

The Protector

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First published in Great Britain in 2016
by Orion Books
an imprint of the Orion Publishing Group Ltd,
Carmelite House, 50 Victoria Embankment,
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 4091 6640 5

Typeset by Input Data Services Ltd, Bridgwater, Somerset

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc



www.orionbooks.co.uk

Chapter 1

Jake

His eyes, wide and terrified, stare up at me, his body frozen beneath mine. The heat, the dust, the sounds of screams around me – it's all making it nearly impossible to focus. But I must focus. I blink rapidly, shifting to keep him secure, pushing him into the gravel and grit under me. I'm not supposed to be here. I should be out of sight in the surrounding hills, invisible amid the overgrowth and rocks. The unknown, unseen threat.

The man I'm holding prisoner is thin and malnourished, and the whites of his eyes are tinged by yellow. This brainwashed fucker has taken out two of my comrades. The intense ache in my shoulder reminds me that he nearly took me out, too. I should have stayed in position. I've fucked up. A reckless, selfish need to rain holy hell on these fucked-up arseholes has resulted in the deaths of two soldiers. It should be me lying dead in the dirt a few metres away. I deserve it.

His heart is beating frantically behind the thin material of his filthy T-shirt. I can feel the thuds punching into my chest, even through the layers of my clothing and bulletproof vest. But that evil glint in his glazed eyes is still there as he mumbles a jumble of foreign words up at me.

He's praying.

He should be.

'See you in hell.' I pull the trigger and put a bullet in his skull.

I bolt up in bed, sweating and heaving, the thin sheets sticking to every part of me they touch.

'Motherfucker,' I breathe, allowing my eyes to adjust to the

early morning glow until I can see the inky skyline of London from the panoramic window in my bedroom. It's 6 a.m. I know that without even looking at the clock on my bedside cabinet, and it isn't only the rising sun that tells me so. The alarm in my head that explodes at the same time every morning is both a burden and a blessing.

Throwing my legs off the side of the bed, I grab my phone, not surprised when I find no messages or missed calls.

'Morning, world,' I mutter, tossing it back onto the nightstand before extending my arms toward the ceiling, stretching my tight muscles. I roll my shoulders, breathing some air into my lungs before letting it stream out calmly through my nose. Leaning forward, I rest my forearms on my knees and stare out across the city, pushing back the nightmare to a safe corner of my mind as I breathe slowly through it. In and out. In and out. In and out. I close my eyes and thank the power of forged serenity. I'm a master at it.

But then my muscles tense all over again when the bed shifts beneath me. My hand slips straight under the mattress to pull out my VP9 before my mind has even voiced its command.

Impulse.

The gun is aimed at my waking target before my eyes have even focused.

Instinct.

I'm on my feet, naked as the day I was born, arms steady and stretched at full length in front of me. The 9mm handgun fits too well in my grasp.

'HMMMMM.' The soft purr sinks into my mind, and I take in the tangle of long, naked limbs stretching out on my bed. My mind plays catch-up, taking me back to the bar that I landed in last night, and I immediately shove the gun out of sight, just in time for her eyes to flutter open. She smiles lazily and lengthens her slim, tight body on a stretch, a calculated move designed to have my mouth watering and my cock twitching with want.

Too bad for her. There's only one thing on my mind. And she isn't it.

'Come back to bed,' she whispers, lustfully gazing over all six feet four inches of my body as she props herself up on her slender elbow, her chin resting in her hand, long fingers drumming the smooth skin of her cheek.

I don't give her the attention she's demanding. I'm anticipating a very disappointed woman on the horizon. Same scene, different day.

I walk away, feeling the stabs of a filthy look being thrown at my back. 'Sorry, I have things to do,' I say bluntly over my shoulder, without giving her the privilege of my attention while I speak. I haven't got time for this. 'Feel free to help yourself to a banana on the way out.' I round the corner into my bathroom.

The floor-to-ceiling windows on two walls give me a 180-degree view of the city, but all I can see is my haggard face in the mirror. I sigh and brace my hand on the side of my sink as I flip on the tap and stare at my pitiful reflection. I look as shit as I feel. Damn fucking Jack Daniel's. My palm comes up and runs over the roughness of my jaw, just as I hear 'You're a fucking asshole!' followed by the telltale signs of a naked woman falling into my bathroom. I can't disagree with her. I *am* an asshole. An uptight, vengeful asshole. I wish I could let the peace and quiet settle over me, but in *my* life there is no peace. I see their faces every time I close my eyes. Danny. Mike. They were like brothers, and even four years later, I know it's because of me they're dead. My stupidity. My selfishness. There's no escape. Only distraction. Work, drink, and sex are all I have. And without an assignment at the moment, I'm down to two.

I cast tired eyes past my reflection and find her looking as outraged as I knew she would be. But there's desire there, too. Her pert breasts are tipped with solid nipples and her angry eyes are still getting their fill of me. Turning my head to the side, I wait for her greedy gaze to fall to mine. Her lips part.

My cock remains soft. Not even morning wood.

‘Shut the door on your way out,’ I say flatly, giving her nothing more than a straight face to accompany my blunt order. And then I see it. The intent.

‘Here we go,’ I muse to myself, pushing away from the sink and straightening, bracing myself.

She steams towards me, her hand locking and loading on her way. ‘You bastard!’ She slaps me clean across my cheek. And I let her, gritting my teeth and waiting for the sting to fade before cricking my neck and opening my eyes. ‘The door’s that way,’ I say, extending my arm past her.

We fall into a staring deadlock for a few moments – her stunned, probably reflecting back to the good fucking I gave her last night, and me impassive, wishing she’d hurry the hell up and get out so I can get on with my day.

‘Thanks for the hospitality,’ she snipes, finally pivoting on her bare feet and stomping away.

Moments later, the door slams, making the walls around me vibrate from the force, and I return to the mirror, grabbing my toothbrush. I clean my teeth, then pull on some shorts and running shoes and hit the streets.

The morning air feels good. I head to the park, hearing the settling sounds of London by dawn, the sparse traffic, the birds, the sound of other running feet pounding the pavement. It all has the calming effect that I need to get my day off to a good start. The dew is still lingering on the grass, and a damp mist sticks to my naked torso as I sprint down the path. My legs are starting to go numb. It’s how I like it.

My focus remains forward, my direction automatic, like I’ve run the route a million times. I probably have. The same faces, mostly women’s, all smile hopefully when they see me pelting towards them, their backs straightening, their breathing suddenly forced into something close to consistent. Today might

be the day I stop and say hi, or maybe even toss them a quick smile as I race past. Like I said, huge disappointment. They're each just another face among a sea of meaningless faces, humans in my way. I round every one of them stealthily, my body working automatically to avoid any collisions.

Half an hour in, my mind's starting to feel clearer, and the sweat is purging the alcohol from my system. All of it seeps from my body over the last mile stretch of my run until my lungs start burning with need.

Done.

I break down my pace and come to a slow stop outside Nero's café, looking up to the sky. I nod to myself, satisfied. Seven twenty on the dot. Pushing my way through the door, I grab a napkin and wipe my forehead as I stride towards the counter. I scoop up a bottle of water as I pass the fridge and crack it open, glugging down the whole thing before I make it to the server. She's rung it through the till before I have a chance to reach into my pocket and retrieve a note.

'Your black coffee is on the way,' she says, having a quick check over her shoulder as she speaks.

'Thanks,' I mutter, tossing the empty water bottle across the café. It lands with accuracy in the bin. My black coffee is on the counter by the time I return my attention to the server.

Every day, the same. I scoop up my coffee and leave.

The traffic is building as I walk down Berkeley Street, collecting a newspaper from my usual vendor. He's holding it out to me as I approach, his face smiley. 'Early this morning, mister.'

I nod and take the paper, flipping him a quid before scanning the front page. The anger rises from my toes the second I catch a glimpse of the headline.

'Bastards.' I swallow down the fury, as well as the helplessness, and read on. Evacuations being made, tourists warned not to travel there. Turkey has been added to the list of other red zones. The whole fucking world is a red zone these days. I fold the paper and toss it in the bin as I pass. I don't know why I do it to myself. There's nothing I can do to help. Not now. I'm not needed. Or wanted. My destructive rampage in Afghanistan took care of that. The faces of my comrades, my friends, start to break down the wall of defence in my mind. Happy faces. Dead faces. I blink back the flashback, forcing it away before it can take hold. I need another fucking ten-mile run.

I flip on the shower and leave the temperature exactly where it is. Freezing fucking cold. Bullets of icy water hit me from all four directions, ensuring my whole body gets a punishing. It feels good. Real. My head tilts back on my neck and gives the spray access to my face, while I mull over my workload for the day. Clean my gun . . . for the fourth time this week. Check my e-mails. Maybe call Abbie.

The last one has been on my list each day for the past four years. It remains unfulfilled. Just call her. Let her know I'm alive. That's all she needs. All I can give. Yet I can't bring myself to return to the past. My breathing slows, my head dropping. Gunfire, explosions, screams.

E-mails!

I scrub at my cheeks, pulling myself back from the brink of an anxiety attack, and grab the shower gel. I need to get on with my day. After I wash down and wrap a towel around my waist, I grab my pills and pop one as I pad into the open space of my apartment, over to the foot of the panoramic windows where my desk dominates the space. I lower to the huge black leather chair and fire up my laptop, looking out across the city as my computer loads, resting back in silent thought.

Just text her. Let her know I'm still alive. I laugh coldly under my breath at my pathetic reality. Abbie is the only person on this planet who probably cares if I'm dead or alive. Or maybe she doesn't any more. It's just me. No family. No friends. No parents.

From the moment my mother and father were killed on Pan Am Flight 103, I had one purpose. War. I was seven years old. I didn't even really understand what had happened, but I knew there were bad people out there and they needed to be stopped. The burning need to fight the evil grew as I got older. My grandmother took care of me until old age took her. Then there was no one to worry about me any more. I could join the forces and do my bit. Anything to help.

My sharpshooting ability was soon noticed and I was pulled from the cadets. They handed me a rifle. I never looked back. I aimed, I fired, I hit. Over and over again, and each time I felt a sense of achievement. No guilt. Just achievement. Because there was one less dangerous bastard in the world to be worried about.

Ding!

The ping of an e-mail pulls me from my thoughts. 'Hello, gorgeous,' I say to myself when I see her name on my screen. I'm suddenly hopeful of some respite. It's been two weeks with no assignment, and I've been losing my fucking mind. Two weeks with nothing to do but drink, screw, and fight to keep my mind away from haunting memories.

As always, and typical of Lucinda, her note is simple and straight to the point . . . which is undoubtedly why she's the only woman I actually like.

But my contented smile soon drops away the more I read.

CLIENT: Trevor Logan – business tycoon and property owner.

SUBJECT: Camille Logan – youngest child of client and only daughter.

MISSION: Shadow

DURATION: Indefinitely

VALUE: £100K p/w

I lean back in my chair, my fingers forming a steeple in front of my mouth. One hundred grand a week? There must be some kind of catch. A shadow mission? I haven't undertaken one for a long time, and I'm not sure if it is such a good idea now, for no other reason than that the subject is the daughter of Trevor Logan – a ruthless businessman who has stamped on anyone and everyone on his way to the top. I've seen him in the papers, more recently in a court battle when he was accused of suppressing a minority shareholder of a firm he bought into. Of course, he won. He always wins, and the press always backs the prick. The man is unbearably sanctimonious, and I can't imagine that his precious daughter is any different. Lucinda must have considered this.

She should know better. She knows my past. The horrors, every dirty little detail. This kind of job would require constant surveillance, a full shadow. And for a woman like that? No way. I'd end up strangling her . . . or, worse: the constant reminders of another woman who had the same qualities could accelerate my flashbacks.

I snap my thoughts back into line before they run away with me.

No. I can't, not even for that kind of money.

'I was beginning to like you, Lucinda,' I say quietly under my breath as I bash out a reply.

She'll know I'll be struggling without anything to focus on. Drinking and fucking just aren't cutting it after weeks of indulging in both with a lack of an assignment, but sending me this offer is plain stupid. Is she trying to kill me off? I'm

about to click send when the Google search bar beckons.

'Fuck,' I mutter, typing a few words into the empty space that's begging to be filled.

I immediately hate what I see. A woman – mid-twenties perhaps, with slender legs and a dangerously tempting smile. Her long blonde hair is tousled and braided haphazardly over her shoulder as she sips champagne at a garden party, surrounded by drooling men.

I was spot on. This right here is the worst kind of woman, and I definitely shouldn't get involved for any longer than it takes me to fuck her brains out. Yet when I should be closing down the window and returning to my reply to Lucinda and clicking send, I find myself mindlessly clicking on *more images*, instead. I sift through dozens of photographs, some of her leaving clubs, some of her at parties, some of her strolling down a London street with piles of shopping bags weighing her down. Then there are the professional shots, mostly for fashion brands and designers. I frown when Wikipedia comes up on the screen. She has a fucking Wikipedia page? I sigh, but still find myself clicking on the link and reading on.

Camille Logan, youngest child of business tycoon Trevor Logan and renowned party girl. Born 29 June 1991, Camille studied fashion at London College briefly before being headhunted by Elite Models. She lives in central London and is a regular face on the social circuit. Romantic links include Sebastian Peters, heir to Peters Communications. Camille boasts typical model stats: 5'8" tall, 34" inside leg, 30C bra size and 25" waist. Blonde hair, blue eyes. After a rough breakup with Peters last year, Camille admitted herself to the Priory Clinic to overcome a cocaine addiction. She's since picked up her modelling career and represents brands such as Karl Lagerfeld, Gucci and Hugo Boss.

I slump back in my chair, shocked. ‘They give her fucking stats?’ My mind twists in disbelief as I return to my e-mail and add a *PS*.

Not even for a million! It’s a pass.

I don’t add a *thanks*. Lucinda must have lost her fucking mind. And with that, I slam my laptop shut.

I swirl the amber liquid, watching the smooth swish of my drink as it coats the inside of the glass. How many is this tonight? Ten? Eleven? I breathe out and knock it back, slamming my empty on the bar. The barman immediately refills my glass, and I nod my thanks, resting my elbows on the bar. I’m aware of the looks being pointed in my direction by the women here, all of them willing me to glance up so they can catch my eye. But if I give any one of them even a hint of my attention, the night will end up how most of them have recently. A fuck, a goodbye and a slap. And repeat. Just a drink tonight. Just a drink.

My knuckles wedge themselves in my eye sockets and rub harshly. With a lack of a distraction, whether it be an assignment or a woman to fuck, the fight to stop my mind from wandering to past, dark places is a battle like no other. Faces start to flicker through my mind, faces that haunt me daily. Explosions rattle my brain, and my resting heart starts to crank up in speed.

‘Motherfucker,’ I breathe, looking up and finding a woman batting her eyelashes at me from across the bar. She’s a respite from my personal torture that I’m going to take, but just as I’m rising from my stool to go over, the deafening sound of smashing glass has me reaching for the bar to steady myself. My heart is in my fucking throat, my mind whizzing frantically through familiar scenes. Shattering windows, explosions

from enemy fire, screams of fear. I try to talk myself down, my eyes darting around the bar in an attempt to remind myself where I am. The bartender curses, and I glance over to find him looking at the mess of broken glass at his feet.

‘Hey, handsome.’

My eyes shoot to my side and find the woman from across the bar, smiling seductively. The notion that I could grab her, drag her back to my apartment and fuck her until my heart is hammering for another reason doesn’t settle me like it should.

I can’t see her face. I can only see my past. This isn’t going to work.

I reach for the inside pocket of my jacket and pull out my pills, unscrewing the cap as I stalk out of the bar. I need something to focus on and I need it quickly. The flashbacks are becoming more frequent and my pills less effective.

If I keep going at this rate, I’ll be taking Camille Logan’s room at the Priory Clinic. I’ll be back to where I was four years ago – lost, wasted and with nothing to do but constantly torture myself and relive my nightmares. They’ll never leave me, but I can limit them. I just need to force my personal shit to the side and see Camille Logan for what she is.

A job. Focus on the mission. That’s it. That’s all I have.

I pull out my phone and dial my lifeline.

‘I was just about to call you,’ Lucinda says in greeting.

‘The Logan job. I’ll take it.’ I don’t give a shit who the client is. A woman, a kid, a fucking monkey. I just need to work. Nothing could be worse than this.

‘Good,’ she replies simply, not making a big deal of it. ‘Glad you’ve saved me from having to kick your arse into shape.’

My heart starts to ease up a little. ‘Someone needs to,’ I mutter.

‘Where are you?’

‘Chelsea.’

‘In a bar?’

'Just leaving.'

'With?'

'No one.'

She laughs, like she doesn't believe me. Which she undoubtedly doesn't. 'Get a good night's sleep, Jake. And be at Logan Tower tomorrow at three. One hundred grand will be deposited into your account in the morning.' She hangs up and I head home, my mind now centred on the job ahead and that alone. I'm the best at the security firm I work for. I'm not blowing smoke up my own arse. It's a cold, hard fact.

You want to keep someone safe, you hire me. I have a clean sheet. I plan on keeping it that way.

My head is in the game.