

The opening chapters of ...

# ConunDrum 1

## Quantum Deception

An adventure/mystery novel

by

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All characters are fictional etc, but any resemblance to anyone that the author knows may well be intentional!

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*Thanks to Freepik.com for the graphics on the cover jacket.*

# Prologue

## *Quantum:*

- *scientifically, a discrete quantity of energy needed to change state*
- *generally, a discrete amount of something*

## *Deception:*

- *an act or statement which misleads, hides the truth, or promotes a belief, concept, or idea that is not true*
- *involving dissimulation, propaganda, equivocations, distraction, camouflage, or concealment*
- *self-deception 'living a lie', the act of hiding the truth from yourself*

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## **Near Poonch, Kashmir, Northern India.**

*5 km from the border with Pakistan.*

They'd been holed up in the stinking cattle shelter for nearly three days. They were tired and hungry, and their clothes smelled of cow pats. They took turns at napping, huddled under the stale straw for warmth, eking out their rations.

They waited and they watched.

In one direction they could see the lights of the town of Poonch with its warm beds, hot food and running water. In the other direction there was nothing but barren desolate land, except for a small encampment that had appeared almost overnight. The local *Gujjars* assumed it was one of the nomadic *Bakermals* tribes who tended to keep themselves to themselves. From their vantage point in the cowshed, augmented by satellite imagery, drone photography and other intelligence, the watchers knew the encampment for what it was: a Pakistani-backed terrorist training camp. The reconnaissance last night had proved that beyond doubt. It had also provided a ground plan, the location of their munitions store, and a measure of their strength.

Earlier today they had witnessed a Land Rover travelling along the valley to the camp from Poonch carrying three Pakistani nationals, all of whom were known to the security services. The trip tied in with unusual movements at Poonch Airstrip.

The operation was scheduled to start at 4 a.m. local time.

At Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children, in Bloomsbury, London, surgeons were working late in the evening on a difficult operation: a one month old baby whose heart condition had unexpectedly turned critical. The mother sat waiting throughout the long procedure, trying to come to terms with the likely loss of their child. She couldn't even contact the father for some emotional support, he was overseas on business. India, she thought. He would doubtless be fast asleep at this hour. Oblivious.

Charlie Delta couldn't wait to get home. It was his last mission. It was strictly against protocol for any unnecessary communication on a mission but he had to know. Know if his daughter was OK. He might just get a signal. One bar, that flitted in and out like a ghostly tease. Not enough strength to reach the next door neighbour let alone London.

He checked the time, 03:58 local time, and phoned again.

At 4 a.m. precisely, command centre gave the go ahead.

He thrust the phone back in his pocket not knowing how much that aborted call would cost.

The mission objective was to extract the known terrorist leader. In and out. Whilst everyone else slept. No gunfire. Any terrorist collateral damage was to be avoided but acceptable.

The night was clear. No moon. Just a canopy of brilliant stars. Dawn was contemplating breaking.

The three man team crept along the track to the camp perimeter, a path they had recce'd thoroughly last night. The Pakistani visitors were in a tent on the edge of the camp.

Two of them would enter the tent, capture the wanted man – the young one without a full beard, and neutralise any opposition instantly.

Quietly in. Quietly out.

The third member of the team would keep watch and in the last resort provide firepower to cover their retreat.

They'd storyboarded the plan many times.

"Charlie Delta, you're clear."

"Roger that, Papa Bear."

Charlie Delta and Romeo Tango crawled the last few yards on their bellies and slowly lifted up the flap of the tent. Nothing was moving inside. They allowed their eyes to slowly adjust to the darkness inside the tent. When they were satisfied they set to work. They located the leader's bed which was conveniently placed between the two sleeping old beards. Those two were necessarily despatched: their throats slit, and apart from a small whoosh of air and a pool of blood in their sleeping bags, their sleep was not disturbed.

"Charlie Delta. Hostile approaching tent from the south. Advise," Papa Bear said calmly.

"Shit," Charlie Delta said to himself. He dared't respond to the message in his ear for fear of waking the slumbering leader. He signalled to his partner to apprehend the hostile.

Romeo Tango had to move slowly for fear of tripping over the gear strewn around the tent. He clearly wasn't going to get to the tent entrance in time. He prepared his silenced pistol.

"Charlie Delta. Hostile now five feet from tent. Do I engage?" Papa Bear repeated, with a slight edge to his voice.

The tent flap opened.

A head peered in.

Romeo Tango took aim.

"Daddy, I can't sleep..."

Romeo Tango lowered his pistol.

"No! He's just..."

Thwack! Papa Bear spattered the boy's brains all over the tent from fifty metres away.

"... a kid," shouted Charlie Delta.

The terrorist leader awoke with a start. He reached for his pistol and let off two shots in quick succession. They were wild and hit nothing but a commotion grew quickly throughout the camp.

"Abort! Abort!" shouted Charlie Delta.

They dived out of the tent and ran like hell, hitting their rehearsed escape route within seconds. Papa Bear fired six shots into the munitions store; the ensuing explosions effectively deterred any immediate pursuers.

The team were sucked into the night as inexorably as stars into a black hole.

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### **Several weeks later. Vauxhall, London.**

The Yodel van drove down Glasshouse Walk and turned left into Goding Street. A keen watcher would have known that this was the third time the van had driven around Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens but the casual observer would simply assume that the parcel man was looking for an address.

The gardens were busy this fine spring lunch time: the Black Dog was packed with office types; tourists were queuing for Portuguese tapas at the Café Madeira; Nando's and the Dirty Burger couldn't serve fast food fast enough.

The van drove down the Albert Embankment, turned left, and joined the slow-moving traffic under the railway bridge. Most drivers would have cursed at the mild congestion but the man sitting next to the Yodel driver smiled as they crept forward slowly. He looked at the mobile phone in his hand, at the picture of a beautiful woman smiling. He adjusted his bobble hat – a strange choice for a fine spring day, thought the driver. As they passed the Royal Vauxhall Tavern on their left, they could see a large group of people milling around the entrance to the park.

*Perfect.*

He glanced at the mobile phone again.

“Go!” commanded the passenger, as he pulled his black bobble hat down over his brown face to form a balaclava, leaving only small ragged holes for his eyes and mouth. He pulled back the blanket on his lap to reveal a semi-automatic AK-47.

The driver hesitated but a dig in the ribs from the weapon quelled his doubts. He floored the accelerator, pulling the steering wheel to the left and bouncing up the kerb, aiming for the pedestrians.

But then he braked hard. “We’ll hit that pram.”

The passenger pointed his weapon at the driver’s head, and yelled, “Do it!”

The van shot into the crowd, sweeping the pram high in the sky before slewing sideways to a stop by the two tall pillars at the park entrance. The passenger leapt from his door and ran around to the driver’s side, urging the driver out of the van, whilst spraying bullets randomly from his weapon like a demented gardener watering a flowerbed.

“Allah be praised.”

Within seconds he was running through the park, lost in the ensuing melee.

## Part I Finn - Conception

*Conception:*

- *the making of a child*
- *the forming of an idea or plan*

'People Give In' by Manic Street Preachers:

*There is no theory of everything  
No immaculate conception, no crime to forgive  
Torn between the then and now  
Never really knowing the why and how*

*People break down  
People move on  
People get cold  
People stay strong  
People give in  
People stay strong.*

### Chapter 1

*Winter is coming.*

Aficionados of the cult TV series, *Game of Thrones*, will know that winter could last for many years and that the ensuing bitter cold would be the least of one's worries. The Night King and the other White Walkers, together with their zombie army and the un-dead dragon, would present a far bigger threat than frost-bite or cold toes. Even if you were fortunate enough to be equipped with dragon-glass or a sturdy Valyrian sword, winter wouldn't be your favourite season.

Like the characters in *Game of Thrones*, I viewed the forthcoming winter with dread as I lay in my bed shivering. I pulled the blankets tight around my neck, sealing myself hermetically like a boil in the bag piece of fish, though this fish would be raw and uncooked. It wouldn't be one of the White Walkers that finished me off, it would be the heartless Pembrokeshire winter. I'd skied in the Alps and known cold. Real cold. Though that cold was soon banished by a warm chalet log fire and a glass or two of *vin chaud*. Pems cold was like a virus: it infected your flesh, your bones, even your bloodstream, and it lurked incessantly, multiplying, immune to all counter-measures. It generally went into remission between June and October but then the disease would return with a vengeance. There was no known cure.

My legs felt like they'd been immersed in liquid nitrogen; that's around -200° C, or -300° in old money Fahrenheit. I'd once seen a professor dip a rubber flexible hosepipe into a vacuum flask fuming with the liquefied gas and then bash the now-rigid pipe on a worktop; it shattered into a thousand pieces. I felt my legs would do the same if I inadvertently hit them on the bed frame.

I breathed in and then exhaled and watched in fascination as a fog formed around my head. I took a deeper breath and exhaled again watching the fog form and slowly dissipate. Now you see me, now you don't.

Winter was here to stay, until May at least, and it was now only late November. How did I ever think I could survive in my little old campervan for a whole year?

In the Spring it had seemed a romantic idyll, and so it had proved for many weeks as I travelled around south west Wales, stopping on a whim, here or there, wherever and whenever it took my fancy. I saw the sun get out of bed each day and wondered what mood she'd be in, and later watched her tuck in for the night, spent. I studied the cockles and the grockles on the beaches, walked the coastal paths (all 186 miles of them), stomped across the Preseli Mountains (not quite as high as the Alps at only 500 metres) and watched the noisy courtship of what may have been mating Monarch butterflies in the dusky

pink skies over Dinas Head. I fried bacon for supper under the metronomic illumination of Strumble Head lighthouse, washed it down with a mug of coca before hunkering down with my Kindle: maybe some thrills with Dan Brown or Harlan Coben, occasionally some spice from Black Lace, and just as often a smattering of gentle eroticism from Thomas Hardy's Bathsheba. One day I'd like to write like any one of those guys – a racy mystery adventure.

But it wouldn't be today.

My hands were too cold to hold a pen, and having wiped the condensation from a patch of the window, too cold even to tap a keyboard.

Through the window I could see it was about high tide in Neyland marina, that meant it was soon after spring tides, confirmed by last night's moon beginning its wane. From my vantage point in the car park I could look left and see the many boats that were still berthed at their pontoons, safe from the ravages of any but the wildest winter storm. I could make out the masthead of my boat amongst them, a small old cabin cruiser. To my right I could see those boats that had been hauled out, settled in their rusty iron cradles, hopefully immune to anything the Pembrokeshire winter could throw at them. Some needed new antifouling, some a new engine, whilst others needed to be put out of their misery. Beyond them I could see where Westfield Pill (the inlet sheltering the marina) met the mighty Cleddau river; turn left there, duck under the towering Cleddau bridge, and you'd enter the secret waterway: a peaceful meandering wilderness with more pills and inlets to explore; turn right and you'd hit the Irish ferry, the refineries (now mostly closed), the new gas-fed power station, the LNG (liquid natural gas) storage depots, then next stop Ireland, and beyond that America.

There was no wind today and the waters moved lazily like a giant oil slick, thick and treacly as if another degree drop in temperature would stop them in their tracks, frozen like a glacier.

I grabbed my clothes and brought them under the blankets to warm up for a few minutes, as I used to do as a child. Then I psyched myself for the ordeal ahead. "5-4-3-2-1 Go!" I said to myself. I threw off the covers, ripped off my pyjamas (a tracksuit from the charity shop), and donned my clothes as fast as my disobedient fingers would let me. Someone once said my clothes had all the style and coordination of a circus clown; I'm sure they were simply jealous. I kidded myself that they were carefully selected to hide my ageing spreading body from an unsuspecting public.

I sang U2's 'Beautiful Day' as loud as I could in a desperate effort to banish the cold:

*You're on the road  
But you've got no destination  
You're in the mud  
In the maze of her imagination*

*You're lovin' this town  
Even if that doesn't ring true  
You've been all over  
And it's been all over you*

*It's a beautiful day  
Don't let it get away  
It's a beautiful day...*

But it wasn't a beautiful day.

It was goddam freezing and grey. The sun had just turned over in bed, pulled the duvet over its head, and gone back to sleep. It wasn't going to bother venturing out and about today.

And I doubted that I featured at all these days in *her* thoughts or *in the maze of her imagination*.

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I ran my fingers through my wild grey bushy hair.

*Good enough, I'm not on the catwalk.*

My old parka felt like the goblins had starched it rigid overnight as I wrestled my way into it. I exited the van and patted the bonnet. Good old Danny boy. The Mercedes Vito had served me well even though in *car years* it was probably as old as me. On seeing a bunch of youths loitering nearby bouncing a football, I pressed the remote to lock the doors.

“Cool van,” one of them said.

I nodded and strode away. I wouldn't trust them an inch. There was little of worth to steal but it was my entire life in there. Why weren't they at school anyway? Oh yes, it was Saturday.

I'd decided to spend the morning in Haverfordwest public library, for three reasons: firstly I could get there for free with my new bus pass (eligible at age 60 in Wales); secondly it'd be nice and warm there; and thirdly I wanted to check out their reference section to research some ideas for my gestating novel.

First, I wanted to check on the swan with its injured wing in the nature reserve, a short walk beyond the marina. I walked at a quick pace along the path that had once seen Brunel's GWR trains shunt up and down its way from 1856. *God's Wonderful Railway* had been cruelly felled by Beeching's axe and on the 15<sup>th</sup> June 1964 the last passenger train departed, taking with it the very lifeblood of Neyland. Thankfully the building of the marina in the 1980s, with its lakes, dams, weirs and fish-ladders provided a heart-lifting stroll at any time of the year.

Except today I felt edgy walking along the path.

I passed under the road bridge towering high above me. A jump from the top would sort out all my problems; if the impact didn't shatter all my bones then the oozy mud of the riverbed would hold me in a deadly embrace until my last breath. It'd be warmer down there - no wind, no frosts.

It was an option. But today I didn't have the courage.

The bridge cast an ominous shadow over the languid river below and a lazy mist loitered over the water as if it was plotting against me, judging the appropriate time to swirl around me, ensnare me in its tentacles and suck me down into its cold depths.

I shuddered and looked around me. Nothing. No one.

*Get a grip, Finn.*

But I couldn't shake the feeling I was being observed.

Maybe the jobs in the car parks had spooked me.

I left the main path where it forked to give access to the first lake where I hoped to find the forlorn swan. The cob hadn't left its nest all week but today it was gone. That meant either it was now OK or it had starved to death. The sad pen paddling aimlessly nearby seemed to indicate the latter. Perhaps it was the swan's ghost haunting me, making me feel so uneasy.

I stamped in a puddle, cracking the thin ice layer, and thought of the local weather folklore:

*Ice in November to bear a duck*

*The rest of winter will be slush and muck.*

The lake hadn't frozen yet but it sure felt like it might if it wasn't for the ducks continually thwarting its attempts.

I shivered through to my bones. I saw the other swans and ducks fluff up their down to keep warm so I pulled my parka tight around the collar, thrust my hands deep in my pockets, and headed back the way I'd come, head down to avert the gaze of any would-be follower. I thought I heard rustling in the bushes, perhaps a scheming whisper. On auto-pilot I crunched along the gravel path wishing I could make less noise so as not to attract my imaginary pursuer, my White Walker.

I soon rejoined the main tarmac path but I realised I could still hear the sound of crunching gravel, and it was getting louder quickly. It must be the jobs from the car park. Had I looked at them *in a funny way* earlier? Had I earned their wrath for some other reason? I had no wallet to offer them, no phone, no nothing.

Should I run – for sure they'd easily outpace me?

Or should I turn and try to reason with them – perhaps promise money from the van (money that I didn't have)?

Either way I felt I was about to have seven tons of crap kicked out of me. It was going to hurt.

What happened to the *Beautiful Day*, Bono?

## Chapter 2

I felt a shove from behind. This was it. I took one involuntary step forward to brace my fall.

With my heart pounding I turned around slowly expecting to see a swaggering job from the car park with a knife, intent on relieving me of my worldly wealth. Good luck with that chum, although I knew full well that poverty wouldn't save me from a good drubbing or a kick in the balls.

As I lifted my apologetic eyes from the ground all I could see was a black bundle of soggy fluff squat on his haunches, panting, looking expectantly first at me and then at the gigantic slimy branch he'd dropped in front of him. His left eye had a white patch around it making him look like a pirate in negative. Then a voice made me look up further to see a little old lady running as best she could, waving a walking stick, and shouting breathlessly, "Bad dog, Noah. Bad dog."

As she drew level she gave Noah a well-deserved tap on the head with her stick, as she clipped on his lead. "Bad dog." She turned to me, trying to apologise between gasps for breath. "I am so sorry. Are you all right? He never does that normally."

Her pungent lavender perfume did a fine job of masking the earthy dog stink.

At that moment I could happily have been savaged by a drooling smelly Noah, it would be a welcome save from my assumed destiny. "I'm fine. Don't worry. No harm done." I knelt down and ruffled Noah's head. "There, boy. Watch where you're going next time."

"I think he caught sight of your parka and mistook you for Patrick, my husband," explained the slightly less out of breath lady.

"It's OK. Really." I looked down the path beyond the lady. "Where is your husband today?" In my desperation to say something, anything, I hadn't considered that she may be alone in life, except for her dog.

"Sadly he's more or less housebound now. Bless him. He so used to love this walk. I'm Audrey, by the way." She held out a formal hand.

I shook her hand gently and smiled to express my sympathies. She had pretty hazel eyes, short white curly hair and a face landscaped by laughter lines. "Finn."

"Finn? Are you the chap in the post office wanting puzzles or some such?"

"fraid so."

We agreed we were heading the same way and started walking back to the marina car park. Noah was delighted to be let of the leash again and spent his time running forward then back, checking we were following, covering ten times the distance that we walked. "That's why we called our little cockapoo Noah," Audrey said, "he counts us in two by two."

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I found I had to walk quite fast to keep up with Audrey, and she was the one with the walking stick.

"So what's that all about then, Mr Finn, these puzzles?"

"It's just Finn. Plain old Finn."

I had indeed placed some postcard adverts in the local shops:

*Wanted: your conundrums.*

*Got a puzzle you can't solve?*

*Can't explain the inexplicable?*

*Email Finn and see if I can fathom the unfathomable.*

I was rather hoping to learn of strange phenomena and weird goings-on to use as plot lines for my *maybe-one-day* novel.

“Oh that’s exciting,” said Audrey, with a wicked glint, “Like a murdered body in the study locked from the inside?”

“Exactly.” But all I’d got so far was:

*Why does my wife spend more than I earn?*

*Is it possible to get out of a glacial crevasse?*

*If one glass of red wine is good for you then surely a whole bottle must be really good?*

Audrey hooted with laughter which made my disappointment with the postcard response more bearable. I guess I’d been rather optimistic, or naive.

“I don’t suppose you’d be interested in my puzzle then, Finn. There’s no dead bodies involved, I’m afraid.” With my encouragement she told me how her husband, Patrick, had locked all their valuables in a safe: passports, bank details, and so forth. “And a bag of extremely valuable old coins for our nest egg.”

“Very sensible.”

“Yes, I suppose so.” He was worried about forgetting the safe combination as his mind played tricks on him these days and he didn’t want to write it down anywhere. He’d designed a puzzle that would disclose the code to the safe, so if he should ever forget it all he had to do was solve the puzzle and open the safe.

“And..?” I knew what was coming next.

“Ah Patrick, bless him. He’s mind’s not what it was. He’s not only forgotten the combination but he can’t remember how to solve the puzzle either. He never showed me how to do it and I do so want to sell those coins. So I’m in a bit of a pickle really, Finn.” She turned to me with tears in those pretty hazel eyes. Her laughter lines had become over-ploughed with worried furrows.

“Do you want me to take a look?”

“Would you mind? I’m afraid it won’t make a great story for your book but I would be most grateful.”

We sauntered on and arrived at the edge of the car park when Audrey suddenly stopped.

“Someone’s trying to steal my car. They’re trying to steal the puzzle and rob my safe. My coins!”

## Chapter 3

Sure enough I could see four or five jobs milling around a yellow Fiat 500, probably the ones I’d seen loitering earlier. They seemed to be egging on another who was under the car, presumably stealing the catalytic converter – platinum fetched a good price.

“We’d better call the police. Do you have a phone, Audrey?” My heart rate sky-rocketed as I imagined all sorts of nasty outcomes from any attempts to apprehend them directly ourselves; foul language and knives were their most likely weapons.

*Why weren’t there more bobbies on the beat these days?*

“Police? Huh,” scorned Audrey, “My car will be gone by the time they arrive.”

Before I could stop her she was advancing rapidly across the car park, her stick waving like a flag. “Hey, you. Yes, you.”

I prayed the jobs would hightail it. I wasn’t made of the same stuff as Audrey. But the youths stood their ground and engaged in debate with the fast approaching one-woman army. I couldn’t leave her to fight them alone. Damn it. Reluctantly I jogged over to the fracas wondering for the second time today if I was about to get my head kicked in.

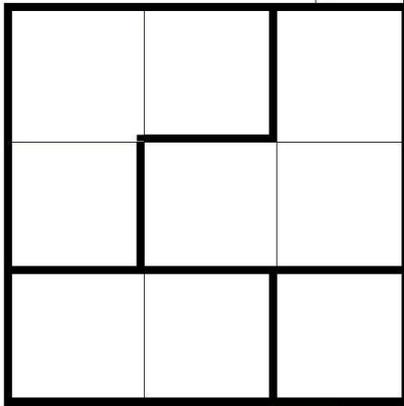
Noah ran back and forth between Audrey and me, urging me to close the gap quickly.

“It’s all right, Finn,” Audrey said, as I arrived panting, “They’ve got their ball stuck underneath, that’s all.”

After a few minutes of pulling and pushing the football came free. “Thanks, Miss, sorry,” they shouted

as they ran off, kicking the ball between them with more skill than our current national squad.

“Nice lads, aren’t they? Now where is that puzzle?” Audrey unlocked the car and began to rummage inside. “Here we are.” She handed a single sheet of paper to me.



$9 \times 4 \times 3 + 3$

“So what do you make of that, Finn?”

I studied the strange pattern for a minute or so saying nothing but trying to look engrossed, and intelligent. I didn’t have a clue what it meant but I didn’t want to disappoint Audrey too soon, nor to display my incompetence. “Well, it’s not immediately obvious... but I do have some ideas. Why don’t I work on this for a while? Can I take it now?”

Audrey had clearly been expecting an instant solution to the puzzle. “Oh, all right. I suppose. You won’t lose it, will you?”

We exchanged phone numbers.

“I’ll be in touch in a day or so. I promise.”

“Thank you, Finn. This means a lot to me. I want to sell those coins and take Patrick on the Hurtigruten.”

“The hurty-what?”

“Hurtigruten. It’s a Norwegian coastal cruise. I want him to see the northern lights. It’ll be the trip of our lifetime. He’s always wanted to witness the Aurora Borealis. I want to surprise him.”

“Well, I’ll certainly do my best.”

“I do hope so, Finn,” she implored with those wet hazel eyes, “Before it’s too late. For Patrick.”

Noah nudged my leg and I could read the clear message in his eyes. *Don’t you dare let us down.*

## Chapter 4

Large dollops of rain slid steadily down the windows of the marina café in a desperate race to get to the bottom first. It was another cold wet Welsh day.

I hadn’t made much progress on Audrey’s little conundrum other than guessing at the basic puzzle type. To be honest, I had barely tried despite my promise. I knew she’d be away for at least a week so I’d buried it in my to-do list, which was overstating the depth of that list somewhat.

I had two things to do today: keep warm and meet Bob. The café enabled me to do both, although Bob was late and I was feeling embarrassed loitering in the café without so much as buying a cup of tea, even though they knew me well enough. The smell of sizzling bacon was worse than a CIA water-boarding.

I nodded to one or two of the regulars.

“Mornin’, Finn. How’s it *gwain*?” Tom greeted me.

I grunted something back along the lines of it was going badly, thanks for asking.

“You look likes you been through an ’edge backwards on this fine Sunday morning.” He laughed. I guessed my curly grey mop was well overdue for shearing but that was ten quid I could ill afford at the moment. “Paper’s there, if you wannit,” he said, sliding the review section from yesterday’s The Times towards me. “Beats me ’ow you do those darn puzzles. Can’t be doing with all that guesswork.” I nodded, in no mood to explain how logic alone solved those puzzles, not guesswork. “There’s tea in that pot too, if you want. I’m done.” I folded the paper and put it in my jacket pocket and helped myself to a lukewarm half cup of tea. I loaded it with three sugars. “You can ’ave that too,” he said, sliding a raffle ticket my way. “What do I want with a bloody holiday cruise?”

Tom hid behind the main section of his paper and we sat in companionable silence on adjacent tables, whilst I caressed my teacup with both hands, my jumper sleeves pulled right down over my purple-blue knuckles.

A headline on the back of Tom’s paper caught my eye: *PC’s wife killed in revenge attack*. Poor bugger. Just doing his job and some low-life decides to get even by destroying his family. I wondered how anyone in that line of work, be they coppers, armed forces or secret agents, could hold down married life carrying that sort of risk. No wonder James Bond only had fleeting relationships; his women nearly always ended up dead, including his one wife, Tracy – played by kick-ass Diana Rigg, killed by the dastardly Blofeld. I guess that was why Clark Kent wore that cunning disguise of a suit and a pair of glasses, to protect his Mom and Pop, and of course Lois. Who’d have guessed he was really Superman dressed like that?

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At length Bob bounded in with his usual gusto, discarded his bright red Helly-Hansen sailing jacket with a flourish, like a shaggy dog shaking itself dry.

“How about a full English then, mate?” he said, plonking his slightly overweight frame into the complaining chair, and signalling to the waitress.

It was always good to see Bob though with all his international travel it wasn’t often enough. We’d met many moons go (back in the days when I had a little spare cash) on a Neilson’s sailing holiday, and although he was nearly twenty years younger than me we hit it off. We’d kept in touch ever since.

Bob was the only person in my life that I’d ever call *a real brick*.

He wiped the rain off his face with the sleeve of his white Ralph Lauren polo shirt. He had the knack of looking casual smart at all times. He’d even look good in a grease-stained boiler suit. His splash of Denim after-shave was always just-so; *for the man who doesn’t have to try too hard*. I suddenly became aware of my parka smelling like a dried-up fishpond. “Not sailing today then?” Bob smirked.

“As if. You know me, fair weather sailor these days.”

“Oh, so you won’t want to crew for me next week. I’m racing *Flighty* down to Guernsey and back. Bit of a piss-up really, if I’m honest. Just a few of the lads.”

*Flighty* was a thirty year old Sigma 41 that he kept on the Hamble; it was a beautiful sailing cruiser that he’d spent a fortune on in addition to the sixty-odd grand purchase price.

Ten years ago I’d have jumped at the chance but the body doesn’t get any younger, especially mine. In truth I knew that to be a lame excuse. Nowadays I was simply too frightened of screwing things up, losing Bob the race, and looking a total dick in front of his mates. It was easier not to try, not to get involved.

Memories of my secondary-modern school flooded back: the established bullies in my class, and the up-and-coming bullies in the year below, taunting me: “Grubby grub-screw. Bet you never have. Bet you never will, Ne-ville.” What chance did a porky kid called Neville Grubb have? Especially one who didn’t know what a grub-screw was, in the first place (a small engineering screw, if you’re interested). Do you know anyone famous called Neville, (apart from Chamberlain, of course)? Anyone of that name ever done anything useful (Chamberlain – case proven, I think)? So I learnt how to go unnoticed, how to blend in, how to be invisible, to avoid confrontation. Sometimes it worked. Too often it didn’t.

Luckily I managed to earn a little respect from some of my classmates when I discovered my puny adolescent body had matured into a pretty lean swimming machine. Suddenly everyone wanted me in their gala team. “You swim like a dolphin, Grubby.” And so I became known as Finn; the double-n was my way of looking extra cool in a hostile world.

However that burgeoning confidence was soon shattered when my domineering father ejected me from the family home for refusing to consider university. “You’d better go earn some money then my boy. You’ll not be sponging off me all your life.”

I should have been christened Yo-Yo because my fragile ego went up and down perpetually and rhythmically throughout my life. Right now it was at its nadir having been kicked out of yet another house, that of my third wife.

Hence living in a campervan.

Hence no money.

Hence reluctantly sponging off mates.

“Tuck in then,” commanded Bob, as the waitress delivered two large breakfast platters. He laced his with a gallon of tomato ketchup and a bucket of salt, and proceeded to attack it with relish. “So it’s a no to the race then?”

I shook my head. “In truth, Bob, I’m selling my boat too. Time to hang up my tiller and compass.” Time to liquidate my only remaining asset.

Bob stopped mid-sausage and looked pensively at me. “What are you asking for it?”

“Well, little cruisers like my Swift-18 in good nick go for three or four grand but mine’s not that good, so I’ll ask for two for a quick sale.” It needed to be quick as the mooring fee was due in a few weeks and that was the best part of a grand.

Bob demolished a piece of bacon before responding. “Put it on at five.”

“But...”

“Give it a few weeks. It’s a good little boat. Someone will buy it for sure. Trust me.”

As we scoffed our breakfast, Bob regaled me with stories of his recent trip to the Middle East. KPMG sent him all over the world and he loved it; it gave him a break from his wife, Pollyanna, and more especially from his live-in mother-in-law: dragon-breath – she could cook toast just by breathing on it, Bob often quipped. He joked too about having a girl in every port and I honestly didn’t know if he was serious. I certainly wasn’t going to ask.

“I saw the F1 race at Abu Dhabi last week. You should see the place. It’s amazing. A different world. Money dripping from every grain of sand.”

I listened to all his exploits, rather jealously if I’m honest.

“So... Finn, what about you? What’s that postcard I saw on the door. What do you want puzzles for?”

I bashfully explained that I was hoping to learn of strange goings on that I could use as plot lines in a novel I’d been working on, on and off, all summer. It was to be a Jonathan Creek type story, or a Sherlock Holmes with a Dan Brown twist. I awaited his ridicule but I was surprised to hear his enthusiasm.

“I got a puzzle for you then. What the hell is quantum physics all about? One of my clients was bamboozling me the other day and I was too much of a twat to confess I didn’t have a clue what he was talking about. Says it’s the next big thing. Along with artificial intelligence – whatever that is too.”

“All I know,” I said, “is that Einstein or someone said that if you think you understand quantum theory then clearly you don’t.”

“That’s a bit deep, mate, isn’t it?” Bob looked at me with something approaching admiration. “You could say the same about women. No one understands them either. Perhaps they’re the quantum sex.” Bob chuckled and mopped up the last of his tomato sauce with a chunk of bread and sat back satisfied. “So, have you got a name for this guy then, your hero in your book?”

I hadn't. I wanted something strong and dependable, like *Steele* or *Stone*.

"Billy Brick," giggled Bob. "Or Colin Concrete... who had sandy hair... stone-faced, with a gravelly voice... and a rough exterior."

I had to admit that was funny. "At the same time I want a sense of vulnerability, of empathy. A soft centre."

Quick as a flash Bob said he must come from Valetta, because Maltesers are hard outside and soft in the middle.

I shook my head in despair but Bob's cogs were still graunching in overdrive. "How about Drum?" said Bob, after much consideration. I nodded, I quite liked that. "His Christian name would be Conan, and he'd be from Belfast, so you'd pronounce his name *Conn'n*." I frowned. Bob laughed. "Conan Drum. Get it? *Con-un-drum*."

"Very drole, Bob." I attempted a laugh but wasn't in the mood. "I'll probably never write the book anyway."

"Of course you will. I can see it now, you on the couch for Breakfast TV: "*Drum was conceived in the summer of 2018 and born in the following year, aged 35, of no fixed background. His parents were an out-of-work itinerant scruff and an old bootleg version of Microsoft Word.*"

Bob patted himself on the back for that one and I had to admit he was amusing. He squared his plate and cutlery and passed it to the waitress. "That was lovely, my dear." He passed her several banknotes before turning back to me as I protested about the bill. "Nah, my treat." He looked at his watch then retrieved his jacket. "Well, you know what I think? Just write the darn thing and see how it turns out. Just do it. But a word of advice, don't give up the day job."

I did laugh now. "I don't have a day job. Remember?"

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We strolled across the car park, our collars turned up against the wet westerly gale.

"It was good of you to come all this way, Bob, I appreciate it."

"No problem, I was down this way. I need to be in Cardiff by lunch time so I best be off." He zapped his Mercedes CLA coupe, and patted its rear wing. "Not bad eh? Brand new last week. It's got all the toys."

"It's only a Merc, Bob. Everyone's got one these days." I pointed to my van, a few cars length away.

"Is that yours? Wow. Cool paint job."

"Yep, my van and my house." I couldn't take the credit for the artistic surfing designs all over the van, that was down to the previous owner. In fact, I found them a little embarrassing but it had been a good bargain and I had no cash for a re-spray.

"Can I take a look?"

As Bob clambered in and had a good nosey around, enthusing about its compactness, I checked my emails. The free marina wifi was a lifeline, as were their shower and toilet facilities, ones that would disappear as soon as my boat was sold.

There were a few more cranky conundrums in my inbox, responses to my postcard adverts:

*Why is my wife always right even when she's wrong?*

*If a time-traveller came from the future, would he be stuck here until time-travel was invented?*

Buried amongst those and the usual junk was one from a familiar name. I opened it and read it with trepidation.

Bob sensed my unease. "What is it, mate?"

"It's from Beca."

"Your delightful step-daughter? That Beca?" He tried to hide the scorn in his voice.

I nodded.

"Have you seen her since... you know?"

I shook my head.

“And Bran?”

No, I hadn't seen my wife, nor her daughter, for nearly a year. Not since I was thrown out of the family home.

“What does she want?”

“She wants to meet.”

“Why?”

“Doesn't say.”

“And... you're going to?”

“I guess.”

Bob put on his serious face, a rare thing, and placed his hand on my shoulder in a fatherly gesture.

“Do you want me to be there? Just say the word.”

“Thanks, Bob, no. I don't want you dragged into all that again.”

He squeezed my shoulder, climbed back out of the van, and put his hands in his pockets. “I'm here for you. Whenever.” He turned to go towards his car but then paused. “A word of advice, Finn. Don't bring her here,” he said, gesturing to my van, “Make it somewhere public.”

I nodded. That was sound.

“Don't take any chances with that scheming bitch.”

## Part II Drum – Inception

*Inception:*

- *the starting point of an activity*
- *'Inception' is a 2010 science fiction film starring Leonardo DiCaprio as a professional thief who steals information by infiltrating the subconscious - literally getting inside their head*

'On The Floor' by J-Lo:

*I'm like Inception  
I play with your brain  
So don't sleep or snooze  
I don't play no games so don't, don't, don't  
Don't get it confused no  
'Cause you will lose yeah.*

### Chapter 5

*Winter is coming.*

Aficionados of *Game of Thrones* will know that winter could last for many years and that the cold was the least of one's worries. The White Walkers and their zombie army ensured that winter wouldn't be your favourite season.

Unless you were in Abu Dhabi where the late November temperatures plummeted from their summer highs of forty-plus degrees down to a relatively cool twenty-five degrees, which meant that winter here could be almost tolerable for an Englishman like Drum.

He welcomed the prospect of cooler nights but he would not be staying at Yas Marina long enough to fully appreciate them. His time here was over. Another dead end.

Despite the warm Saturday evening north-westerly breeze coming down the Persian Gulf, Drum felt a chill crawling down his spine. Since leaving the Yas Viceroy hotel he suspected he was being followed. How did he know? Experience. It gave one an edge, a sixth sense – a sense that you ignored at your peril.

He began to deploy the seasoned tactics to try and identify his tracker: he stopped to tie his shoelaces, looked in reflective windows, and gawped tourist-style at the flamboyant yachts in the marina whilst sneaking sly sideways glances, but all to no avail. Drum didn't like being hunted. It was time to become the hunter.

He knew he needed what the CIA called an SDR, a *surveillance detection route*: a logical route with at least three points where an agent could legitimately stop and check, and force any tracker to show themselves; the last stop being designed to force a showdown, with an escape route to obviate confrontation if the odds suddenly changed against you. Thus, if a person was seen twice at the checkpoints then that may be a coincidence, but thrice would imply definite *enemy action*. Above all, Drum knew that patience was the hunter's most valuable weapon.

He continued along the marina boardwalk allowing his long lean frame to quicken his pace just a little. He'd spent his first evening here getting the lay of the land so headed confidently to the tower complex on the south side of the marina entrance, knowing it would take him past the biggest yachts in the marina. Every berth on every pontoon was occupied, many with their lights blazing and onboard parties in full swing. It was race weekend in Abu Dhabi, the last in the Formula One calendar and the qualifying session had finished barely an hour ago but the revellers needed little excuse to start the celebrations. Lewis Hamilton was on pole and Mercedes had locked out the front row thanks to some clumsy mistakes from Ferrari. The race and the championship were all over bar the shouting. The symbiotic roar of the crowd had now been replaced by more sporadic cheers and shouts as some fans dispersed from the stadiums,

heading for home or fast-food joints, whilst others stayed to witness the excitement of the lower formulas still on track. Everywhere happy people thronged, some anticipating the evening pop concert and others foolishly throwing firecrackers at random to the consternation of the event officials. Tonight's boisterous festivities would be but a warm-up act for the real festival tomorrow night after the race, where over fifty thousand fans would either celebrate or commiserate.

Drum headed for the marina management office and slipped behind it into the shadows. He wasn't scared. No point. If the tracker following him wanted him dead then he'd have shot Drum at the first opportunity and let his body fall into the marina to be chopped into digestible pieces by the boat propellers. No, the guy obviously wanted to talk, to interrogate, to find out what Drum was up to. Perhaps this trip wouldn't be a dead end after all. Perhaps the man he had been hunting for so long was the very man now hunting him. If so, he would soon be sorry. Very sorry.

Drum thought he could spot his man walking quickly in his direction, everyone else was strolling, ambling, even staggering along. Drum couldn't be sure if he had an accomplice. No point in taking out one guy if his mate then took you out. Patience.

In UK waters the Sunseeker 155 would be considered a large yacht at over forty metres in length. Its futuristic lines, hand-crafted detail, and twenty-plus knot performance would turn heads in any harbour, especially with its thirty million pound-plus price tag. It may be the choice of F1 mogul Eddie Jordan but here in this unreal universe of opulence the 155 was little more than a large tender alongside the gargantuan craft that only serious wealth could buy. Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich's yacht, *Eclipse*, was nearly four times as large and faster; and the largest yacht in the world, *Azzam*, topped one hundred and eighty meters and thirty knots, though neither would fit in this marina which had a sixty meter maximum. However, the 155 was ideal for Drum's plan. It showed no cabin lights, only a couple of deck lights. Drum loitered to ensure his follower could catch sight of him then merged into a small group of revellers before peeling off and leaping aboard the stern of the 155 like a gazelle. He crouched low and made his way forward then stopped amidships just ahead of the RIB-tender garage. Having satisfied himself that the cul-de-sac arm of the boardwalk below was nicely in the shadows, he squatted and waited patiently. There was no rush. No need to stick his neck out to see if the guy was coming. No one else would come his way unless the boat owners returned.

But his stalker had to come this way, for sure.

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After a few minutes Drum spotted him. He was two boat lengths away and clearly had no idea where Drum had secreted himself, as he looked up and down the marina wondering which way to go. If he walked past Drum's hidey-hole then the encounter would be short. If not, Drum would turn the tables on him and become his hunter; he would tail him until a suitable situation presented itself for a confrontation. Either way Drum now held all the aces.

The guy decided to come Drum's way. He was of slight build, dressed in jeans and tee-shirt, wearing a baseball cap, and carried no obvious weapon. He looked to be of Arabic origin though in the poor light Drum could not be certain. Drum had no real idea what the man he had been hunting for most of the year might look like, he only had a name - Talpur. Talpur of Turbat, Pakistan. He'd seen photos and observed the man through binoculars but it seemed he changed his appearance like a chameleon. If this was indeed his man then Drum could easily take him out with one arm tied behind his back.

But as ever, Drum was cautious. Talpur was known to be a ruthless sadist and might carry a secreted weapon, perhaps a knife or mafia-style stiletto. Drum took his keys from his pocket and removed the large car key from the key-ring. His own car was back in the UK but the key did more than fire up his beloved Jaguar XKR. He pressed the key release button and out popped the business part of the key. He pressed it again, hard, and a sharp spike protruded from the metal tip. He clenched the bulk of the key inside his fist allowing the spike to emerge between the first and second fingers. Now he was ready.

Around him, revellers partied, music blared, and fireworks launched skywards intermittently. Occasionally, a repartee of klaxons sounded like an argument between irate frogs.

Drum was oblivious to it all as he waited patiently.

The man walked beneath Drum's coiled frame and suddenly spun around turning his back to Drum as a firecracker startled him.

Big mistake.

Ninety kilograms of solid Drum fell from the sky like a six foot missile onto the unsuspecting tracker. He was floored instantly, his head and shoulders hanging over the boardwalk staring helplessly at the water, with Drum sitting astride his shoulders. Drum pressed the key-spike to the back of the man's neck, hard enough to make its presence felt but not so hard as to draw blood. The man struggled, tried to kick, tried to free his arms. Drum pushed his face under the warm water and waited, quietly humming to himself.

Perhaps, his trip here wouldn't be a waste of time after all.

## Chapter 6

After ten seconds Drum allowed his quarry some air, pulling his head by its short hair back to a painful angle, and moving the key-spike into the man's arc of vision.

"Talpur?" Drum said quietly in his ear.

The man sputtered, struggled and kicked.

"Wrong answer." Drum ducked the man again, for fifteen seconds this time. "Now, shall we try again?"

"I'm Kas..." the man spluttered.

"Couldn't hear you." A third ducking followed, twenty seconds.

"Drum!" the terrified man screamed as best he could, gasping for air, "It's me, Kassab."

Drum spun the body over and looked at the wet face, the goatee beard, the pathetic moustache, the playful intelligent eyes. Scared eyes. "Shit, Kassab. Why didn't you say so the first time?" Drum hauled him to his feet, whereupon Kassab collapsed to his knees coughing and retching as Drum looked on helplessly, patting his back and returning the lethal car key to his pocket.

Eventually Kassab staggered to his feet and looked at Drum. "If this is how you treat you friends then Allah help your enemies."

Drum held Kassab's face in his hands at arm's length, fearing he might fall to the ground again. "I am so sorry, Kassab. Let me look at you. Damn, how long has it been?"

"A year, maybe." Recovering his breath, Kassab began to prattle. "I spot you by the hotel when I drop off a fare, so, like, I follow you, calling, but the crowd's too loud, so, like, I try to catch up, you walk too fast, then you disappear, and then like... Pow!"

"I'm really sorry, Kassab, my friend."

"It's nothing. I'm fine. But look at you. You've not changed a bit. Your natty suit and tee-shirt. Like you still look like a spy or something, but your hairs too long. But... what are you doing here? Is Sam here too?"

Drum shook his head slowly. He hoped Kassab couldn't read his eyes.

"Never mind. I fix you with lovely girl. Like, very nice family."

Drum laughed even though inside he was aching. Kassab had that affect on him. Always laughing. Even in the face of death; even a slow painful death that Drum had once rescued him from.

"What about you? And that foxy young thing, Aisha?" said Drum.

"Aisha? She's history, man. I'm in love with Alya. We're getting married."

"What? When? I trust I'm invited."

Kassab looked at his feet and shuffled. "I haven't actually asked her yet. Perhaps tonight." Then he

burst into laughter and embraced Drum. “It’s been way too long, Drum. So, you come for the race? Exciting, yes?”

Drum shrugged. “It’ll be three hundred kilometres of processional boredom, as usual.”

They walked along the boardwalk towards the tower, planning to grab some food, with Kassab nattering away like an old school mate and Drum mainly keeping his silence.

At length, Kassab said, “You’ve changed, Drum. You’re not so much fun anymore, you know that? Like you carrying some pain?”

Drum shrugged. “A bit tired, that’s all.”

Kassab shrugged too, unconvinced. “So... you ever gonna tell me really why you’re here?”

Drum played with the words in his head. He would trust Kassab with his life but the more Kassab knew the more it might endanger him. “I’m looking for someone. I was told he might be found out here someplace. Something about *Al Alam*.”

“That means *The World* in Arabic,” interjected Kassab helpfully.

“I know. And that’s why I went to *Burj Al Alam*, in Dubai.”

“The World Tower? It’s a building site. It’s a mess. They all gone bust or something. It’ll never be built.”

“Yeah, I discovered that.” Drum grinned. “Perhaps I should’ve checked on Google Maps before I booked the flight. Anyway, it’s back to square one now.”

Before Kassab could respond his phone rang. It was the concierge at the Yas Viceroy hotel. If Kassab didn’t move his abandoned taxi this minute it would be sent to the scrap merchant, or worse.

“Gotta go, Drum. But give me your number and we’ll catch up.”

“Do that.” Drum reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out an envelope, scribbled his number on it and handed it to Kassab. “Here. Take these too. They should impress Alya.”

Kassab opened the envelope and his eyes sauced. “You’re not serious? Grandstand tickets? Man. I never been to no race before. She’s an absolute fan.”

“You’re welcome to them. I’d planned to meet a buddy but plans got changed. Besides, it’s time to fly home.”

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As Kassab scampered away, Drum reflected on Kassab’s carefree world and prayed it stayed that way for him. He wouldn’t want him to have to bear his own burden: the anger, the injustice, the guilt, the void.

He decided to continue his walk to help clear his mind of such paralysing negativity so he headed for the golf course, but his unfamiliarity with this area of the Yas complex forced him to clamber over a few road barriers and lead him through the self-park car park, adjacent to the taxi rank where he’d been dropped off yesterday. As he ambled through the thinning ranks of cars he heard voices above the background hullabaloo of the retreating crowds. Heated voices. A woman shouting. Aggressive men. A stifled scream.

Drum quickened his pace.

## Chapter 7

Drum strode towards the fracas confidently, heading for the car adjacent to the quarrelling group. It appeared that the woman had been about to get into her car when three men had intercepted her. There was plenty of light from the overhead floodlights so he could clearly see the keys in her hand. The elder suited guy with the nasty facial scar stood between the woman and the open door, his face thrust towards her mouthing something threatening. The big bald guy, wearing baggy white trousers and a white puffa jacket, looking like a piece of boil-in-the-bag fish, stood arms-crossed in front of the car, his back to

Drum. The third guy, a young tall cocky punk in vest and beach shorts, strutted about menacingly. They hadn't seen Drum approaching yet.

"Mr Stone wants results," Elder hissed at the terrified woman, holding her chin roughly with one gloved hand.

"Yeah, and he said we could do whatever we liked with you if you didn't co-operate," added Cocky, in an adolescent squeaky voice. "So why don't we finish this conversation at your hotel? It's got a nice comfy bed."

It appeared that talking was above Puffa's pay grade.

Drum approached the group. "Do you mind, that's my car?" he said, pointing to the neighbouring vehicle.

"Come back later," said Elder, dismissing Drum like an annoying servant.

"Yeah, beat it, punk," snarled Cocky, turning on Drum, "Unless you want to make something of it?"

Drum held up his hands in mock surrender. "OK. It's cool. I get it." He started to retreat slowly, holding their gaze.

The woman whimpered, her chance of rescue rapidly evaporating. Drum hadn't yet taken in her full details, she wasn't the priority right now. He did notice that she was beautiful with a petite body and long dark hair beneath a wide-brimmed hat. He noticed too her emerald green eyes. Pleading eyes.

The rest of his survey would have to wait, his time was best spent on detailing the three guys. The elder's jacket was open revealing a shoulder holster. Not your average carjackers then. The young punk was clearly unarmed and prowled about aching for trouble. Puffa man was still fixed resolutely at the front of the vehicle.

Drum needed to move them around a bit.

He took slow steps forward again. "Are you sure you don't want to reconsider?"

"What did you say?" Elder said incredulously, dropping his grip on the woman and turning square-on towards Drum.

"Hey, Ponzi," Cocky called to Puffa, "do you get this guy?"

Puffa turned and shuffled towards the open side of the car, slowly unzipping his jacket. Drum wondered if he could move any faster.

"I wouldn't want anyone to get hurt," Drum said calmly, catching the woman's eye and discreetly glancing in the direction he wished her to travel. Her imperceptible nod was encouraging.

"The only one who's going to get hurt is you," hissed Cocky, squaring up to Drum two paces away, in front of the woman.

Elder, standing between the door and the car body, started to remove the glove on his right hand. It's hard to draw a weapon with gloves on. Drum caught a whiff of his pungent aftershave.

Puffa took another step forward and was now slightly ahead of the half-opened door. The zip on his jacket was giving him trouble.

Not as much trouble as Drum was about to give him.

Drum pushed off with his back foot, dropped a little height on the next step, and on his third step thrust upwards like a surface-to-air missile, right beneath Cocky's chin. Cocky left the ground before collapsing back to earth, cursing.

A hard shove on the chest put Elder into the driving seat, his legs sticking out of the car; a vicious pull on the car door had him cursing too.

Puffa made the mistake, although only slowly, of moving forward, right into the path of the door being forcefully thrown forward by Drum. Drum's long reach grabbed Puffa's jacket by the collar and pulled his head forward to kiss the door frame violently. Puffa deflated issuing a stream of vitriol.

"Keys!" Drum demanded, holding out his hand to the woman. Thankfully she complied and had the presence of mind to run quickly around to the other side of the car and clamber in. Drum hauled Elder out of the car onto the ground, grabbed his pistol and scuttled it across the car park. Drum jumped into the driving seat and gunned the engine.

## Chapter 8

“Jesus, who are you? S.A.S. or something? James Bond?” she blurted, her hands fiddling nervously with her hat in her lap.

He shook his head. A small smile spread across Drum’s lips as he considered Daniel Craig’s replacement. He checked the rear-view mirror. The thugs were still re-assembling themselves in the car park. “Where are you staying?”

“Four Seasons.”

“Where’s that?”

“Al Maryah island. Downtown.”

Drum nodded and weaved around several dawdling cars exiting the car park before accelerating past the golf links and Ferrari World to join the E12 highway, where he floored the throttle. Even the little Citroen DS3 hire car was surprised at how fast it could go.

They drove on in silence for a few minutes, Drum determined to put distance between themselves and the thugs. At length, the woman turned sideways to study him. “So are you going to at least tell me your name?”

“Drum.”

“Drum? Is that Mr Drum, or Drum something?”

He glanced at her and smiled. “Just Drum.”

“Well Drum, I guess I owe you a big thank you. I’m Zara, Zara Barbineaux.”

“No problem.” Drum turned for a longer look. She really was as beautiful as he’d first thought: long wavy shiny dark brown hair, pretty nose, fine high cheek bones, glossy lips, large gold bangle earrings, unbuttoned black leather jacket over a silvery low-necked top, gold bangles on each wrist, one large jade ornament on the right ring finger, short black leather skirt, long bare slender legs, white high-heeled shoes. Stunning.

She caught him studying her and smiled. Beautiful green eyes, but vulnerable. He gripped the wheel tighter and brought their speed down to something vaguely legal. Was that vulnerability the force that had made him intervene, had compelled him to act, had given him no choice in the matter?

“So what was that all about back there?” said Drum.

“Oh, it was all a misunderstanding. I was supposed to be meeting someone today but they didn’t show, and... things got difficult.” Zara proceeded to relate how she attended every F1 race with her friend, and how they always splashed out on a nice hotel with all the trimmings, as if apologising for her expensive lifestyle. She prattled on without answering the original question and without revealing much about herself. Drum reasoned it was the shock working itself through.

Sheikh Khalifa bridge appeared soon enough. They crossed over the elegant new structure that spanned the creek between Saadiyat Island and Abu Dhabi City and Zara directed Drum the short distance to the Four Seasons hotel.

“Will you be OK?” asked Drum, helping Zara out of the car.

“I think so,” she replied uncertainly. “We weren’t followed, were we?”

Drum shook his head. The thugs probably didn’t know where Zara was staying otherwise they’d surely confront her in her room rather than amongst a crowd. But it might not take them long to find out if they were so inclined. It clearly wasn’t an ordinary carjack. The pistol he’d thrown away was a Makarov, the standard service pistol of many Eastern European governments.

“I’ll check your room for you if you like?”

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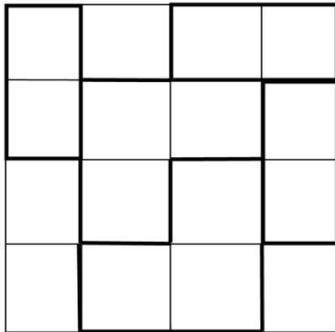
The elevator sped them without fuss to her deluxe waterfront room on the ninth floor. It epitomised affordable luxury: tasteful blue and grey decor, a huge double-bed complete with towelled swans, a meal

table near the window with views over the water, a cosy settee, a cinema-sized TV, and a white marble spa bathroom complete with a deep-soak tub. Drum completed his checks. No one had been hiding in the room.

Zara drew the curtains aggressively as if to keep out some evil. She poured two large brandies from the mini-bar and handed one to Drum. “Make yourself at home. I’m going to take a shower. I feel I need it.”

Drum had already checked the room so there wasn’t much else to see. *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* on the table held no interest for him but beneath them something caught his eye. It was a single sheet of paper with a hand-drawn complex box design drawn on it and a few lines of writing.

Doubling me with old numbers gives Laval, Caraparac etc.



*Cast your unwashed out of sight*  
*Count the men who can fight*  
*Bring gifts to the tent*  
*Make Miriam relent*  
*Aaron must ensure all is right.*

Drum studied the paper for awhile. It made no sense to him. He placed it back on the table and sat on the settee to savour his brandy. As soon as Zara had calmed down he’d head back to his hotel. He didn’t think she’d be in any danger here but it worried him that the thugs could easily track her hire car if they so desired and try again tomorrow. It worried him too that they were armed with ex-KGB type pistols. He would need to get some answers from Zara before he could sleep soundly.

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The bathroom door clicked open and Zara appeared wearing a long loose black and white striped towelling gown, held closed, barely, by three large black buttons. Her wet hair was piled on top wrapped in a towel. She carried the empty brandy glass and headed to the mini-bar. “Another?”

Drum shook his head. “I best be going.”

She poured her drink and walked over towards Drum, passing the table. “Ah, I see you’ve seen my puzzle. My friend, Kenny, gave it me at the last race. It leads to a stash of gold bars if you can solve it. Apparently.”

“Can’t help you there, unfortunately,” Drum said dismissively. He thought someone was spinning her a good tale. Who collected gold bars? They’d weigh a ton, anyway.

Drum stood to leave. “Are you sure you’ll be OK?”

Zara moved close to him. Her bath oils filled the air with the scent of roses. Her lips shone with brandy. Quivering. Inviting.

It had been too many months since Drum had felt the warmth of a woman. Perhaps he deserved a little reward, he told himself. Maybe he’d earned that much.

## Chapter 9

But Drum reigned in his carnal weakness and gently pushed Zara away. He'd sworn allegiance to one woman and until he'd wreaked vengeance on her behalf he'd promised himself not to break that vow. Zara was surprised, perhaps even momentarily insulted but she hid it well, and left the room to change out of her bath robe, but not before persuading Drum to at least stay long enough for a bite to eat.

He ordered room service, neither of them had eaten since lunch time, and they tucked in heartily when it arrived.

Drum studied Zara across the table. She'd changed into a long scarlet tight low-necked tee-shirt that flattered her petite figure, and her wet hair left dark patches on the shoulders. Drum found it hard to concentrate on his food. He noticed an unusual tattoo on her upper right arm: a snake and a sickle entwined. He realised she'd been watching him and felt slightly embarrassed. He decided to show off the little Arabic that he'd picked up in his few trips to this region. "Did you know that Zara means star or flower in Arabic." She was both.

"No, I didn't know that," she said, with an amused smile.

"But here it's spelt Z-a-h-r-a."

"Kenny says I was probably conceived in the changing rooms at the back of a Zara shop." They shared the joke. "But there are no such shops where I come from," she added sadly.

"Which is where?"

"Lithuania. Just outside Vilnius. And there, my name means princess."

"And where does the princess live now?"

She laughed. "Cambridge."

"Massachusetts?"

"No, Cambridge, England. My husband works at the science park. Dr Kenny Rourke. Have you heard of him?"

"Your husband? Why didn't you say so earlier?" Drum fidgeted in his chair.

"Because you wouldn't have stayed. Don't worry, he won't send any thugs after you." She laughed. "Besides, we have a very *open* arrangement." She leant back in her chair, stretched her arms upwards, thrusting her pretty body un-self-consciously forwards. She clearly hadn't given up on Drum yet.

She continued to explain that she kept her own name for modelling work. Her husband was supposed to be meeting her here this weekend but his phone was going straight to voicemail. They went to every F1 race, always treating themselves to a bit of luxury. He'd wanted to stay at the race circuit but she'd chosen this hotel as it had direct access to The Galleria, a luxury shopping mall. He always spoiled her.

"That puzzle is his." She pointed to the paper on the table. "If you can solve it then you'd know where he's hidden his latest invention."

"Which is what?"

"He called it a portable quantity computer, I think, but I don't really know what that is. Kenny says it'll be worth a fortune so I'm to keep the puzzle in case."

Drum had no idea what a quantity computer was but suspected that she had been spun another yarn.

"Anyway," she continued, "I don't know what there is to see here, so tomorrow I'll do some expensive shopping in the morning and then I'm sure he'll come running to cancel the credit cards."

Drum laughed. "In that case you should visit the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, it's arguably as stunning as the Taj Mahal. And then maybe a swim at a beach to cool off; I can recommend Lulu or Nurai; you might even see some dolphins."

"Kenny can't swim so I'll probably use the hotel pool. Besides with his heart condition he needs to take things easy. Anyway, he wants to see the oilfields. He's got a friend in the business out here."

"See them before they go. It's only a matter of time before they're but a distant memory, like the pearl trade before them." Drum explained that Abu Dhabi grew up on the back of the pearl trade until the

1930s when they started the oil rush. “They can build anything out here now, even a ski resort, but just remember that everything is built on sand.”

“You’d get on well with Kenny, Drum. He can be a grumpy old sod, too.”

Drum noticed Zara was more relaxed now speaking about her husband and decided it was time to take his leave.

As if reading his mind, Zara said she would contact Mr Stone, her boss, in the morning and sort out whatever problem there was, and get him to call off his dogs. “Will you stay until then? In case they come back. Kenny will be so grateful to you for looking after me. Please, Drum.” Large green eyes pleaded unashamedly.

Drum felt his resolve weakening despite his pledge to himself. It had been so long. He even managed to push her husband out of his thoughts; she did say they had a very open arrangement. Thankfully his dilemma was interrupted by his phone. It was Kassab. He’d been mulling over Drum’s search for *Al Alam*, the World. “What about *Juzur al-Alam*, the World Islands?” He explained that they were an archipelago of small man-made islands that represented the countries of the globe, situated off the Dubai coastline, north-east of Palm Jumeirah, the famous tree-shaped complex of posh hotels, apartments, restaurants and shops. “But like your World Tower, Drum, the islands were never finished. Only *Al’ard Alkhadra* is anywhere near habitable. That’s Greenland to you.”

Drum had heard those Arabic words before somewhere but he’d had no clue what they meant at the time. “Kassab, you’re a brick, thank you. By the way, have you proposed to Alya yet?” He hadn’t but he would, for sure. “I’ve a room booked at Yas Viceroy. I don’t think I’ll be needing it tonight.” He looked at Zara who smiled and sipped her wine slowly. “And while you’re there, have dinner in the hotel restaurant on my tab. If Alya doesn’t accept your proposal after that then you have a problem, my friend.”

“You’re kidding me, Drum. No?”

Drum assured him that he wasn’t, and that he would ring the hotel desk now to arrange it.

“Just go easy on the champagne, Kassab. OK?”

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Drum had come to the Emirates in search of a man called Talpur. In search of vengeance. It had appeared to be a wasted trip. Even the F1 race hadn’t made up for his disappointment. But bumping into Zara had certainly rescued the weekend. Tomorrow he would set off for Greenland - in shorts and tee-shirt.

Tonight, he would sleep on Zara’s sofa as her bodyguard and dream about what might have been, and what might yet come to pass.

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