

KILLING STATE

Prologue

This morning for Honor Jones MP was unremarkable, except in one respect. She was going to die.

In a dark fleece and trainers, a black docker's cap pulled over his ears, her killer looked like any other jogger as he waited. It wouldn't be long now. She liked to run when the streets were quiet and the park was empty.

The day before he watched her as she stepped out with her shiny blonde hair in a ponytail and white ear-buds. She was alone. He could have told her that was dangerous. When there's a predator about, you're safest in the herd.

She'd eased the door shut behind her – a considerate neighbour – and yawning, she fiddled with the iPod. He could have told the Tory MP for Mile End that she should vary her habits. That routine would be the death of her. Down the short herringbone path, through the cast-iron gate which creaked, and on to the street. Stretching out her hamstrings, her long slim leg doubled as she pulled her foot up behind her. She did the same with the other leg and then set off. Running steadily down her street, across the road, ducking under the railway bridge, into the park where small-time dealers did small-time deals, by the canal, past the graffitied lock and right into Majesty Park. By the time she was round the far edge of the lake, she was breathing hard but even.

It was there he planned to move in behind her, and, listening to her music, he hoped she wouldn't hear him. He would slide the blade once through the heart, and once through the wall of the stomach, aiming to catch the artery so she would bleed out before help came. Precise. Efficient. Professional. He had been through it in his mind a hundred times, counting it out, she would die forty-two seconds after she first felt his breath on her neck under the swing of that blonde ponytail. He would be careful not to get blood on his running shoes.

After yesterday's run, the banker who lived in the flat above hers came out as she left for Westminster. She smiled, her hand on his forearm as she said something that made him laugh, leaving him staring after her as she headed for the tube station. The police would question the City boy after the body was found. Had he found her attractive and did she reject him? Did that make him angry? He'd be appalled at her death, distraught, and then outraged that anyone would think that he could do such a thing.

Across the road, Honor pulled the front door behind her, and the watcher felt the oak-thud of it. She yawned as she opened the creaking gate, and behind the privet hedge, in the shadowed doorway, he flexed his muscles. He let her go, drawing out the two purple horse-pills from his fleece pocket, chewing them, swallowing. He could hear the sound of her trainers against the wet pavement. And then he moved out from the shadows.

At first, he kept his distance.

She was a quarter of a mile ahead of him, then 500 paces, then 400. As she breathed in, so did he, and out again, in and out, drawing the air down deeper as she did. Her stride was shorter than his, but across the water, he knew the exact moment her breath grew ragged and a light sweat broke out on her forehead. She wasn't as fit as he was but she was fitter than most. Fifty paces between them, she kicked up her heels, pushing herself and forcing him to move up a gear. She was flying.

She was in sight until the moment she disappeared into the trees. A less experienced man might have panicked, but the run through the woods took two and a half minutes, time enough to catch her, and he had the knife ready. Six inches, serrated, he would make it quick, make it a mercy.

His pace was fast and steady. But as he entered the woods and rounded the bend, she wasn't running ahead of him, but sitting on the park bench alongside the path. Smoke curled up from her mouth and for a moment he thought she might be on fire, till he realised there was a cigarette between her fingers. The burning tip, the sudden centre of the world.

He broke his stride, hesitated, stopped.

Honor Jones had eyes which were sea-glass green and gold close-up and there were smudges under them that looked like bruises. She'd been crying. She pulled first one bud and then the other from her ears, watching him all the while.

"I have to finish the cigarette," she said, and with the tip of her thumb nail flicked the ash from the barrel on to the damp ground.

From behind the trees, there was a squawking and a clatter as four Canada geese rose from the lake up into the air. And it came to him that she knew what he was. She'd known he was there all along. Waiting for her. Pursuing her. Which meant that she knew what he was there to do. But why wasn't she screaming?

His right hand lay alongside the knife, the thin polyester tracksuit the only thing between his cold flesh and the warm blade.

He was still six feet away from her, and she could run. Twenty feet beyond the shadowed bench was open ground and she might be lucky. A man might be walking a dog. It might have been a dog which spooked the geese. An Alsatian lapping at the water's edge between the concrete and the slime. He didn't think she would run though, her muscles weren't bunched and ready for flight. Her left arm was stretched out along the bench, and he imagined her sitting relaxed on the green benches of the Commons chamber waiting for her turn to speak.

Her chest rose as she inhaled again. He moved closer and her jaw tightened.

She flicked the cigarette on to the ground and stood with a sigh. "I was warned you'd come and I didn't believe it," she said using her trainer to grind the cigarette end into the path.

The blade was cold now – enough to burn the quad muscle down to the bone. She tilted the blonde head to one side.

“Have you been sent to kill me?”

There was a note of inquiry to her voice rather than panic. Curiosity rather than fear. She took a step closer into the silence between them, and North smelled the Chanel on her skin. She reached for him, but didn't touch him.

“Where's Peggy?”

Honor's voice was soft – persuasive.

He had no idea where Peggy was. No idea who she was.

All he knew was that when he broke into the MP's flat yesterday, Honor had scrawled the name Peggy in scarlet lipstick over and over again on her bathroom mirror.

She dropped her attempt at persuasion, glaring at him, her hands on her hips. “You're going to kill me because I'm looking for her aren't you? That's the only possible explanation.”

Her friend Peggy was missing and she was trying to find her. Someone didn't want Honor to find Peggy.

He wasn't a murderer or a mercenary. He was duty-bound to follow orders, and this was nothing personal. The MP was a target, and she was dead already if only she knew it.

His weight on the balls of his feet.

Honor's death would happen in seconds. Merciful. She wouldn't suffer more than she had to. North made a deal with himself.

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