

By Nicholas Alpe

Chapter One

I was twenty years old running down a hill towards the train station. I wasn't going to miss my train. Sweat dripped off my forehead and down my cheeks in the blistering heat. My rucksack was heavy on my back and I could feel a large sweat patch forming underneath. I was tired and wheezed with every breath. I could see the station ahead through squinted eyes and when I reached it I forced my ticket through the slot in the barriers. As I ran through the half-open gate I reached back for my ticket but I was moving so quickly it tore in my hand. I didn't care; I had to catch this train. I pushed through a crowd of people walking in the opposite direction, apologising as I dodged between them. They were mainly families and groups of kids heading for the beach, their buckets and spades scratching my legs as I ran past. I could see the train at the platform and the beeping doors began to close. I charged down the stairs and jumped the bottom four. As I stumbled across the platform the train began to move. It sped up and shot into the distance as I stood watching, embarrassed and out of breath.

It was thirty minutes until the next train and I found myself, as I always did, staring out at the sea. Something drew me to it, something I couldn't explain. I had this feeling that one day someone at sea would need my help so I had to watch constantly. It wasn't just at the station; I'd keep my eyes fixed on it while I travelled on the train, or in a car, or walking along the promenade. It was just this feeling I had that I couldn't explain. At every buoy that bobbed up and down or every seagull that landed on the water I took a double take, just to check it wasn't somebody in trouble. I watched people walk out on the mudflats during low tide, remembering how I used to enjoy it when I was a kid. I thought how crazy I must have been and how crazy those people must be now. They could get stuck out there and drown when the tide came back in. Maybe they were just ignorant and didn't realise the dangers. I'd lose track of time staring out to sea like that, trying not to break my concentration. There were some occasions when I wouldn't hear the train because I was concentrating so hard. I ran through scenarios in my head and what I'd do if ever a situation arose. Would I jump the fence and jump down onto the beach from the platform or would I run the long way round through the station entrance? Would I empty my wallet and mobile phone from my pocket and leave them on the beach or would I just dive straight into the water? I didn't know. The only thing I knew was that at this moment in time nobody at sea needed my help and my train was pulling in.

I grabbed the wheel hard and tried to concentrate on the road. I'd been having flashbacks like that for the past few months. I was tired. I hadn't been sleeping properly. If I was lucky I'd catch about two hours sleep during the day then I'd stay awake all through the night until morning. Seen as I was up all night anyway I transferred to night shifts, thought it might help. It didn't stop the flashbacks. These thoughts would just pop into my head and I'd recall moments from the past. It could be anything, childhood memories, people I'd met, close encounters, it all just crept into my head and caught me by surprise. They were happening so often some nights that I could hardly tell what was real. I had so many near misses on the road that I'm surprised I hadn't killed anybody. Thankfully I'd never been seen and nobody had been hurt. I just needed to keep busy, to keep talking to people and carrying passengers. I was vulnerable when I was alone but if I had some company, even just the operator's voice on the radio, it was enough to keep me from drifting off into thought.

It was eight fifty pm. I was driving into the cab office before starting the shift. *I was in my mid-twenties, cruising around in a patrol car. We got a call; it was like something out of a police movie. "All units to Hendon Central, bar fight in process". We switched on the blue lights and shot off like a space shuttle. The speed we could travel at was incredible and it gave me such a rush to know I could do this everyday and it was perfectly legal. Weaving in and out of the traffic I couldn't wipe the grin from my face. Even as we nearly ploughed into an oncoming lorry I was still grinning like a fat kid in a sweet shop. I opened my eyes with a jolt, I slammed on the brakes immediately. I'd crossed to the other side of the road, mounted the curb and nearly hit a young couple heading into The Old Bull and Bush pub. "I'm so sorry," I said as I wound down the window. "Are you okay?"*

"Try driving with your eyes open next time" The man screamed, "you could've killed us!"

"I'm sorry"

"Why don't you just piss off?"

So I did. I drove on thankful that he hadn't tried to drag me out of the car and kick the crap out of me. When I reached the office Marcus was standing outside trying to light a cigarette. "You know those things

are bad for your health?" I said, as I always did, approaching the narrow entranceway.

"Working with you Jim, that's bad for my health" He was quick to reply in his deep croaky voice.

"Yes, but *I'm* not going to give you cancer"

I entered the office and left Marcus outside in the cold. His body would start twitching if he didn't smoke a cigarette every hour so I wasn't going to keep him talking, especially not about something as pointless as the health risks of smoking. A couple of the young lads, Dave and Grant, were stood by the TV. Together they were like the personification of confidence and paranoia. Dave was loud, cocky and full of arrogance. He played football semi-pro and every week we'd hear of how many goals he'd scored and how many women he'd shagged after the game. Grant however was quiet and timid. He drove like an old woman and was scared of everything. He wouldn't overtake a lorry in case it pulled out and forced him to swerve off the road, he wouldn't drink alcohol within a forty-eight hour period of driving his car in case there was still a trace of it in his system and he had this strange habit of never looking you directly in the eye when you were talking to him. The lads didn't stick around long. As soon as their programme finished they jumped in their cars and drove off into the night. Dave did a fancy wheelspin, like a lot of these young lads do, before his car screeched off like a shot. Grant sat in his car for about two minutes repeating his safety check before waiting until the road was completely empty on both sides then driving on slowly.

Harry was operating the phones that night. He was a large man and could barely fit in the small chair by the table. He'd moved the armchair with the torn up fabric over to his desk and sank himself into it. Now he could barely reach the phone but at least the chances of him getting stuck in the chair were reduced. He was wearing his red Hawaiian shirt. He had a wardrobe full of them and I'd never seen him in anything else. In the summer he'd wear them with incredibly short shorts and sandals with socks. He looked like a proper Brit abroad, except it was always raining and he wasn't shouting abuse at a Spanish waiter. I told him about my incident up at the Bull and Bush. He didn't really pay attention to the details he just went straight into one of his rambles. "Did you know that there is an unfinished tube station just around the corner from that pub?" He said.

"Yes you've told me a million times" I droned. Harry was something of a local historian, not a very good one, but he showed a keen interest.

"Well, did you now that..."

"Yes I did" I interrupted, not wanting to hear another one of his sketchy local facts "You told me last week. And the week before that and the week before that"

At that moment Marcus walked in before Harry could attempt to educate me with another piece of history, for which I was rather grateful. "What's my first job Harry?" He croaked. I was distracted by the light glaring off his bald head. Harry searched the desk for something. As he lifted a bunch of papers I caught a glimpse of his porn magazine hidden underneath. He picked up a pink Post-it note.

"Airport job. A young woman wants to be picked up from Cricklewood at nine-thirty and taken to Gatwick airport. There's the address. Don't be late" Harry handed the paper to Marcus who took it and headed towards the exit. "Oh Marcus?" He shouted. Marcus stopped at the door and turned back. "You might wanna wear a hat tonight. You could blind someone with the light reflecting off that slap-head of yours"

"Screw you" Marcus croaked as he walked out the door.

I liked Harry. He always had the right thing to say at the right time. He was an ex-copper too. Got out of the job about fifteen years ago when he was in his forties. He still had the passion for it, and certainly the attitude but his dodgy knees meant he was only suitable for a desk job. And Harry's philosophy was, "a desk copper is a dead copper". I didn't quite see how operating the phones in a minicab office could offer him a more exhilarating career but I wouldn't dare ask him. He always had plenty of interesting stories to tell about the force and the things he had to do. I could always tell when he was lying or exaggerating but the young lads lapped it up. My favourite was the one he told about an old lady who'd been dead in her house for three or four months, who they only found because the neighbours complained about the smell. Harry was given the job of guarding the house until the crime scene investigators could come take a look. When they finally turned up they found Harry sat on the sofa next to the body watching TV. He looked straight up at them all and said, "I thought she might like to watch *One Foot in the Grave*".

Harry kept the calls coming in fast that night. "Golders Green to Finsbury Park", "Child's Hill to Wembley", "Willesden to Hampstead Heath". We always laughed at the Heath jobs. Harry had a way of saying it that implied they were up to some sort of sexual activity. He was probably right. I can't think of many reasons

someone would go to the Heath after dark. The night got busier and the calls came in faster and faster. I was punching street names into the SatNav so quick I could feel the buttons cracking under the strain. By ten o'clock the radio was going non-stop and I had so many jobs queuing up I decided to turn it off. As I turned into Finchley Road I reached for the switch and took my eyes off the road for a split second. When I looked ahead again I nearly ploughed into the side of a number thirteen bus. The driver yelled something but I couldn't hear him even with the window open. He made an angry gesture then drove away. At that moment a car pulled up next to me and a voice I recognised instantly croaked "busy night?" It was Marcus. "Just on my way to that airport job" He said. "Don't worry, I won't tell the Governor you nearly killed yourself".

"Thanks", I said as we sped away in opposite directions.

At half past midnight I finally got some peace. All the customers were in a pub or club somewhere getting wasted. I was preparing myself for the rush that would come in an hour's time when they all started turning out. But for the moment I just enjoyed the quiet. I seized the opportunity and stopped at a dirty chicken joint. I knew it was probably deep-fried rat or something that I was eating but I didn't care. The grease turned the box see-through and I could feel my arteries clogging up beneath my skin but in this job these are the only small pleasures you have. As luck would have it, when I sank my teeth into the burger the radio went. "Pick up at Golders Hill Park. West Heath Drive entrance"

I knew I was closest but I wasn't moving. This was my quiet time.

"Golders Hill Park. Jim they've asked for you"

"What's the name?" I replied with my mouth half full, dropping lettuce into my lap. I didn't know anybody who lived in that area.

"Didn't give one. Just said they wanted you"

"Well it's always nice to have a fan. I'm on my way"

It only took a minute to reach the park. It was in total darkness. The streetlights were out and the road was completely silent. Working the night shifts you get used to the eerie streets but this time something didn't feel right. I sat in the car for a while and Harry tried the call back from the cab office but he said the number was withheld. "Just another prank" I thought. You get used to hoax calls, especially at night. Some kids were probably round the corner watching me, giggling at me, taking bets on how long I'd stay for. So I radioed in. "There's no-one here Harry. Park's all shut up. Probably just a bunch of kids having a giggle". I began to drive on slowly but something caught my eye as I drove past, something at the bottom of the fence. At first I thought it was just a shoe, a bright white *Adidas* trainer but there was something else. There was a leg. A white trainer on what appeared to be a woman's leg just protruding from the fence, sticking out of the darkness. It was motionless. I knew I had to do something but if I had known then what was to follow I would have just driven on.

I got out of the car nervously. *It was my first day on the beat. I'd pursued a shoplifter into a dark car park. No back up and no idea what to expect.* "Hello?" I whispered, "Can you hear me?". Nothing. I tried again, this time slightly louder, but still nothing. My heart was beating so hard it was like a full percussion orchestra was playing on my chest. I touched the leg but it didn't move. It was still attached, but the rest of the body was on the other side of the fence, hidden by the darkness. I needed more light, so I went back to the car, pointed the headlights at the fence and switched them to full beam. I sat back in my seat in shock, yet I couldn't take my eyes off it. It was a long time since I'd seen a dead body and that was a man who died of a heart attack. I wish it had been a heart attack this time, that seems much tamer in comparison. Instead I was staring at what was left of a teenage girl. Her jaw had been ripped off and I could see on her right hand her fingers had been removed. I later learned this was the same for the left and her tongue had been cut off.

I was still sitting in the car when the police arrived. I'd switched off the headlights so as not to alert any passers by or peeping Tom neighbours. When I flicked them on again the detective must've jumped about three-foot in the air. I don't think anyone was expecting to see what lay before them. The scene soon became swamped with officers. Suddenly my subconscious paternal instincts kicked in and I felt protective of this young girl. All these men were staring at her and taking her picture. When I found her she was alone and in some way at peace. Now that had been disturbed. To the officers she wasn't a person, she was evidence. As I stood by the car and watched them work on her I turned to see my half-eaten burger on the passenger seat. Harry's voice jumped into my head. "*Jim, they've asked for you*". There were only two words going through my mind. "*Why me?*" But I wasn't ready to answer that question just yet.

Chapter Two

The next morning. Jim has gone to Harry's....

I rang the bell and waited. I knew Harry would try to ignore it so I rang again, this time holding the buzzer a little longer. I waited. As I was about to buzz again a figure moved behind the patterned glass window. Harry flung the door open and without even glancing up at who stood before him yelled, "What?". His grey hair was ruffled and his eyes were heavy. He was wearing brown silk pyjamas and tartan slippers. He looked different without his Hawaiian shirts and the silk pyjamas made him seem older. He wasn't the jolly picture of a man I knew him as at work.

"Sorry Harry, I wouldn't bother you if it wasn't important" I explained calmly.

"It better be worth it" Harry grunted as he gestured me in and closed the door behind.

Harry's house reminded me of my Nan's house when I was a kid. The wallpaper was light brown and had dark felt patterns on it. There were collectable plates with pictures of Cliff Richard on them displayed in large old wooden cabinets. In the living room everything was brown. The sofas, the tables, the TV cabinet and the chairs had all been painted and varnished in every possible colour of shit.

Later Chapter...

The car has been hit and is careering down the side of the road

In those split seconds that seemed to last a lifetime I found myself searching through memories of past events. Not fond moments however or flashbacks of my childhood. Instead I was searching my life history frantically looking for something that would tell me what to do in this situation. *I was eight years old watching 999 on the telly with my Mum and Dad. But Michael Burke had no answers for me. I was in my teens watching disaster movies, a trend at the time, but still nothing. I was nineteen on a flight to Paris reading the laminated emergency procedure card. The brace position, head between my legs, arms above my head.* I wasn't about to crash-land at sea but the principal had to be the same. So I adopted the emergency brace position, although I wasn't smiling like the woman on that card, and I waited for what seemed like an eternity until I felt a powerful jolt accompanied by a large bang. And then I rolled for a while, I was upside down then back upright again, over and over. I heard a loud crack then the car slammed into a tree. I tried to move my right arm. The pain shot through it like a thunderbolt. I didn't want to look at it but I had to. The bone was sticking through my forearm. I reached for my phone with my good hand and flipped it open. My eyes felt glazed over and it was hard to make out the buttons in such short focus. I felt for the button I needed and pressed it three times. Click, click, click. Three pictures that would end up in all my friends' inboxes the next day.

When I rang for an ambulance the operator's voice was like nothing I'd ever heard before. They shouldn't allow them to sound like angels because every time she spoke I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. When you're trapped in a wrecked vehicle at the bottom of a dark valley this hardly reassures you that you're going to live. She kept talking to me until the emergency services arrived, telling me what to do and telling me that I'd be okay. I didn't really listen to her much. I kept trying to picture what she might look like. I went through a mental database of attractive women and compiled all the best bits of each. I'd done the legs, the bum, the body, arms, chest, hair and was just about to make her face when a fat hairy hand reached through the window. Suddenly my image of the operator faded away, as did the angel voice when the paramedic took the phone from me and told her I was in safe hands now. His hands didn't look very safe to me. This guy was built like the incredible hulk. I was sure he could break my arm in several other places with one small touch. However, I had no choice but to let him pull me out and to my surprise he was actually rather gentle. He ordered the other carriers around and told them all to be really careful. They slid a bodyboard underneath me and he strapped me in tight, his voice calm and reassuring. Perhaps he was the male equivalent of the emergency operator. Although I hoped she didn't look like him.

Jim has gone to the hospital...

Staring up at the bright lights on the ceiling I tried to recall every detail about the incident. Morley had been beating round the bush grilling me for about thirty minutes when he finally got straight to the point. "You were travelling alone you say?" He interrupted me, hinting that he knew something I didn't.

"That's right. I'd just been speaking to Harry on the radio"

Morley's attitude changed. His eyes shrank and focussed hard on mine. "And at what point in the day did you meet the girl?" he asked accusationally. I sat up on the bed fast. The rapid beating in my chest returned. My mind was telling me there was another body but I had to be sure. "What girl?" I asked, knowing full well what was likely to follow.

"The young woman we found in the boot of your car"

Christina:

The hospital was where I first met Christina. She stood out amongst the drunks and the overdoses like a red sock in a white wash. Her eyes illuminated the grey smokey air and captured mine in an unbreakable gaze. Her hair floated in the gentle breeze and her perfect curves made her stand with such elegance. She had a black coat wrapped around her shoulders and was leaning against the back of an ambulance. I'd stepped outside for some fresh air but found nothing but the smell of oil from the line of out of service ambulances.

"Have you got a cigarette?" She uttered silently from behind me

"Sorry?" I replied, turning to see her close up

"A cigarette. Have you got one?"

"Sorry, don't smoke" I said. It was times like this that made me wish I did

"

...

She was a welcome break from the stress and tension of the case; like the first drop of rain after a long hot summer or the last bubble in a bottle of flat lemonade.

Later...

The doctors had predicted a quick recovery. But it would be four weeks before I could drive again. I found myself eating at The Little Pizza Place in Golders Green three or four times a week. But I didn't go for the food.

Later...

Returning from the airport my stomach sank. Maybe I should have walked her in or at least helped her with her bags. Not that she had many. I wanted to say goodbye to her, I still felt that there was some reason I shouldn't let her go. I imagined myself chasing through the departure lounge to tell her not to go, to warn her that something bad might happen. But how crazy would she think I was if the only reason I wouldn't let her leave was because I had this *feeling*.

Last Chapter

Jim has chased Marcus to the abandoned North End tube station...

... To my surprise the door flung open on the first kick. I lost my balance a little but stumbled on down a long winding staircase. Puffing and panting I began to jump several steps at a time, nearly slipping over on the damp stone ground. The staircase seemed to go on forever. My chest was burning and my legs tightened at the knees. It was so dark that when I reached the bottom I had no idea and tried to keep moving downwards. My knees gave way as my feet crashed into the floor then I hit the ground hard. Looking up I could make out a door in front of me. I knew this must be where he was waiting. Without thinking I burst into the room. It was this kind of cavalier behaviour that got me shot all those years ago, and low and behold, as I entered the room, there was Marcus stood in the dim light pointing a gun at my head.

Bang! The sound bounced off the walls and around the room piercing my ears. I brought my right arm up in a desperate attempt to protect my face and felt a soaring pain as if it had been broken in two again. I fell backwards bouncing off the door frame before hitting the floor. The whole thing happened in less than a second but it seemed like it was in slow motion. For a brief moment I lost sense of time and place.

There was a thin wave of smoke coming from the cast on my right arm. It danced and twisted in front of my eyes like a ballerina doll in a music box. Then it was gone. There was a small hole in my cast and inside it a round metallic object. The bullet.

I suddenly became aware of where I was and what had happened. Marcus stood in front of me with a look on his face that told me he was just as surprised as I was that I was still alive. Our eyes met for a second both realising the stroke of luck we had just witnessed. Marcus was the first to break the silence.

"It seems you're immune to bullets" He whispered. He could have easily pulled the trigger a second time but instead he was stalling, trying to make sense of everything it seemed.