**Chapter 1**

Oliver Tarrant rarely ventured far from his Northumberland home and his familiarity with foreign weather was limited, to say the least. He’d expected Mexico to be hot, but not this hot. Twenty-four hours ago, when he stepped from his airplane into the sky bridge tunnel, he’d felt a scorching draught tussle his curly blonde hair. Mystified as to why such a warm country would install airport heaters, he’d glanced up and realised his mistake. The tunnel’s rubber seal had failed to make full contact with the doorway and this was just the daytime air wafting through from outside.

No, these temperatures were very different to the climate Tarrant was accustomed to back in northern England. Stepping out of his air-conditioned hotel in Mexico City felt remarkably similar to opening an oven to check on the progress of the Sunday roast.

At least it was cooler here in the mountains, he mused.

Sitting in the rear of the police car, Tarrant turned from watching the passing countryside. “I have to say it,” he murmured, nervously. “I don’t like this.”

“Why am I not surprised?” snorted his colleague. “You want to be careful you don’t piss your pants. You haven’t liked anything since we arrived and most of the time you’re scared of your own shadow. I can’t believe the Laird sent you with me.”

Tarrant gritted his teeth, but said nothing. Richard Brunton had always been an arrogant bastard and he detested the man, but their somewhat unique situation meant they were forced to get along with each other. Attractive, with shaggy black hair and a fashionably unshaven square jaw, Brunton stood a few inches over six feet in height, a good eight inches taller than the slender Tarrant. His muscular stature was intimidating, which, along with his aggression, was the main reason the Laird had long ago appointed him his Head of Security. Out here in the wilds of Mexico, however, Brunton’s size and violent nature wouldn’t count for much if things turned bad.

Tarrant swallowed uneasily. When dealing with drug cartels like this, things could often turn very bad indeed.

Wearing a pale blue civilian suit, Eduardo Garcia, the district Police Chief, sat in the front of the patrol car beside the uniformed driver.

“A smooth road, I think you gentlemen will no doubt agree?” He spoke perfect English and gestured to the winding route through the woodland ahead. “Believe it or not, this has nothing to do with our Highways Department. No, we have Senor Blanco to thank. He paid for the repairs and the resurfacing of the entire road between the city back there and his home. Presumably he doesn’t like bumps. I should say: he didn’t like bumps.” Garcia laughed. “He won’t be disliking anything anymore.”

Tarrant peered out over the lush landscape of forest and rugged mountains. He’d assumed Mexico would be an arid desert, a preconception shaped by countless movies featuring dusty towns with men in sombreros lounging around during siesta. Presumably some parts were like that – maybe around the Texas border – but he hadn’t realised the size of this place, some eight times larger than his native Britain. This was the south of the country, fifty miles west of Mexico City on the edge of the Cumbres Sierra Nevada National Park.

“Is this it?” asked Brunton, leaning forward.

“This is it,” confirmed Garcia. “The Aztec Palace.”

Tarrant gazed at the building complex ahead, an isolated collection of white towers and red-tiled rooftops, all enclosed behind a high wall. Constructed atop a rugged hill, it did indeed resemble a palace, with a helicopter pad, a private reservoir to supply water, and several machine gun turrets to supply security. An inconceivable amount of money had clearly gone into this residence and it was safe to say that the owner, Francisco Blanco, wasn’t short of pesos.

“Welcome to the headquarters of the Muerte Blanco Cartel,” said Garcia.

“Muerte Blanco?” Brunton translated the name and laughed cynically. “White Death?”

“Er, yes.” The Police Chief pulled a sour face. “I have to say, Francisco Blanco was somewhat theatrical. Until last night he was one of the biggest players in the world of narcotics. I think this palace speaks as to just how powerful he was.”

Tarrant remembered once reading why footballers were paid such obscene wages – they needed those hundreds of thousands every week because their sporting careers could be relatively short. They might be out of a job in their mid-twenties and thirty million in the bank would protect them from the nuisance of having to find another line of work. Blanco’s people were similar. A career in a drug cartel also paid quite well, but it too could be short-lived and the severance package often left much to be desired.

The electronic gates were open and the patrol car drove through to enter a tiled plaza decorated with huge Aztec statues and a central fountain complex. Circumnavigating the latter, it pulled up outside the main doors beside a small fleet of police vehicles and forensic vans. Clambering from his seat, Garcia beckoned to his guests.

“Gentlemen, please…” He nodded to the entrance. “My people are working inside, but it’s quite safe to go in and explore. Feel free to report anything you see in your magazine story, but I’ll need to personally vet any photographs you take.”

The two men had no intention of taking pictures, mostly because they weren’t journalists. A lucrative bribe had ensured the Police Chief hadn’t bothered to verify their false story, or check the fake credentials.

Tarrant gazed anxiously around the courtyard. The stone walls were painted gleaming white and festooned with the red blossoms of climbing plants. Some areas were covered in a very different shade of red; a dark congealing red that seemed to be highly popular with clouds of buzzing flies. Beneath the crimson splatters and arterial sprays lay the mangled bodies of seven or eight men.

Tarrant gulped. Or maybe nine or ten – with the state they were in, it was difficult to be sure.

“So which one is Blanco?” he asked.

“Oh, no, my friend.” Garcia shook his head. “These are just a few of his men. There are many more like this inside, but you’ll find Blanco, or rather various pieces of him, out back by the main swimming pool. Just be careful you don’t slip in the blood as we go through. By the way, it’s perhaps a little late to be asking, but I hope you aren’t squeamish?”

Brunton grinned. “Not at all,” he said, truthfully.

“Why is everyone wearing a white suit?” asked Tarrant, still staring at the corpses. “It’s like a uniform.”

“I suppose you could call it that,” explained Garcia, leading them into the palace. “Blanco insisted that all his foot soldiers dressed the same. It ensured that, whenever they killed, the terrified witnesses would know who was responsible. Murderers in your country strive for anonymity, but these people like to advertise their power.”

Tarrant walked slowly through the opulent interior of marble columns and expensive artworks, gaping around in wide-eyed horror. Blanco’s men had indeed been outfitted in white, but their clothes now resembled blotchy camouflage attire, if ever camouflage attire were needed for a bizarre environment of scarlet and white. Floors, walls, and even ceilings, were splattered with blood and torn corpses were strewn everywhere, many having been literally ripped apart. The air conditioning was switched off and a sickly, almost metallic, stench filled the rooms and corridors.

Tarrant knew that blood contained metal, probably iron, if memory served, but surely there shouldn’t be so much iron that it actually stank?

“I’m afraid this isn’t a rare scenario,” said Garcia, noticing his pale features. “Over two-hundred thousand people have died in the drug wars. Blanco originally had an alliance with the Delgado Cartel in the north, but recently they had a falling out.”

“Er…” Tarrant looked around at the carnage. “This is the result of a tiff?”

Garcia shrugged. “These people don’t fool around. Angel Delgado, the cartel head, obviously decided to remove Blanco from the picture and send a definite message to the other players in this business. God alone knows how many he sent here to inflict this sort of damage.”

Brunton and Tarrant exchanged knowing glances. It had taken far fewer assassins than the Police Chief believed, but both men had to agree, it did look as if an army had gone through the place, a crazed army wielding chainsaws.

They walked out through open rear doors to a large swimming pool where Garcia headed to speak with a group of his officers.

Tarrant turned to Brunton. “There are bullet holes everywhere,” he whispered. “How come the guards all missed her?”

“Don’t be stupid,” sneered Brunton. “They almost certainly didn’t miss. No, the information was correct; this is definitely the person we’re looking for.”

Like the building interiors, the swimming pool area was lavishly decorated with Aztec tiles and large statues, but the overall aesthetic was ruined today by the arms, legs and intestines floating in the murky red water. Green hummingbirds whirred between pots of begonias, their emerald beauty incongruous beside the visceral devastation. Some of the more stupid ones hovered briefly over mutilated bodies, mistaking the ghastly wounds for the bright red flowers. A marble nymph poured an endless torrent into the pool from the upturned urn she carried. Tarrant stared at the giant water feature, his mouth falling open.

“My God,” he croaked, seeing the human colon draped over its head like a red wig.

Garcia strolled back to his side. “It’s doubtful that God was present last night,” he said, pointing to a pile of offal. “Blanco is over there. His head has been taken, presumably as a trophy for his rival. I’m told Senor Delgado preserves them in bottles of formaldehyde to decorate his study.”

“Each to their own,” murmured Tarrant, dryly.

The knowledge that just one assassin had done all of this terrified him. Moving away from the Police Chief to walk around the pool, he took a small hip flask from his jacket pocket and sipped.

“Take it easy with that,” snapped Brunton, following. “We have a limited supply and you don’t need it.”

“This woman…” said Tarrant, quietly. “Like you said, they were correct about her, but are we really sure she’s the right one for us. Maybe we could find a…”

“What?” scoffed Brunton. “A less dangerous one? I think dangerous kind of goes with the job description. Besides, we don’t have the time to shop around as it were.”

“But the risk…”

“Everything is a risk. Just our being here is a risk. Imagine finding ourselves in a Mexican prison for whatever reason and being separated from the Fountain for too long.”

Tarrant winced, That was something he definitely didn’t want to imagine.

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The Four Seasons hotel stands in the heart of Mexico City on one of the central tree-lined avenues. Entering the main lobby, Tarrant and Brunton discovered an oasis of coolness and calm, quite a contrast to the endless cacophony outside where Latin American temperaments were paired with loud vehicle horns. Grateful for the air-conditioned breeze, the two men took one of the elevators to the top floor where the most expensive suites looked out over the rooftops. The subdued lift music was supposed to soothe the guests, but it did little to calm Tarrant’s nerves. He hesitated as the doors slid open.

“What’s wrong now?” snarled Brunton.

“I can’t help thinking...” Tarrant swallowed and took a few deep breaths. “If she should suspect we’re lying to her… If she suspects that this is just a ploy to…”

“Come on.” Grabbing his arm, Brunton marched him to the suite at the end of the corridor and rang the bell. “You might not like this, but you know there’s no other way. The clock is ticking and we have to get this done.”

A middle-aged woman in a white towel robe answered the door. Strikingly attractive, with dark shoulder-length hair, a black silk patch covered her left eye. Tarrant was momentarily taken aback. He’d never given any real thought to such things, but he’d expected top assassins to have two eyes. With this particular woman, however, he didn’t suppose it mattered much.

“Miss Crane?” asked Brunton. “Maria Crane?”

“That’s the name I currently use.” The woman looked him over, smiling at his muscular frame. “How can I help you?”

“We know you’re here in Mexico on business.” Brunton lowered his voice. “We have a proposition that we hope will interest you – a business proposition.”

“I see.” Crane paused for several seconds, which felt like minutes to Tarrant. “Then you’d both better come on in, hadn’t you?”

They followed her into the plush suite and she closed the door behind them, smirking at Tarrant.

“No need to be so frightened,” she said.

“Er, no…” He looked confused. “I’m not…”

“Your breathing is rapid and your heart rate is elevated; the pulse in your rather appealing throat is pumping much faster than it should. Don’t worry, I won’t bite.”

“He knows what you’re capable of,” explained Brunton, grinning. “We saw your handiwork at the Aztec Palace this morning. It scared the shit out of him, but I found it impressive.”

“Is that so?” She stared for a few moments. “I see.”

Tarrant had the distinct impression that she was considering whether or not to kill them. With all the cartel warfare, finding bodies in a Mexican hotel room wouldn’t be too unusual for Conchita from housekeeping. It was probably on a par with discovering a condom in the bed, or a stolen towel.

“How did you find me?” asked Crane.

“We’ve been searching for… someone, er, like you,” said Tarrant, nervously. “We, um, trade in a certain product and we asked some of our customers on the Dark Web if they knew of anyone like you who…”

“Angel Delgado, the cartel boss, is one of our clients,” broke in Brunton, exasperated by his colleague’s edginess. “He told us all about you; about what you are. He explained how he hired you to take care of Blanco and told us where you were staying.”

“Did he?” Crane nodded. “My work is strictly confidential. I’ll have to call upon Senor Delgado and discuss this before I leave the country. Just out of curiosity, what does Delgado buy from you?”

“Bottled water,” laughed Brunton.

“Is that some attempt at a joke?”

“Not at all,” Tarrant quickly assured her. “Shallow people will pay stupid money for water, but our product is different and it’s actually worth the price.” He took out his hip flask and warily passed it to her. “Um, this is it: Ravenspoint Spa.”

Crane sniffed. “Yes, this is water, but it’s something far more, isn’t it? How much do you charge?”

Brunton winked at her. “We charge thousands, darling.”

Closing her eye, she sniffed again. The liquid was odourless, but Tarrant guessed this woman’s olfactory senses might be a little different to the norm.

“Interesting.” She returned the flask and smiled thinly. “You mentioned a business proposition?”

Brunton nodded. “As I say, we’ve just visited the Aztec Palace. We have a similar job for you and we need your unique talents as soon as possible.”

“Where?”

“The north of England, near Newcastle.”

“I’ve visited Scotland.” Walking to the glass balcony doors, she gazed out over the lush trees in the neighbouring parkland. “The weather is a little different to this.”

“This is a nice view,” said Tarrant, approaching her. “But allow me to show you a much nicer one” He took out his phone, tapped a banking app and held up a page of transfer details for her to read. “This amount is only a deposit and it’s ready to send to the account of your choice. You just need to enter your details.”

“I like you.” Smiling at him, she took the mobile and transferred the money. “I can’t say as I’m so keen on your big brash friend there, but I do like you.”

“Um, very good,” said Tarrant, nervously clearing his dry throat. Hopefully she wouldn’t like him too much. “Now all you need do is travel to Britain and we can discuss the work.”

“Who is it?” she asked.

“You mean the target?” said Brunton.

“I mean who just paid me that money? You’re clearly representing someone and I want their name.”

“Reginald Mulgrave,” said Tarrant.

“I’ve never heard of him.” Crane shrugged. “But fortunately for you that isn’t a problem. His money is good.”

“The deposit is an incentive,” said Tarrant. “You’ll keep it whether you take the job or not. The remainder will be deposited after you visit Britain and speak to Reginald in person. I should point out that time is very much a factor here. It’s less than two weeks to Christmas and the work needs to be completed before then. It needs completing before the 21st of December.”

Crane laughed. “Christmas won’t get in the way of anything. I’m not in the habit of celebrating such things.”

Well, that’s one less name on my gift list, thought Tarrant, nervously.

“I’ll be there,” she confirmed. “I have a loose end named Delgado that I need to tie up and then I’ll fly out two days from now.”

“Excellent,” said Brunton. “I’ll supply you with all the contact information.”

Tarrant was still far from happy about this. Despite the air conditioning, rivulets of sweat trickled down his back.

“Yes, excellent,” he agreed, his heart thudding. “We’ll look forward to seeing you there.”

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**Chapter 2**

Yorkshire, Britain’s largest county, was named by the Vikings and sliced up by them into three manageable areas known as Ridings. After a thousand trouble-free years, the bureaucrats decided this was impractical and, in 1974, they changed the ridings to North Yorkshire, West Yorkshire, and South Yorkshire. The county of Humberside replaced the East Riding, but this was highly unpopular and, after much campaigning, it reverted back to its original name in 1996. No one was entirely sure why any of this disruption occurred, but it’s generally assumed to have been some obscure governmental way of making wealthy people wealthier.

Hull is the only city in the East Riding, or Kingston upon Hull, to use the full title. The name was taken from the River Hull that flows through the centre, but where other cities, such as Newcastle upon Tyne have been simplified to just Newcastle, the people of Hull bizarrely discarded the obvious name of Kingston and went instead for Hull, or “Ull” as many there pronounce it. The city sprawls along the tidal banks of the vast Humber River, so why the nondescript River Hull was chosen for the name is anyone’s guess.