

By Any Name

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

Rain teemed down, needle sharp stalactites that glittered, silver threads in the beams of headlights, transforming the tarmac of the suburban street into a sheet of gleaming jet. The anonymous dark blue saloon car slowed to a halt at the kerb, the occupants waited and watched. A shadowy figure vaulted a low gate set at the entrance to a playing field. The car window slid down and the muzzle of a gun emerged from the shrouded interior. The soft plop of a silencer-muted shot echoed through the quiet street. The figure fell headlong on to the sodden, spongy grass.

Heart thundering violently against his ribcage, the hunted man explored his reflexes, tensing the muscles in his legs and arms. He felt no pain; he wasn't injured. Somewhere close by he could hear the roar of traffic. He had to move, keep going until he reached people. His only salvation lay in a public place.

The car door opened. He continued to lie still. Footsteps resounded above the splash of rain, squelching when the gunman moved from the hard surface of the road on to the grass. He opened one eye and saw a shoe; a highly polished black shoe laced with raindrops that sparkled in the reflected light of a street lamp.

Digging his toes into the ground he launched into a rugby tackle. Locking his fingers around the gunman's ankles he floored him. The hunter's skull crunched ominously against a fencepost, but the prey

lingered only as long as it took him to kick the gun from his assailant's hand.

Zigzagging, he ignored the pain in his heaving chest and pounded towards the traffic. Ribbons of street lights shone down, bathing a roundabout in a soft, golden glow. The whine of engines closed in on him as drivers hit accelerators to give their vehicles the boost needed to negotiate the sharp incline of a slip road. Amber numerals flashed "50", but the drivers that shot past him either didn't see, or chose to disregard the directive. Misty, water-filled darkness obscured the road ahead, yet the traffic sped on in unrelenting torrents raising a filthy, oily spray that soaked him and clouded windscreens, increasing the risk of accident.

Another shot whistled past his ear. He leapt in front of a car. The squeal of brakes and the crash of metal fracturing against metal resounded behind him but he didn't slow his pace. Driven by an instinct for survival that had chosen the motorway above the bullet, he dodged between vehicles that hurtled blindly onwards. He breathed easier when he reached the central reservation. Drawing cold, exhaust-laden fumes into his lungs he clambered over the barrier and changed course, running backwards to face the oncoming traffic.

To his right he caught a glimpse of smoking wreckage, heard the raucous strain of sirens, but he kept his head down and pounded ever onwards, his head jerking, his bare feet slapping the freezing skim of rainwater that iced the road. Surrounded by noise, dazzled by tides of headlights, he had no idea where

he was going, only that he had to keep going. Wheels turned, spray spurted. The cacophony of horns escalated.

It would have been easy to succumb to the inevitable, to curl into a ball and wait for nothingness. But just when he thought he could stand no more, the gleaming headlights and blasting sound passed by, only to be replaced by another pair of threatening yellow eyes... and another... and another...

He continued to dodge between lanes, avoiding vans, trucks, cars, all the while keeping to the centre; fearful lest his assailants had gained the motorway. Running – running – his heart hammering so fiercely he wondered why it hadn't burst. His lungs burned, hot, searing, as he fought to siphon air into his beleaguered body. Blood surged through his veins, the drumbeat of pulses beating time with his footfalls as he swerved from lane to lane in an effort to escape the blasts of noise and blinding lights, but still they kept coming.

Weaving – roaring – blasting – until a single soft sound alerted every fibre of his being. His eyes strained. He searched wildly for safety. There was none. He ducked as another crack echoed towards him...

'If the reports are right, he should be here.'

'I can't see a bloody thing in this.' The police driver wiped the condensation from the inside of the windscreen with his sleeve.

'There he is!' the constable cried.

'The silly bugger's running towards us.' The driver switched on his siren.

'Just our luck, another bloody nutter. Ambulance?' the constable asked.

'Make it two. At least one car has crashed into the barrier ahead.'

The constable picked up the radio telephone. 'Car crashed - location?' He checked for landmarks as his colleague steered at hair-raising speed towards the inside lane, aiming for where the hard shoulder would have been, if there had been one. 'Ambulances...'

'Ask for one with special restraints for that bloody clown,' the driver interrupted.

The constable turned his head. 'Back-up's in place behind us.'

'Here we go.' Brakes smoking, siren blaring the driver swung the car sharply sideways in an attempt to corner the running man who was sandwiched between the inside and middle lane. Blue lights flashing, two police cars charged down the outside lane towards them but a car and a lorry blocked their path.

'You think the silly sods would slow down and pull back when they see police cars, damn them.'

While his partner concentrated on driving, the constable, who knew better than to analyze the risks his colleague was taking with their lives, took a closer look at their target. He was bare-foot, dressed only in jeans, his dark hair slicked close to his head by the downpour.

'Got the bastard!'

Their seat belts pinged, pinning them to their seats as the car screeched to a halt, bumper touching the

barrier, cutting off the runner's exit from the inside lane.

Cornered between the parapet and the police cars, the man stood bowed, his chest heaving, his palms gripping his knees.

'Will you look at him!' The driver's cry echoed above the roar of the traffic.

'Is that what I think it is?' the constable looked to his companion.

The driver's voice dropped to a whisper. 'Fucking hell.'

The man climbed the parapet. Before the officers had time to move, he'd disappeared over the side.

'Alert all cars in the vicinity, make sure those ambulances are on their way.' The driver wrenched open his door, and joined the crew of the second police car.

'It's all right, sir.' A rookie constable looked over the edge. 'One of our cars was heading for the next slip road, they've got him.'

The driver looked down. The drop was over thirty feet but the man was on his feet, handcuffed to the door of a police car. He saw the officers pulling on rubber gloves.

'Blood?' he mouthed above the sound of the traffic, wind and rain.

'Looks like he took a bath in it,' came the answering cry.

CHAPTER ONE

The blue light was flashing on the ambulance but, forewarned by control, the paramedics had decided against using the siren because initial reports suggested the patient was in a volatile, traumatised state. They saw him when they approached the motorway, standing stiffly to attention, his wrist handcuffed to the door of a police car. The half a dozen or so officers on the scene were standing at a distance, away from the dark slicks of blood and gore smeared over his jeans and bare chest.

The ambulance drew to a halt. One paramedic jumped out of the cab and went to the back. His partner joined the group of police officers.

‘What’s the score?’

‘He was running down the motorway. We gave chase; he jumped thirty foot, but doesn’t appear to be any the worse the wear for his fall.’

‘Superman, or high as a kite?’ the paramedic asked.

‘You tell us. There are glass splinters in the blood on him, but he’s not complaining. In fact he’s not saying anything.’ The constable flicked a dismissive glance in the man’s direction.

The paramedic ran a professional eye over the patient who continued to stand immobile and upright as if he were on a parade ground.

‘Good luck with him.’

‘Thank you.’ The paramedic zipped himself into the protective suit his partner handed him, slipped on

a pair of rubber gloves, and walked over to the prisoner. 'Do you have a name, mate?' he enquired casually, to no effect. 'Your name, mate?' he repeated.

'Wherever he is, he's not with us,' an officer asserted.

The paramedic looked to his partner, who was hauling a sheaf of plastic bags out of the back of the ambulance. Taking one, he approached the bloodstained man. 'We're going to bag your hands, arms and chest. Just a precaution until we can clean you up. If we hurt you, shout. All right, mate?'

The patient turned his head, but his eyes remained unfocused.

'You're bagging the glass?' an officer asked.

'It's best removed with a suction hose in casualty. We'll make sure the plastic sheeting hangs loose. You're not going to fight us are you, mate?' he asked warily, slipping the first bag over one bloody hand and tying it with tape.

The man gave no sign that he'd understood a word.

'I'll do his legs.' The paramedic's partner set to work. 'Nasty injury there.' He bagged the patient's swollen ankle.

'He jumped from the motorway,' an officer reminded him.

'He's in shock. Sooner we get him to casualty, happier I'll be.'

'He looks like the joints my missus wraps for the freezer,' a constable joked when the paramedics finished.

'Give us a hand to get him into the back of the ambulance,' the senior paramedic asked

Despite the paramedics' success the officer approached the patient cautiously. 'You taking him to the General?'

'Where else?'

'We'll see you there.'

The only free parking space outside casualty was marked SENIOR CONSULTANT but that didn't deter Dr Elizabeth Santer from driving her battered, neglected Ford into it. She locked the door, switched on the alarm and entered the building.

'Thanks for coming out.' The duty houseman, Alan Cooper, greeted her when she walked into the foyer.

'I wasn't doing anything special.' She resisted the temptation to add; "I no longer have anything special to do."

'He's in five. A police forensic team came in. They scraped and bagged samples of the blood and tissue plastered all over him. Very little was his own. He was covered in glass, but after we suctioned it off we found only superficial cuts. The only other external injury is a sprained ankle, which has been X-rayed and strapped.'

'Name?'

'We have none. He hasn't said a word. He's exhibiting all the usual signs of shock; lowered temperature, cold, clammy skin...'

'He was found running barefoot and half-naked down a motorway?'

'Yes.'

'It's freezing out there.' Elizabeth shivered. It wasn't much warmer in casualty. 'Anything else I should know?'

'We gave him a full physical. There's healed scar tissue from five old injuries.' He glanced at the report in his hand. 'Three exhibit the characteristics of healed bullet wounds; one in his right shoulder, one in his lower-right leg, and one in his upper-left arm. The other two, both on his chest could be knife wounds.'

'You've X-rayed the bullet wounds?'

'Yes and there's characteristic signs of bone thickening. The police are working on his identity. We're admitting him, at least for tonight.'

'You've advised the ward?'

'Yes and because of the blood and tissue, the police are mounting a guard until they've made further enquiries.'

'Tell the sister to prepare the private room next to her office. If we have to endure a police presence on the ward, Dave will want it somewhere that will generate minimum disruption.'

She pushed open the double doors that led through to the treatment cubicles. Two policemen were standing guard outside five. Elizabeth nodded to them before entering. She couldn't fault Cooper's caution. The nurses who were swabbing the patient's chest were both renowned throughout the hospital for their karate expertise.

'Good evening, or should I say good morning, Dr Santer?' one said when he saw her.

She acknowledged both nurses before turning to the patient. 'Hello, I'm Dr Santer, the psychiatric registrar.' Flicking through the notes Alan Cooper had handed her, she walked to over to the trolley the man was lying on. 'And you are?'

The man stared at her. His eyes were cerulean blue, startling in their intensity and depth of colour, and very different from the pale-washed blue, so common to Anglo-Saxons. His hair was a rich blue-black, his skin tanned Mediterranean olive. His feet overhung the end of the trolley, and Elizabeth judged his height as several inches over six feet. His chest was finely muscled but not in a body-building fanatical sense. There wasn't an ounce of excess weight on him.

She examined the bowls the nurses had been using. Alan Cooper had mentioned blood and tissue – he hadn't warned her it was brain tissue.

'If you won't tell us your name we'll put out an appeal,' Elizabeth prompted.

The man gazed at her for what seemed like an eternity to the nurses. But accustomed to dealing with the clinically depressed, Elizabeth was inured to periods of silence.

Eventually he made a brief unintelligible sound.

'Yes?' Elizabeth encouraged.

'I – I – don't – know,' he blurted.

She laid her hands on his head.

'There's no cranial injury.' Alan Cooper had followed her into the cubicle.

'There's no evidence of external trauma,' Elizabeth concurred. 'Does your head hurt?' she asked the patient.

'I - don't - think - so.' He spoke in quick staccato, accent-less tones as though he were mimicking an electronic voice.

'Reflexes?' Elizabeth inquired of Cooper.

'Normal.'

'How did you get here?' She looked directly into the patient's eyes. She knew the answer to her question from Cooper's notes, but wanted to hear it from the man.

'Ambulance.'

'And before that?'

His face contorted with the effort of remembering.

'What were you doing before you were in the ambulance?' she repeated.

'Running.'

'Why?'

'Bullets.'

'Someone was trying to shoot you?'

He screwed his eyes shut.

'Well, you're safe with us now,' she reassured. 'I'll give you something to help you sleep. We'll continue this conversation in the morning.' She scribbled a note at the bottom of the patient's report before passing it to the senior of the two nurses. 'Chloral hydrate to be administered on the ward. I'll check him again when he's settled in.'

'You're not going back home?' Cooper asked.

She glanced at her watch. 'There's no point. I'll be on duty again in another four hours.'

'I feel guilty for dragging you out.'

'Don't.' She motioned her head towards the door. 'You did the right thing,' she murmured when they were in the privacy of the office.

'You think he's suffering from amnesia?' Cooper asked.

'You don't have to be Sherlock Holmes to deduce he's suffered some kind of trauma. And trauma-induced amnesia is more common than most doctors realise.'

'He mentioned bullets. Could he be hallucinating?'

'Did the police say anything about any shooting?'

'No.'

'Then he could be delusional. I'll try to get more out of him in the morning. Has there been a public appeal?'

'The police took photographs and mentioned a press conference.'

'Let's hope someone comes forward to claim him.'

'The police are also searching the area for bodies.'

'Given the amount of blood and tissue I saw, I'm not surprised.'

'Funny to think he could be a murderer,' Cooper mused. 'Apart from the scars he looks normal enough.'

Elizabeth smiled. 'What do you think a murderer should look like?'

A nurse knocked and opened the door. 'One John West and two police guards gone up to the psychiatric ward.'

'John West?' Elizabeth looked at her in surprise.

'He was picked up on the westbound carriageway of the M4 heading out of London, it seemed appropriate.'

'And John?'

'John West has got to be better than John Doe, for a live man, hasn't it, Dr Santer?'

Elizabeth woke in the doctors' rest-room on the top floor of the hospital just before seven o'clock. Stiff and aching, she swung her legs down from the coffee table she'd used as a footstool, rose from her chair and went over to the vending machine. She'd tried all the combinations the machine had to offer and, no matter which she settled on, the coffee invariably emerged grey, insipid and tasteless but the tea was even worse. Succumbing to temptation she abandoned her diet in favour of hot chocolate. Clutching the plastic beaker, she switched on the television.

A clock filled the screen, its hands pointing to the hour. After a few seconds of cacophonous noise and dizzy computer hieroglyphics, a man who looked brighter and more alert than any being had a right to at that time of the morning, shuffled a sheaf of papers on the desk in front of him.

Arranging his features into a sombre expression that portended tragedy, he gazed directly into the camera and delivered the first item; a plane crash in Scotland. No survivors were expected to be found among the eight-man crew and ninety-eight passengers.

Long shots of a dark, wind-swept, snowy landscape strewn with wreckage, speckled with

floodlights and the diminutive figures of rescue teams were replaced by a close-up of a blanket-swathed corpse on a stretcher. A sonorous voice droned in the background, detailing the time that the plane had gone down. A close-up of a news reporter followed. Blinking beneath artificial lights, shivering behind his microphone, he bellowed in an attempt to make himself heard above the howling wind.

‘Yes, Peter, this is a terrible and shocking tragedy. Everyone here has been moved by the professionalism and dedication of the rescue teams, who have worked throughout the night to recover bodies from the wreckage, and who continue to search in – as you can see – these impossible weather conditions...’

The sound cut abruptly. The picture died.

‘Weather permitting, we’ll return to Mark live at the scene later. But for now we’ll go over to Westminster and the Minister of Defence. Minister, would you agree this is a tragedy of mammoth proportions for the government?’

‘Not only for the government, Peter, but for the country and the armed forces. I know I speak for the Prime Minister and every member of the cabinet when I offer my deepest sympathy and condolences to all the bereaved families. We must remember the victims of this crash were not only the leaders of our security forces, but family men who will be sorely missed on a personal as well as professional level.’

The camera cut back to the studio. ‘Minister, could you tell us if there will be an inquiry as to why so many high-ranking officers from the security forces were travelling on the same aircraft?’

'I can't comment on that question at this stage, Peter.'

'Has there been any confirmation of an explosion on board the aircraft before it went down?'

'It's too early to discuss possible causes...' the minister continued to skilfully avoid giving a direct answer to the interviewer's questions. '... it will take us some time to collate evidence as to possible causes of the crash... we are not aware of any recent threats from any known terrorist group... no, as yet no group has claimed responsibility... tragic as the situation is, it will not, and cannot be allowed to affect the international peace talks...'

Elizabeth sipped her chocolate and wondered why the media bothered to arrange interviews with politicians who were incapable of answering a direct question.

The bulletin moved on to the next item; a general shot of an anonymous conference room was followed by speculation on the agenda of the various super-powers, and the possibility – or not – of a global scaling down of nuclear arms. The effect the air-crash and subsequent loss of senior security personnel might have on the conference was discussed against a still of an anonymous foyer that the delegates would presumably enter, the red carpet they would walk down, and photographs of various high ranking personnel...

'Bloody well get on with it,' Elizabeth urged impatiently.

'Bloody well get on with what?' Dave Watson, the hospital's psychiatric consultant, and her immediate

superior, walked in and made a bee-line for the coffee machine.

'Get on with putting out our mystery man's photograph.'

'The amnesiac you admitted last night?'

'You're an early bird.'

'I just finished reading the notes you put on my desk.'

'Couldn't sleep?'

'The twins have been awake all bloody night. I escaped at six. I never thought I'd regard this place as a sanctuary but after home, it's blissfully peaceful.'

'Poor Anna,' Elizabeth commented. 'Where's she's escaping to?'

'Bed, any minute now. I phoned the agency and asked them to send round a nurse.'

'A kind and considerate father.'

'Self-interest. Anna's hell to live with when she goes without her beauty sleep. So, how is our new patient?'

'Out for count the last time I looked at him.'

'I see you resorted to the innovative and advanced remedy of knock out drops.'

'Ssh!'

A police mug shot of John West filled the screen.

'... Hospital staff have named the man "John West" because he was apprehended on the west-bound carriageway of the M4. The police are appealing to anyone who recognizes him to come forward. If you have information, the number to ring is...'