

ONE

The first message came in at 6 a.m. Rebecca Sinclair was already up, cradling a tea on the balcony, claiming her five minutes of peace before the week began. When, in the coming days, she thought back to this moment she was grateful that her phone had been on silent, that she didn't see the message immediately, and had enjoyed a last few breaths of summer before her life collapsed.

Robert was downstairs. She could hear him practising the speech he was due to deliver today in the House of Commons. No other sounds but the birds; her daughter remained asleep, her stepson and stepdaughter stayed with their mother in London during term times. Rebecca's companion was the quiet drama of the Chilterns: the sheer edge of Watlington Hill tumbling into the grass beneath it, the inviting darkness of the beech wood across its back like a pelt. Then, as the new sun tiptoed across Christmas Common, a revelation of wildflowers dusting the chalky soil. Mist lingered here. On quieter days she could go out and try to catch it in her hands, but not this morning.

She lifted her phone to check the time and saw a new WhatsApp message from an unknown number. No name, no picture, just one line: *I know who you really are.*

Rebecca stared at the words. She went to delete the message but placed the phone face down on the mattress and turned back to the view. Then she picked up the phone again. The brevity of the

message gave her a chill. Some scam, she wanted to think, but that didn't feel right. Scams deceived. There was no deception here, just a forthright claim. Rebecca wondered if she should show it to her husband, but knew at once that she wouldn't, and felt sick.

When she came downstairs Robert was pacing the kitchen, in a crisp shirt and blue silk tie, arching carefully over his coffee with each sip. The day's newspapers were piled up on the table, unread. Rebecca scanned the front pages for anything worth alerting him to, knowing he had teams of people to do this now but wanting to preserve her role as filter and messenger. Being a member of the Cabinet didn't just bring official cars and red boxes and TV interviews but also a whole new level of scrutiny. She placed the *Guardian* down.

'Michael De Souza still gunning for you.'

Her husband drained his coffee cup and placed it squarely over the journalist's byline.

'I don't want to see his face at this time of day.' He grimaced, kissed her, glanced at the clock. 'Thanks for the warning.' The MP scanned his speech a final time as he dropped it into his briefcase, then straightened and addressed the kitchen. 'A family, at its best, teaches us our values, shapes our identity and nurtures our sense of responsibility,' he said.

'You used my line.'

'That's why today we will improve the Troubled Families programme, to provide vulnerable families with the intensive support they need—'

Their intercom chimed. Robert checked the security screen, saw his governmental ride and buzzed the gates open.

A Range Rover pulled up outside Howe Cottage, beside the five-hundred-year-old yew tree. Here when Chaucer was still a twinkle in his father's eye, as Robert liked to tell guests. Robert's driver emerged, gave Rebecca a friendly salute through the window.

‘Don’t forget the reception tonight,’ she said, as her husband tied his shoes. ‘Black tie. Have you got what you need for that?’

‘At the office. I’ll message you.’

Another kiss, then he was gone. Only when the front gate had whirred closed behind them, did she look at the message again. *I know who you really are.* This was what she was, she thought, glancing around the wooden beams and antique furniture of her home; the evidence surrounded her, exhaustingly so. Wife of a politician in a Grade II listed cottage, with an eight-year-old daughter she really needed to rouse and feed. But what a perfectly chosen message. She tried to smile. If you had to choose six words to strike fear into someone ... How many people could look at their life and think: this is everything; I have nothing to hide?

Rebecca wasn’t sure, and continued to wonder as she packed her notes for the talk she was to give today for new beneficiaries of the charitable trust where she worked. She dressed, considered herself in the wardrobe mirror. Following her marriage she had decided to stop dying her hair blonde, in a spirit of perversity. She had resisted the MP’s wife look, and similarly the Chilterns lady, the Barbour and gilets, and had started going to second-hand stores for surprising items, discreet expressions of independence. Her hair was dark, and today her eyes seemed particularly bright; fearfully bright.

Her daughter, Iona, woke protestingly, before being reminded that her class was going on a field trip to an Iron Age hill fort today, which stirred some enthusiasm. They breakfasted together – Rebecca forced herself to eat – then loaded themselves into the Tesla. The drive took them between wheat fields to Watlington. Laughing children in red sweaters stood out against the grey stones of the market town like little drops of blood. The primary school was the epicentre of their dawn chorus. It was a beautiful day, but the light and sound felt uncomfortable, and

Rebecca found herself staring longingly at the trees and fields beyond. The heart of their own beauty was an indifference that gently obliterated you. This she had recognised for several years.

When her daughter had disappeared into the school, Rebecca looked at her phone again. A second message had arrived.

I know what you did. I have pictures.

The message concluded with instructions: *Download the Whispr app. It makes all communication secure. You don't want your family to find out about this.*

Rebecca crossed the road, past the Chequers pub to the cricket club, where she sat on a bench outside the main gate. She checked that none of the other parents or school staff were nearby, then she folded over her lap and pressed the palms of her hands into her eyes. After a moment she straightened. Anyone could claim to have pictures. Why was she taking this nonsense seriously?

She googled the anonymous phone number. Nothing came up. Rebecca dialled the number and it rang but no one answered.

She had received some training on identifying what Robert's security advisers had named phishing attacks: people who persuaded you to click a link and suddenly your devices were riddled with malware. The possibility was comforting. She imagined some scrawny young man in Lagos or Mumbai or Beijing, reaching out to the Western world; or not even a person, but a bot, an algorithm, dragging a net through humanity's guilt.

Whispr appeared to be a legitimate, highly encrypted messaging app offering total anonymity. Fuck that.

She blocked the number and drove to work.

Three years ago, St Peter's Church discovered it had a sizeable trust set up by a Victorian businessman and staunch temperance campaigner intent on providing the men of Henley with alternatives to alcohol abuse. In the hands of its current chairman, Reverend Jeremy Palmer, the trust had become a charity and

expanded to provide services to local youth and those in need generally: helping with CV writing, job applications, offering support for families battling mental illness, after-school activities for teenagers. Rebecca had joined shortly after Robert won his seat, one of only three paid employees. Robert had liked the look of it from a PR perspective, so long as she didn't get too involved with food banks, and beneath the raffle sales was a mission she believed in.

Today, they were welcoming a handful of selected mentees to a morning of interview training. Some were already waiting outside the church as Rebecca arrived. She managed a smile and headed for her office in what had once been the vicarage. She always loved this, entering her own office. The space was a trophy in itself, testament to years of nocturnal study and self-belief – to a struggle that no one would ever fully know, and no one needed to. It held her up and it held her apart from her husband's orbit.

Her phone was busy now: a Westminster spouses' group, the school Board of Governors, a local children's hospital that she was encouraging to apply for funds – the cloud of activity that usually arrived with a sense of the fullness of her life and now seemed so many points of vulnerability.

At 10 a.m. Rebecca gave an introductory talk to the mentees in the church, grin fixed, trying to savour the smell of old stone and wood and wax. She didn't believe in God but she believed in this smell, which had never failed to calm her until today. Her introduction was followed by an inspirational talk from one of their alumni, then it was back to her office for a video meeting with the children's hospital. She managed to forget about the messages for an hour or so. Then, at midday, the first pictures arrived. From a new number this time, still no name. The first showed her dancing in a G-string, her bra in her hand. The second showed her blindfolded, on all fours. In the third, there were drugs visible:

a mirror on the bed with lines of cocaine, alongside which she lay on her side, naked apart from a pair of heels.

I have hundreds, the accompanying message claimed.

Rebecca locked her office door. She sat down on the floor with her back against it, then crawled over to her wastepaper basket and vomited.

Her phone beeped a minute later. This message was a list of email addresses. It included her parents' Hotmail accounts, those of her closest friends and some co-workers at the Church trust, her husband's constituency account, then contact details for several of his friends and colleagues. Finally, there were names she recognised as members of the press. Whoever was behind this had collected all the pieces of her life.

Rebecca was so used to interpreting the world through the prism of Robert's career, her first thought was of the various enemies who might turn on her by association: enraged constituents, the Labour Party, half of Fleet Street. These were the sharks that circled her family. But this was not how they operated.

For the sake of doing something, Rebecca changed her passwords and privacy settings. Her hands were shaking. She checked the news. Robert's speech had been well received, loyal media suggesting he appeared increasingly prime ministerial. He looked good at the despatch box, notes rolled like a baton in his hand, pumped with outrage and vision. Messages from other MPs' wives sat on her phone, congratulating her, which meant they'd assessed the value of her stock. Most satisfyingly, perhaps, his attackers in the left-wing press were momentarily caught on the back foot, stories on various donations and lobbying rendered petty beside his competence and compassion. She found Whispr on the app store, downloaded it and signed up. Within seconds, her tormentor had found her on there and sent another message.

Transfer 10.15 BTC by midnight tonight, followed by a long string

of random letters and numbers. She had never seen a Bitcoin address before but understood the basic concept: you could use it to send and receive money anonymously; no banks or apps involved, just this code. She found an online currency conversion calculator, typed in 10.15 BTC and it came to £250,000.

Rebecca sat back, winded. What kind of resources did they think she had? Did they imagine this kind of sum would be straightforward for her given her privileged existence? At least now she knew what they wanted. From a quick search it seemed easy enough to set up a Bitcoin wallet – you just installed some software. But obviously you'd have to buy the coin, exchange your brazen sterling for this shadow currency. And she wasn't going to do that.

If there was one thing she'd learned about the powerful it was that they fought back. They played dirty, and saw the world as adversarial, a zero-sum game in which you destroyed your opponents before they destroyed you. When Robert first became aware of Michael De Souza, the pitiless *Guardian* hack digging into his business affairs, he set about trying to ruin the journalist personally and professionally.

She needed to buy time.

Who are you? Rebecca wrote.

One word came back: *Eclipse*. It sat there on her screen, insolent, unwavering. Still, she had initiated some communication. That had to count for something.

I need a few days to raise that, she messaged. I don't have it to hand.

The longer you take, the more people get sent pictures of you.

Then I won't be in a position to pay. I need to be able to get the money discreetly.

24 hours.

Rebecca felt ludicrously grateful. She took a breath. What was she going to do? Out of instinct, she took a piece of paper and pen; brainstorm, she thought: options, strategy. After a moment,

she smashed the pen into the paper, breaking the nib and denting the desk below.

No solutions occurred to her over the course of the afternoon. Rebecca collected her daughter from school, managed to chat to one of the other mums and arrange a sleepover, all while the pieces of her world were tumbling through the air around her. Their nanny was already at home – a muscular Australian woman in her forties – cooking Iona’s supper. Rebecca dressed for the reception, did her make-up on autopilot. She looked unintentionally striking: pale, haunted. She chose more jewellery than usual, then a burgundy lipstick, then she went to the living room drinks cabinet, downed half a glass of vodka and called the taxi.

‘No more than an hour’s TV,’ she said, kissing her daughter farewell.

As they approached the junction with the M25, she told the taxi driver to divert: she wasn’t going straight to the Lord Mayor’s reception. There was something she needed to collect from a house in Croydon first.

Once upon a time, she would have felt embarrassment as she directed him deeper into the humble streets of south London, to the family home that had always seemed to her such a worrying expression of life’s scale. It had never been clear to her what inspired this anxiety; rich in a previous life, perhaps; in possession of a disproportionate soul.

Her father answered the door, startled. He retained his permanent flush of apparent anger, but beneath it there was a new frailty. Her mother was visible through the living room doorway, lying on the sofa; her default position. She propped herself up on an elbow. Both stared at Rebecca in her black satin off-the-shoulder dress.

‘I was passing. Thought I’d say a quick hello.’

‘Well, come in, Becky. Don’t just stand there.’

'I needed to grab something, from my old stuff.'

'Of course.'

Entering their home always felt like an affront. There was an instinct to stoop, as if she might not fit through the doorway. The place was unchanged. Over the years, she had offered various forms of refurbishment and even, very gently, that they might move to better premises entirely. But this was them. She had always marvelled that such a modest structure could house someone's existence. Yet it now contained her old life adequately enough. In fact, one suitcase held it.

It was in Rebecca's old bedroom. She brought it down from the broken wardrobe, caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. She looked like some exotic bird that had got into the house, a fragment of wild night. A fairy tale curdling.

Rebecca unlocked the suitcase out of which she had conjured so many identities before burying one in it. Schoolwork, old photos, books; her first twenty-three years squashed together so that the later stages were barely separable from childhood, all entangled in one stale knot.

Her old life. Her real life.

Hidden inside an old make-up bag was a business card. Or, at least, it was the size of a business card but handwritten. She wasn't sure why she had kept it. Because of the man who gave it to her, perhaps. It was yellowed now, but the message, in flowing black ink, was perfectly legible: *If you ever need me*, followed by a number, then the name 'Elliot'.

She tried to call, standing there in her old room, staring down at the darkening street, but the line was dead. Of course it was. Why had she thought this might work? Every line should be dead, every door closed. Otherwise what did time mean?

Did Elliot even exist any more?

TWO

'White van,' the boy said. 'It's been behind us for five minutes.'

Elliot Kane glanced in the rear-view mirror then back to the Pentonville Road.

'Seen it before?'

The boy shook his head. 'It's a Ford, one man in it. Nothing written on the side.' He looked at Kane with a ten year old's desire to impress. Kane had noticed the vehicle a few minutes earlier, slipping through the Monday-morning traffic behind them, down towards Kings Cross.

'Get its registration?'

'I've memorised it.'

'Good work.'

The boy smiled. Kane squeezed the accelerator and watched for a reaction from the van. He was in a sleek black Audi, which he'd bought as part of the new role: private spy. It had been a year now, working for himself, and he'd learned that a private spy got a lot of attention, sometimes from the people you were targeting, equally often from your own clients whose trust declined in proportion to how much they were paying you. And both sides were inevitably loaded; everyone had the resources to fund a tail team, and plenty of former spooks lined up to provide the service.

'Going to lose him?' the kid said.

'Not sure that's wise. We don't want to draw too much attention, remember.'

‘Yeah.’

And there was a risk assessment involved: Central London, with a child in the car, heavy traffic and a lot of police about – Kane wasn’t going to initiate a chase. But at Great Portland Street he got lucky with the lights, cutting them fine and leaving the van stuck on red.

‘I knew it,’ the kid grinned.

He was Mason Bell, son of Kane’s partner in the investigative firm. Partner in more than that, it was turning out, which was both convenient and complex. Kane turned off Piccadilly into a sleepy Mayfair: boutiques, hedge funds and private clubs nestling behind gold plaques and sharp railings. He felt good, lucky, with the dizzy brightness that comes at the end of luck. And this was his favourite part of London, he could admit that to himself now; the most beautiful and blood-soaked corner of the world. Kane parked alongside the sports cars outside the Westbury Hotel.

‘We’re going to be quick,’ he said. ‘Have a good swim. Don’t cause any trouble. I’ll pick you up when I’m done.’

The kid grabbed his towel and trunks, strode past the door person towards the spa area. Kane went to the Polo Bar at the back.

The bar was plush, bland and very Mayfair, with polo sticks on the wall and low chairs spaced out of eavesdropping distance. Waiting for Kane in the far corner was a shaven-headed man in a bright, short-sleeved floral shirt. It showed thick forearms but hid the old military tattoos that Kane had glimpsed once, if not for long enough to determine which country had enjoyed his service. Bob or Bobby Spears was the name the man used, which didn’t sit entirely straight with his Eastern European accent and an investigations company registered in Montenegro. Kane took a seat opposite him, ordered black coffee from the hovering waiter.

'How's life, Elliot?'

'Good.'

'About to get better.'

Spears slid a flash drive across the table. His gold rings winked. Kane let the drive sit for a moment and looked around. A couple of suits by the windows talking French; three middle-aged women in jewellery close to the bar. Kane had been meeting in the Westbury for fifteen years. He remembered the early days, feeling like he was getting a glimpse into a dark and exclusive realm. After fifteen years haunting these places you have to accept you're the darkness. His coffee arrived and he took a sip, thinking, as ever, that you'd expect better coffee. He picked up the flash drive.

'It's a full criminal record,' Spears said. 'Plus tax investigations, files on his wife and children, private flights, even some videos with prostitutes. There's enough dirt there to put your man out of business.'

'You always impress me, Bobby. Thank you.'

For the last six weeks Kane had been on a job for a billionaire in a big legal fight with another billionaire. Caught in the middle was a bank that both men claimed to own. It must have meant a lot to them, because each side had put millions into the quest to block and criminalise the other. Kane was digging dirt for a fee of five grand a day. It was a stupid, morally blank life and he was richer than he'd ever been and planning his exit.

Spears poured tea into a china cup. Kane turned the drive in his hand, then pocketed it. Kompromat was more than he'd asked for, and a testament to Spears's enduring connections. Kane assumed most of the data had come from Moscow, a contact inside the FSB – maybe some official saving up to escape the current shitstorm. Kane handed Spears a padded envelope containing eighty grand in euros, and the investigator dropped it into the case beside him. A decent payday, minus whatever

he passed on to his sources. But Kane knew what he really wanted was protection. Most people assumed Kane was still attached to MI6 in some capacity and therefore to the British government.

'You are keeping an ear out for me?' Spears said.

'Of course.'

'A lot of my friends are nervous. My Russian friends in particular. They are upset and confused.'

'If they're still here now, I reckon they're safe.'

'No one's safe. You know, the Alenichevs have left. The Mishinskys sold their mansion. You were happy enough to take their money when times were good, now they are scapegoats.'

'I haven't seen honest people getting nervous.'

Spears laughed, then wiped his mouth and dropped the linen napkin onto his plate. Kane imagined his web of acquaintances, powerful men and women waiting to find out if they were pariahs. Londongrad was over. Sanctions had sunk their teeth through the expensive skin of the capital's oligarchs. He'd last seen the Mishinskys' Notting Hill mansion on the news, occupied by squatters, a banner from its windows: BLOOD ON LONDON'S HANDS; OCCUPY UKRAINE AND WE OCCUPY YOU. A rock had been overturned, leaving a lot of reptilian creatures blinking in the light.

'You heard about the Bolshunovs,' Spears went on.

'About the horses.'

'Twenty of them. Shot. Couldn't bear to leave them behind.'

Kane had heard all the stories: closing up the big houses, shooting the racehorses, scuttling the yachts. He'd heard about the classrooms of elite schools languishing half empty, lawyers shutting up shop. Parasite London, starved of blood, was supposedly withering away. He hadn't noticed it yet.

'I'll tell you if I hear anything specific,' Kane said.

'I am still a helpful person to know. There's a lot of material

available at the moment, a lot of power to those who know where to look.'

'I value your acquaintance, Bobby. I'll keep an ear out for any trouble.'

This seemed to be enough.

'The videos are quite something,' Spears said as he got up to leave.

Kane picked up Mason from the pool and waited for him to change. They left the hotel together, squinting into the sunshine. The day crackled with the electricity of leaving a successful handover. No obvious watchers, but Kane performed some light counter-surveillance anyway, driving back a different route with a few wrong turns. Reluctantly, he acknowledged the buzz. He had always told himself that what he loved about espionage was hiding himself in other cities and identities, but integral to that kick was the possession of secrets. You weren't hiding unless people wanted to find you.

His personal phone rang as he was turning onto the Euston Road. A landline. He didn't know the number and was about to kill it when he saw it began with 721: Whitehall. Government.

Kane pulled over.

'Hello?'

'Elliot?'

'Speaking.'

'Do you have a moment?'

Kane recognised the voice of Alistair Godfrey, even though it had been several years. Head of P5, the Operations Section in MI6's Russia department. He was one of the few former colleagues Kane liked and trusted.

'What is it?'

'Are you in a position to speak?' Godfrey asked.

Kane glanced at Mason.

'Briefly.'

'Does the name Anthony Zachariah mean anything to you?'
It took Kane a few seconds to realise who he was referring to. Realisation came with a shot of unease.

'Yes.'

'He was killed last night at his home in Surrey. I'm at the scene, wondered if you could throw some light. It's a nasty one, Elliot. And the only information we've got about him came from you.'

Kane felt a darkness return. Godfrey gave him an address on a private estate entitled Magna Carta Park. Kane hung up, stared at the traffic, then swung the car around and began back west.

'Where are we going?' Mason asked.

'There's something I need to see.'

It took forty minutes to get to the crime scene. Kane left the M4, skirting Windsor on one side, Legoland on the other, to a different kind of make-believe. A sign for Magna Carta Park promised 'a private estate for the twenty-first century'. It led away from the main road to a grandiose set of gates and a security lodge beneath a flag with a coat of arms.

The first police cordon was here. Kane gave his name to the officer, who radioed through and then waved him on.

Half a kilometre further, a surreal assembly of homes appeared, imitations of Queen Anne and Regency style, only untouched by time, their bravado garish. Acres of parkland surrounded them, jewel-perfect cross-hatched lawns, a golf course, six tennis courts. Ten police cars.

Kane left his car alongside the police and told Mason to wait. An inner cordon had been placed around the home that contained the murder. Godfrey met Kane at the tape. He wore a white forensic suit, with the Borough Commander in full uniform beside him. Both glanced uncertainly at Mason in the passenger seat.

'You're in company,' Godfrey said.

'He'll be okay for a minute.'

'Is he yours, Elliot? I haven't kept up.'

'No.'

'Okay. Well, we won't have long anyway.' Godfrey was a large, gentle man who had survived both Eton and Oxford without losing an innate sense of tact, a good reader of people and situations, which was why, behind the soft façade, he occupied one of the most frontline roles at MI6 and was tipped for the top. The Police Commander stood beside him, alert and concerned.

'Bit of background is there?' he said to Kane, hopefully.

'I need to see what happened.'

Kane was given his own protective suit and shoe coverings. He told Mason not to leave the car. Godfrey led him to the home at the centre of the activity.

'Mercifully, their children are away with grandparents,' Godfrey said, 'Anthony Zachariah, as far as anyone here can tell, was a successful businessman who moved to the UK almost twenty years ago. His wife was a primary school teacher. So there's a lot of people wondering why they've been targeted for assassination.'

Kane passed beneath the lucky horseshoe over the entrance, into a corridor lined with family photos, through to a smart new kitchen with children's drawings on the fridge. Zachariah lay on his back on the slate tiles, eyes closed, in a bed of treacly blood. He wore jogging bottoms, white socks and a sky-blue polo shirt that had ridden up to expose the lower half of his stomach. His throat had been hacked at viciously, exposing a dark, wet mess of larynx and trachea.

Anthony Zachariah was what he'd become, but Kane knew him as Anton Semonovich Zakharyan. The best source he'd ever had.

No spray or splatter or smear that Kane could see, none of the

traces in which you could begin to read a narrative. The butchery was narrowly contained.

A second body lay at the bottom of the stairs.

Police watched Kane as he approached it. Irina, Anton's wife. She lay awkwardly, her feet still on the stairs, a white nightie ridden up her thighs, hair in a blonde plait. Her mouth was open so that you could see what was obscured in her husband's corpse: their tongues had been removed.

Kane flinched, then forced himself to look closer to confirm he'd seen correctly. Corpse signalling. That was what they used to call it. Murders as messages. Now he saw the tongues themselves on the floor, a foot or so away from each body.

Colourful plastic building blocks spilled from a box in the living room. Drawers and cupboards stood open. So not just a hit; the attackers had been searching for something. Kane stared, puzzled, at a small doll on the living room floor, its head stained as if it had been dipped into the victims' wounds. Then he turned and saw the living room wall, across which a Russian word had been written in blood: *Podkulachnik*.

Kane was staring at it when Godfrey came over.

'I feel I should know what it means,' Godfrey said. Kane eyed the police who watched their every movement but remained respectfully out of earshot.

'It's an old Soviet term: *Podkulachnik*, sub-kulak. Means traitor to the government.'

'Of course. Was he?'

'Once upon a time. Any suspects?'

'None so far.'

'Any recent contact from him at our end?'

'Not as far as I'm aware. Not many traces at all. But we ran some checks and he's been receiving payments from us for the last sixteen years: two thousand a month to a Swiss account. Your name comes up as authorisation.'

'Who discovered the bodies?' Kane asked.

'One of the estate's security guards. They noticed the gate into the back garden had been left open, then looked in through the window.'

'And you haven't picked up any intelligence on this? Nothing from sources in Moscow?'

'Nothing yet. We're hunting fast, as you can imagine. What can you tell me?'

Kane walked over to the French windows. They were outward opening with mortice lock, double-cylinder deadbolts, security screen rolled up, vibration sensors on the panes. A large garden led to a high brick wall: roses, towering delphiniums, then the open gate. He counted three security cameras, all with red lights showing, suggesting a connection had failed. Kane stepped into the garden, careful to avoid the route any intruders might have used. Godfrey followed. They were briefly alone.

'His original name was Anton Zakharyan,' Kane said. 'I recruited him shortly after he came to London. He worked for a department of Russia's Main Intelligence Directorate called Unit 22195. It concentrated on overseas assassinations. But he was retired; this was a decade and a half ago.'

'Looks like the news might have finally reached Moscow, nonetheless,' Godfrey said.

Kane studied the open gate, then turned back to the house, flush with its dream of another age, another England. If it was a hit team, they'd be out of the country by now. No shortage of flights in the last five hours to Cyprus, Georgia, to Moscow itself via Istanbul or Baku. Zakharyan would have known as well as Kane, you don't retire from treachery. And not returning to the motherland, staying within the timid landscape of Surrey, would have raised red flags. But why now? With such open viciousness?

'I'm late for HQ,' Godfrey said. 'I need to speak to them, then

I'll be in touch for more background.' He hesitated, seeing Kane loiter. 'I'll tell the police to let you have another minute.'

'Thank you.'

When Godfrey had gone Kane turned back to the stairs. He asked the Crime Scene Manager if he could look at the first floor and they led him past Irina's corpse.

The children's bedrooms were themed: pirates and princesses. The floor above contained an adult bedroom and study. The bedroom contained a king size bed with oyster-coloured silk sheets, but only one side had been slept in, a few long blonde hairs on the pillow. Irina had been coming down in nightclothes. But what was Anton waiting up for?

The study was neat, modern and relatively bare: a PC, ledgers, a filing cabinet. On the desk beside the computer Kane saw a hardback book with a cream cover: *The Oxford Anthology of English Poetry*. Kane had given it to Zakharyan as a gift shortly after they had begun meeting regularly. Something had been wedged in halfway through, like a bookmark.

Kane picked up a pencil with his gloved hands and used this to lever the book open. It wasn't a bookmark but a sheet of notepaper containing the word *Eclipse* and a string of letters and numbers.

The alphanumeric chain looked like a cryptocurrency address. Kane took a photo on his phone, closed the book and looked around the study a final time before returning downstairs. The crime scene techs and Murder Investigation Team were watching him more impatiently now. He'd been allowed a paying of respects. Kane was grateful for that. He left them to it, knowing they weren't ready for where the trail was going to lead them.

Eclipse.

The estate had become crowded by the time he left the house, its crime scene swelling, a collision of urgency and artifice that

gave the impression of a film set. Reporters who had somehow breached the fortifications of Magna Carta Park were being steered back towards the tennis courts. Kane took off his overalls and handed them to a woman who marched over and introduced herself as the senior investigating officer. Kane apologised for not being able to help further at the moment, explained that he had a child waiting for him in the car, and continued towards the Audi.

'Can I get your name, at least?' the SIO called.

'I'm afraid not,' Kane said. He couldn't think of a single question about Anton Zakharyan that he'd be prepared to answer, not without speaking to C first. Mason stared at the officer as Kane gunned the engine and reversed away.

'Did someone die?' Mason said.

'Two people.'

'People you knew?'

'People I used to know.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Go home. There's not much else I can do now.'