

‘Where did you get the gun?’ said Rebwar.

‘What?’ Clive looked at it. ‘None of your business. Tie them up!’

‘Off another client. That you’ve robbed. Just like you’re going to rob these two.’

‘What? Off some thieves.’ He chuckled. ‘Is that stealing? Consider it a duty to the community.’

Dirir went over to Rebwar. ‘Brov, I thought he was some kind of lawyer or somethin’ like that.’

Rebwar stood up. ‘Tell them.’

Clive’s mouth moved, but no words came out.

‘You’re just a parasite. Feeding off people’s bad luck and bad choices.’

‘Hey! I’ve got the gun.’

‘Ever fired one?’

‘Want to find out?’ Clive swallowed. His hand shook a little, as he tightened his grip on the pistol.

Rebwar turned to Dirir. ‘Oran was trying to find out what you were taking from the company. He was after it too. Just like you. I guess Habid didn’t trust any of you. It was Javid who caught onto your scam, Dirir. Skimming the transfers to Ethiopia. You got greedy, five or ten per cent...’

Dirir shrugged his shoulders.

‘But twenty, that’s like a tax bill.’

‘Oh, will you stop the shipping forecast.’ Clive took out some cable ties from his jacket and walked over to Oran.

Oran stepped back and got out a flick knife.

‘Don’t make me laugh!’ Clive sneered.

Oran thrust forward, just missing Clive.

‘Hey! I’ll shoot. I will! And it hurts more than a knife. It’s not a toy gun. Idiot. Come over here, Rebwar, and tie this live wire.’ But Oran kept moving towards him.

Dirir watched them. Rebwar looked around. An empty metal shelf was to his right. Underneath some boxes, he spotted a rusting crowbar. Clive shouted to Oran to step back and the knuckles on his hand whitened as he squeezed the gun. Oran lunged and stabbed Clive in the belly. He stepped back

and tripped, his feet entangled on the loose ethernet cables. Clive stared at the expanding red stain over his belly. Rebwar grabbed the crowbar and swung it at Dirir's hand. He reacted to the pain and dropped the knife. Rebwar swung the metal bar again and aimed just below the knee and grabbed the knife. Dirir fell onto the carpet and squirmed with the searing pain.

The gun fired. Rebwar jumped for cover behind the metal shelving unit. Oran was behind a thin column, which barely shielded him.

'Rebwar, come I... I'm bleeding. The idiot got me.'

Another gunshot and some masonry crumbled from the white column.

'Found the safety catch?' said Rebwar.

Dirir tried to get up but his leg gave way. He swore. He used a desk to prop himself up.

Rebwar found a thick manual next to him. *Complete Guide to IP Networks*. He threw it at a metal box close to Dirir. Clive shot at the booming hollow sound. Dirir slumped over the desk and groaned. Rebwar used the moment to run over to a large wooden desk laden with brown boxes. Clive shot again, a window exploded behind him. The wind rushed in and loose papers blew across the office like a panicking flock of seagulls, followed by more random shots: flashes of light bounced off the white ceiling; crumbling panels fell; more windows exploded; gusts of wind whistled in, pushing boxes over and spilling their contents.

Rebwar heard a series of metal clicks like a passing train. The office settled down. Dirir had rolled onto the floor. Blood dripped off the wooden desk that he had used as a prop. Oran was still behind the pillar, which had a couple of gouges. Rebwar looked over at the boxes and saw a pool of blood where Clive had been. Had he brought

another ammunition clip? He doubted Clive knew how to unclip the magazine and he was nowhere to be seen.

‘Rebwar, I need a man like you,’ said Oran.

‘I’m not interested.’

Oran dusted his suit jacket off. ‘What’s your price? Every man has one. Find Clive.’ Oran walked over to Dirir and looked at him. He was holding his chest and struggling to breathe. Spitting blood. Oran grabbed him by his shoulders and dragged him over to a broken window.

‘You don’t have to do this,’ said Rebwar. ‘The police will be here soon.’

‘He’s a dead man.’ Oran lifted Dirir over the foot-high lip that joined the floor.

‘He’s still—’

Oran tipped Dirir over. A moment of shock was followed by a dull thud that echoed between the buildings. Oran hobbled off over the cables, dodging the desks. Crowbar in hand, Rebwar went after him. A blood trail ran down the carpeted stairs and the sound of footsteps bounced up from the stairwell. Rebwar reached the top of the lobby just by the spiral staircase. The wooden bannisters were sticky with blood. Clive’s body was slumped upside down at the foot of it, his head white as the walls, his eyes staring up into the void.

‘This is my last offer.’

Rebwar looked at the front door. Oran was holding Clive’s gun. ‘It’s not loaded.’

‘Are you going to take the risk? I have shot many guns.’

‘In the Turkish army? Who are you?’

‘I tell you only if you work for me.’

A car drove up to the entrance, its headlights lighting up the lobby. Rebwar could only see Oran’s outline. He heard him shout something over to the car. Its engine stopped and

its headlights cut. Rebwar ran towards the open lift. Metal clicks snapped at his heels. Oran shouted. Rebwar fell into the empty shaft and grabbed the greasy metal cables. He slid and stopped on the ceiling of the lift. It gave way, and he fell into it. Police sirens echoed down the lift shaft.

‘If you change your mind, you come and find me.’

Rebwar looked up. Oran had gone. More sirens joined in. Rebwar grabbed the railing that lined the lift and helped himself upright. He could feel pain but wasn't too sure where it was coming from; it was an enveloping ache. He tumbled out of the lift door. Lights flickered along a long hallway. Using the wall as support he hobbled on his way.

## CHAPTER 10

Rebwar was sitting at the Shishawi flicking through the *Metro* newspaper. On the table were another three folded newspapers, ashtray, espresso and a pack of branded Marlboro cigarettes. The sun was shining between the big white clouds. Cars drove by over the wet roads, like it was a long black strip of Velcro. In the paper, there was no mention of Oran, Clive or Dirir, no appeal for any witnesses or reports that two men were murdered. Rebwar had asked Raj to do a search on the internet but he only found a few tweets about the police being called out to the Unisys towers, with some people speculating that there were vandals or gangs in the building. Someone had seen flashes. Clive's office had been cleared out and was for rent. It was as if nothing had happened.

Berker came out with a tray with two plates of food. Rebwar caught a whiff of kebab. His stomach murmured.

'Did you find Oran?' asked Berker.

Rebwar looked up. 'You know him?'

'He has a reputation.'

'And that would be?' Rebwar took a sip of his coffee.

Berker flipped his empty tray and with a lowered voice answered. 'Import, export. You know that kind of thing.' And with his index finger tapped his nose.

'Yes, he seems like a connected guy,' said Rebwar. 'Quiet man. Accountant?'

'All I heard is that he's from Istanbul. Son of a grocer they say. Busy?'

Rebwar had gone back to Unisys tower to look for his car. But it had been towed away and none of the pounds had it. He hadn't dared to call the police. Not yet. Money was running out and he needed his car back. 'Car still in the garage,' Rebwar muttered.

Berker eyed up two girls passing by. Both of them giggling over a phone. 'You need car?'

'Coffee. This one is cold.' Rebwar passed his cup.

Berker took it and went back into the restaurant. Rebwar's phone rang. A mobile number flashed on the screen.

'Hello.'

'Could I speak to the Robin?'

It was a woman's voice. Rebwar took a moment to reply. He hadn't been called by Plan B's code name since... He couldn't remember. Clive had used it but dropped it since he wanted his personal jobs dealt with. He had forgotten about that protocol. 'Speaking.'

'We need to meet.' And the phone cut off.

Rebwar stared at his phone, blocked number, Plan B. Was this his new contact or were they looking for Clive? Berker arrived with his coffee.

'Mind if I take a cigarette? Coffee is on the house.'

Rebwar handed Berker a cigarette, the phone vibrated over the plastic surface. He picked it up and read the address.

Two hours later, Rebwar was on the top floor of the John Lewis department store. A big central atrium filled the huge building with daylight. The floor was filled with shiny expensive products. Rebwar checked the prices before he touched them. Speakers blared music, a perfect present for Musa, there were huge televisions that cost more than a car, families of suitcases. Rebwar reached for a watch.

‘Can I help you, sir?’ a young man asked him. His name tag read *Jonas*.

‘It’s a watch?’

‘Smartwatch, you can measure steps, monitor your pulse, read emails, listen to music. Tweet—’

‘Tweet? Does it tell the time?’

‘Read tweets, but you can’t reply.’

Rebwar saw a woman with short-cropped hair looking at him. She moved and looked back up. ‘Ah, thank you... I’ll think about it,’ Rebwar said. He moved to another section where TVs were showing images of exotic locations: waterfalls, deserts, snow-topped mountains. The woman followed him. She wore a denim jacket and trousers, boots. She had a wrestler’s physique.

‘Good for bird watching. Nice resolution, 4K.’ She turned to Rebwar. ‘But, I prefer show jumping.’

‘Are you the Stoat’s replacement. Or the search party?’

She turned, looked up and smiled. ‘I like you. I know we’re not supposed to say it. But I like you. Now walk with me.’

Rebwar hesitated. Was this a tactic to assess his profile? He’d heard from his Iranian friends that the UK police, border control and other security services liked playing

good cop and bad cop. Was she trying to disarm him? Make him comfortable and then trip him up?

‘I’m your new contact.’

‘What—’

‘Before you ask. I can’t say. I don’t know...’

But she knew something. Rebwar watched her looking around as if she was making mental notes. She turned her back to people as they passed.

‘Yes, so I have this for you.’

A padded brown envelope was on a shelf next to a picture frame. Rebwar took it and felt its contents.

‘Don’t...’ She smiled then stopped herself. ‘You know...’ She stepped up to him, he could smell her sweet perfume. ‘And I’ll contact you.’

‘And my car? Visa?’

She left. Rebwar watched her take the escalator down. Copper and detective. She had the intuition. Rebwar went to the toilets, chose a cubicle and opened the envelope. There was a personnel file, phone and some money; he flicked through the twenties. The phone vibrated. A text. It read, *Follow the asset and report.* A few moments later another text arrived with an address of car pound in Kentish Town, it ended with a smiley emoji.

Rebwar typed out, *Visa?* His finger hovered over the send button.

ALSO BY OLS SCHABER

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(Book 3)

Coming autumn 2020

## AFTERWORD

I hope you have enjoyed this short prequel to the Rebwar series.

You can go to my website at [www.olsschaber](http://www.olsschaber) for the latest info on the upcoming books.

There is also a Facebook page and a twitter feed to follow. As well a keeping an eye out for my email with the latest deals and news.

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