

# PROLOGUE

## 7 days from now

*KILLING IS EASY*, the assassin thought.

He'd struggled with so many things in life. Relationships. Money. Booze. By comparison, taking human life came naturally to him, as if he'd been born for it. *Violence is in our DNA*, his mentor had said. *If you're alive today, it's because your ancestors had murdered people who, through themselves or their spawn, would otherwise have threatened your existence. And don't let anyone tell you different. Suffering collective amnesia and behaving 'civilized' is the way of the modern world but, beneath those fancy clothes and phony smiles and oh-so-busy lives we're still primitive cavemen, itching to tear each other apart.*

Still, *easy* didn't mean he *enjoyed* it. Not in the sick or perverted way a serial killer or sadist might. It was all business for him. The only satisfaction he experienced was pride in execution. Which was especially true of his current assignment, one of the most difficult he'd ever faced.

So far so good.

He'd already cleared the two lowest subterranean levels. Now he was on level three, following the same methodical approach. Room for room, he'd sweep the place until everyone was accounted for. It didn't matter if they were a lowly maintenance worker or one of the people in charge. They were all afforded the same treatment.

*I'm an equal opportunity killer.*

Naturally, some might see his actions as a gross betrayal of trust. He'd been hired to protect the very people he was now stalking. But he'd long ago sworn allegiance to nobody but himself. *Even a good dog can turn on a whim and bite you without warning*, his mentor had said. *So don't trust men with their silver tongues and dark hearts. Get them before they get you.*

From his crouched position, the assassin peered around the edge of the maintenance cart. The only people in the cafeteria, three men in

white lab coats, were slowly rising from the table where they'd just finished lunch. Standing upright and with their backs towards him, they presented the perfect target. The assassin emerged from his hiding place, took careful aim, then squeezed the trigger in quick succession. The Glock coughed noiselessly thrice, muzzled by the silencer he'd attached earlier.

The men in the white lab coats slumped to the ground as if an invisible puppeteer had cut their strings. There were a few garbled cries and some brief convulsions but, within seconds, everything had quietened down again. Dark pools of blood began to circle outwards from beneath the men's lifeless forms.

The assassin checked the Glock's magazine. Still eleven rounds left, plus one in the chamber. Another fully loaded pistol holstered below his left armpit. Considering the gun belt around his waist held ten spare magazines, he had no concerns about completing the task. *It's almost too easy*, he thought.

The only thing he feared at the base were the Others. To him, they represented the unknown - their giant eyes hiding motivations he could only guess at. Which was unnerving, considering how immensely powerful they were. He glanced at the Glock. Probably take several bullets to put one down, he thought. But he had strict instructions not to harm any of them. And, right now, they were all safely ensconced within their habitat.

Which is where they'd hopefully stay.

A sound made him prick up his ears. He heard footsteps approaching from outside, accompanied by multiple voices both male and female. The assassin glanced at the bodies on the floor. There was no time to hide them. He retreated back behind the maintenance cart and kept his gaze firmly on the entrance.

There was a loud buzz and the door slid open. Two women and two men in white lab coats entered. Preoccupied by their conversation, they headed for a table on the right without noticing the corpses sprawled

on the floor to their left. Then, after a cursory glance around the room, one of the women noticed the bodies. She pointed at them and started screaming, quickly drawing her companions' attention to the grisly sight too.

The assassin pushed away the maintenance card. There was no time to finesse this, he realized. Speed was all that mattered. The people in the white lab coats were fixated on the dead bodies and hadn't noticed him stepping from the shadows. He raised the Glock and fired four precision shots. The talking and screaming stopped instantly.

From the corner of his eye, he noticed someone at the entrance peering into the room, just for a moment, before dashing back outside. Either a laggard from the current party or someone with diabolical timing – not that it mattered. Heavy footfalls sounded as the person escaped down the corridor. Within seconds, a loud wailing erupted overhead.

*Fire siren, he realized. I've been made.*

The assassin didn't panic. He'd anticipated someone raising the alarm sooner rather than later. It would make no difference. This was his domain. And he had all the time in the world.

# 1

“THE STUDENTS WANT your head.”

Professor Tyson Moore grinned. “Tell them to get in line.”

“I’m serious,” Richard Foster, the dean of natural sciences at Stanford University, said as he poured himself coffee. “They’re demanding a formal apology. Got the notice this morning.”

Tyson gazed through the faculty lounge windows at the famous Stanford oaks in the courtyard. The predominance of yellow and brown leaves suggested winter was fast approaching.

“This concerns the group running the infrastructure awareness campaign?” Tyson said. Towering over Foster, the professor in genetics and biotechnology had to tilt his head at almost forty-five degrees to look his colleague in the eyes.

“Correct.”

“Well, I patiently listened to their spiel and signed the petition. What seems to be the problem?”

Foster sighed. “If only you’d kept it at that.”

“Meaning?”

“A student recorded the off-the-cuff remarks you made after signing the petition. It went viral.”

“Oh crap.”

“Oh crap is right. ‘Respond to facts not emotions’? ‘Boring death is the same as dramatic death’? That’s your take after fifty-three people had just died in the single worst bridge collapse in our nation’s history?”

“Are those direct quotes? Sounds like you’re paraphrasing.”

“It’s verbatim.” Foster seemed exasperated. “What on earth were you hoping to achieve?”

Tyson shrugged. “Simply provide context.” He reflected on his exchange with the students before adding, “Two hundred and fifty people die from medical errors every day, Dick. That’s nearly a hundred thousand people annually. Do you know how many people die from bridge

failures in a typical year? Not a lot. Yes, it's a dramatic event and a tragedy for the victims and their families. But, as a cause of death, it ranks somewhere between cat allergies and misplaced rakes."

"My god, Tyson. Giving lessons on context immediately after a tragedy on this scale, when emotions are still raw, is beyond tone-deaf."

"But isn't that exactly when we need perspective?"

Foster shook his head. "Come on, Tyson. Don't play innocent with me. You were looking to stir. I bet you're not even that upset someone posted the video online." The dean grabbed a donut from the table in front of him and bit into the pastry. "I've noticed some telltale signs with you recently. Restless academic syndrome, I call it. Are you really that bored with university life?"

Tyson reached for a donut himself, then thought better of it and settled on a whole-wheat biscuit instead. "I thought our job *was* to stir. Encourage critical thinking. Prompt debate."

"No, my dear friend. Our job is to teach these youngsters the approved curriculum and collect their parents' money. Publish research that keeps us relevant."

"I'm not a kindergarten teacher."

"I know. But tenure isn't a bulletproof vest."

"Is that a veiled threat?"

Foster looked genuinely hurt. "Of course not. I'm telling you this as a friend. Besides, the university would never dream of parting ways with one of its rock stars."

"That's very kind of you." Tyson took a bite of his biscuit. "Look, Dick, I appreciate your concern, but let me handle this. I enjoy sparring with the students over controversial topics. It's the one time they seem to fully engage."

"I'd say. They practically want to lynch you."

Tyson raised an eyebrow. "Interesting choice of phrase. You realize I'm black, right?" Trying to suppress a smile, he pointed at his face and said, "This isn't just a deep tan I picked up on the beach."

Foster's cheeks turned a slight crimson. "Err – you know what I mean."

"Yeah, luckily for you, I do." After a short pause, Tyson said, "So you'll give me some leeway on this?"

Foster briefly considered it before saying, "Okay, but promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"If you're going through a midlife crisis, please don't think of emulating your father. This institution took a battering when he pulled that little stunt of his back in the day and, if the same thing were to happen today...well, it's not the seventies anymore."

Tyson laughed. "Hey, that little stunt is the reason *I'm* here. Besides, I would never do that to Jessica. She's my rock."

Foster nodded. "Good to hear." He took a sip of his coffee before speaking again. "Now, about that apology-"

Later, after presenting some afternoon classes, Tyson headed back to his office. Given the dean's remarks, he half-expected to find a small contingent of triggered students in the reception area, baying for his blood. Almost disappointingly, there were none.

Iris, his PA, looked up from her work station. Wearing a loud purple dress that matched her personality, she had a youthful appearance that belied her thirty-three summers. Long, dark hair tied at the back in a ponytail made her blend in with the students even more. Tyson was convinced it was intentional.

"Sir, I've been bombarded with calls by someone who's trying to get hold of you," she said with intrigue in her voice. "Called at least five times today. Direct line."

"How did they get the number?" Usually all calls were routed through the campus operator.

"Didn't say. But she sounded desperate."

“I see. And did *she* give a name by any chance?”

“Yes. Called herself Dr Sandra Blackmore. Apparently she’s based at some scientific research facility.”

“Stateside?”

“Curiously no, although she spoke with an American accent.”

“Then where?”

“She didn’t want to say at first, but I told her you wouldn’t return her calls otherwise.”

Tyson nodded his approval. “A lie, but inventive.”

“Thanks.” Iris reached for a piece of paper on her desk. “It was a peculiar name, so I made her spell it out for me in order to write it down.”

Tyson took the note from her and studied Iris’s scribble.

*Bi’r Tawīl*. He frowned. *Where the hell is that?*

“Did she indicate what she wanted from me?” Tyson said.

“No. Said she would only speak to you about it, and no-one else. Sounded a bit paranoid, to be honest.”

Tyson held up the note. “So the only clue I have is this obscure name?”

“You can always phone her if you want the full story. She left a number where she can be reached. Matched the incoming caller ID which seems to be that of a satellite service provider.”

“Satellite phone?” *Where exactly is this place?*

“Yes.” Iris paused. “So you’ll call her then?”

“Hmm, maybe later.”

Due to work commitments, it would be another two hours before Tyson got an opportunity to google *Bi’r Tawīl*. What he discovered, though, kept him at his desk long into the night.

-

The following morning, Tyson confronted Iris with his research.

“You must have made an error,” he said. “Heard incorrectly or something.”

“Excuse me?”

“That woman who tried to reach me yesterday? Sandra Blackmore? She couldn’t have phoned you from Bi’r Tawil.”

“And why not?”

“Because there’s nothing there. Literally *nothing*.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a remote, uninhabited area of the Nubian desert. We’re talking sand, gravel, rocks and not much else.” The photos on the internet had resembled a Martian landscape.

“The Nubian desert in East Africa?”

“Correct.”

“So she lied?”

“Well, I don’t know what’s going on here, but I don’t like it.”

“Maybe it’s a student making prank phone calls?”

“From a satellite phone? Five times in a row? That’s taking it a bit far.” *Could students be that angry at me over my bridge disaster comments?* Tyson briefly thought.

“Why don’t you phone her and ask?” Iris suggested, not for the first time.

“Because I hate being at a disadvantage in conversations,” Tyson said. “She knows everything about me and I know hardly anything about her. Plus this Bi’r Tawil thing really bothers me.”

“Why?”

“Did you know it’s unclaimed land?” According to Tyson’s research, it was the only major territory on earth, besides Antarctica, officially termed *terra nullius* – no-one’s land.

Iris frowned. “Unclaimed land? As in – no country wants it?”

“Not only that. The two contenders for dominium, Sudan and Egypt, have both actively disavowed it.”

“I don’t understand?”

Tyson sighed. “It’s complicated.” An understatement if there ever was one, he thought. At the turn of the twentieth century, colonial overlord

Britain had drawn two conflicting maps of the border region between the two countries. One version had simultaneously assigned Bi'r Tawil to Egypt and a larger adjacent landmass called the Hala'ib Triangle to Sudan, while the alternative map did the exact opposite. This created the perverse incentive that whoever claimed Bi'r Tawil would effectively gift the sought-after Hala'ib Triangle to its opponent. And so, mindful of the consequences, Bi'r Tawil became an albatross that neither country desired around its neck.

“Okay, but why does this trouble you?” Iris asked.

“Well, besides the obvious mystery of what a research facility is doing in the middle of nowhere,” Tyson said, “it reminds me of cruise ship gambling in international waters. You just know there’s something fishy when people try to evade jurisdiction.”

“Perhaps you should call her.”

“Sure, I will.”

But he didn't.

Later that day, blessed with spare time, Tyson decided to delve further into the Bi'r Tawil mystery. He wasn't sure why it fascinated him so much. If he'd wanted to, he could simply have phoned Sandra Blackmore and informed her he wasn't interested in whatever pitch she was about to make. God knows there were enough red flags to steer clear of the woman. Or had Dick Foster been right? Was he restless, looking for excitement and intrigue?

His introspection quickly faded when an internet search turned up an interesting anomaly. Apparently Bi'r Tawil was less deserted than he'd first imagined. According to a few cursory articles, an American company called Suntech had established a solar power plant in the area, eighteen years prior, to develop and test novel solar power technology. As literally the only game in town, Tyson reckoned it had to be linked to Sandra Blackmore in one way or another.

He scoured the internet for more references to Suntech and soon discovered a corporate website where he devoured everything he could find. Apparently the company had been attracted to Bi'r Tawil by the abundance of silica sand and all-year-round sunny weather, motivations he recognized from those cited by solar farms in comparable locales like the Sahara and Mojave. *Everything checks out*, Tyson thought. *If Sandra Blackmore is affiliated with this group, there seems to be no reason for concern. Only puzzle is – what on earth does a solar power company want with a biologist?*

Tyson continued reading. According to its mission statement, the solar power plant's main purpose was research and development, not commercial supply, which explained the lack of grid development that could link with the outside world. *How convenient*, he thought. *Maybe there's reason for caution after all.*

Finally, Tyson used Google Maps to locate the desert site on satellite imagery, which he managed without too much trouble. Even from a fair elevation, the solar mirror array was clearly visible, dwarfing a few nondescript buildings lurking on the periphery. Zooming out, he discovered that the closest human settlement – a small village of mud houses - lay over one hundred miles to the southeast. Roads were conspicuous by their absence. *So no nosy neighbors or curious travelers passing through*, he thought. *If privacy was a concern, these guys couldn't have picked a more secluded location.*

Zooming back in and refocusing on the solar mirror array, he studied the layout. The mirrors were arranged in a circular band around a central tower. *A concentrated solar power plant with most likely a molten salt core*, Tyson thought. *Which means it's also capable of energy storage.* An idea occurred to him. Scrutinizing published information from comparable sites and adjusting for scale, he calculated the installation could produce at least one megawatt of electricity per day.

*That's a lot*, he thought. *Especially for an experimental operation that's not producing commercially.*

Of course, he couldn't have known about the five subterranean levels, the complex's hidden heart and setting for the *real* experimental operations, where energy consumption matched that of a city skyscraper. Or been aware that the solar power plant, lacking its claimed novel technology, used tried-and-tested equipment obtained from commercial suppliers on the open market.

He would only learn that later.

When it was far too late.

