

PROLOGUE

London, England
November

AHMED TURNED UP HIS collar and cursed the snow. He'd never liked the cold, despite his hometown of Aleppo being a far less temperate destination than most Westerners envisioned. He'd found Italy's Mediterranean coast in the summertime to be a paradise and would have gladly made it his home. His current bosses, however, wanted him in London. Frigid, dreary, snowy London. It was temporary, he was told; six months' work with his head down and his mouth shut and he could live wherever he wanted. His plan was to travel back south, find an honest job, and then send for his family.

Tonight, his job was to drive the van. His destination was the medieval market village of Kingston upon Thames, in southwest London. Ahmed didn't know the nature of his cargo and didn't much care so long as it was unloaded quickly. Whatever he was carrying was heavy. He felt the brakes struggle to handle the load whenever he stopped at the many traffic signals along his route. He turned the white Ford Transit delivery van's heat to its maximum setting and lit a cigarette. Traffic was terrible, even for a Friday evening.

Ahmed pulled the cell phone from his pocket: 7:46 p.m. He'd allowed himself plenty of leeway to get to the marketplace on time, but the weather was slowing things down, not to mention the throngs of drivers and pedestrians heading toward what must have been some sort of fes-

tival. Children, bundled up for the cold, holding hands with parents and siblings, were everywhere. The sight made him think of his own family, crowded into a refugee camp somewhere in Turkey. At least they were no longer in Syria.

The van moved at a pedestrian pace as he tapped the horn to part the crowd. He jammed on the brakes and inhaled sharply as a little girl in a pink puffy jacket scurried across the road in his headlights. He turned left and entered the marketplace, stopping the van in front of the address that he'd been given at the garage and turning on the emergency flashers. His eyes strained as he looked through the frosted windows to confirm he was in the right spot, his bosses having been so adamant regarding the precise location of his unloading point.

From a bird's-eye view, the marketplace was the shape of a large triangle, wide at one end and narrow at the other. Ahmed's van sat idling at the base end of that triangle, unnoticed by the happy crowds attending the German Christmas market. The shopping district was busy on a normal evening but with the holiday event in full swing, it was packed. A recent online article had highlighted the quaint festival, and families from all over London and the surrounding suburbs had come to experience its wonders firsthand. Shoppers filled the storefronts, ate in the cafes and pubs, and strolled the booths selling everything from hats and scarves to hot spiced wine, warm pretzels, nutcrackers, candle arches, and traditional wooden ornaments. The already charming town market looked like an alpine village with snow-covered A-frame booths, strung with lights, punctuated by an enormous Christmas tree towering above it all.

Ahmed looked around and saw no sign of the men who were to unload the cargo.

All this congestion must have slowed them down, he thought as he dialed a number on his phone per his instructions and waited impatiently for an answer.

"Allo."

"Ana hunak."

"Aintazar."

The line went dead. Ahmed looked at the LCD screen to see whether the call had dropped or if the other caller had simply hung up. He shrugged.

The explosion was deafening. The market's snowy cobblestone streets held thousands of shoppers and those closest to the van were simply vaporized by the detonation. They were the lucky ones. The steel shrapnel that had been embedded directionally into the explosive device raked into the crowd like a thousand claymore mines—killing, maiming, shredding, and amputating everything in its path, taking future generations before they even existed. A joyful Christmas gathering was now a twisted war zone. Scattered among the wreckage of charred wooden shopping booths, broken glass, tangles of hanging lights, and broken tables were scores of the dead and dying.

Those who could move and who weren't totally dazed from the shock wave surged toward the apex of the triangular market, rushing to escape the carnage. That end narrowed significantly and was now strewn with the remains of the festival, forced there by the power of the high-explosive charge. The debris-choked street was constricted even further by cars parked illegally at the mouth of the triangle. The human wave jammed to a stop in the narrow bottleneck of buildings, cars, and rubble, the panicked mob pushing, shoving, and heaving like stampeding cattle. The young were trampled underneath the old, the weak forsaken by the powerful. The confusing scene was such that, at first, few even noticed the gunfire.

Two men wielding Soviet-made PKM belt-fed machine guns opened up on the crowd from the flat third-story rooftops above, one on either side of the bottleneck. Several 7.62x54mmR rounds tore through the mass of humanity, shredding bodies in their path. Those below, many already wounded from the van's deadly blast, had no chance for escape. The crowd was packed together so tightly that even the dead did not fall to the ground, but rather were held up like sticks in a bundle by the unrelenting human wave. The shooters had each linked multiple belts of ammunition together to prevent having to reload and the steel rain fell until each man's belt ran dry. The firing lasted over a minute. The men dropped

the empty weapons, barrels glowing white-hot from their sustained fire, and made their way down into the chaos below. The market's gutters ran red with blood as they stepped onto what had moments before been a street filled with the joy of the season.

Surveillance footage would later show the two men move to opposite ends of the outdoor market and find positions on the street that would be the most likely routes that first responders would take to treat the wounded. Blending in with the dead, they waited more than an hour to detonate the suicide vests strapped to their bodies, murdering police officers, firefighters, medical personnel, and journalists, and creating a new level of terror for twenty-first-century Europe.

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Four hundred and forty miles to the southeast, Vasili Andrenov looked at the bank of four giant flat-screen monitors in front of him and admired the turmoil. It was being reported that this was the deadliest terror attack in England's history. Not since the height of the Blitz in 1940 had this many Londoners been killed in a single event. That casualty figures were cresting three hundred and expected to climb did not appear to bother him. That half of those killed were children and that there were not enough trauma centers in all of London to deal with the number of wounded bothered him even less.

The room was completely silent. Andrenov preferred it that way. He read the news tickers across the bottom of each screen and sipped his vodka. The media was on the scene before many of the wounded could even be evacuated; their satellite trucks added to the traffic gridlock and slowed the progress of the steady stream of ambulances dispatched from all over London under the city's emergency response plan.

While viewers from around the world watched in shock and horror at what the media quickly termed "Britain's 9/11," the Russian's expression never changed, nor did his breathing rate increase or his blood pressure rise. His eyes simply moved from screen to screen, processing information in much the same way the powerful computer on the desk before him processed data. This would not have been overly remarkable

except for the fact that Vasili Andrenov was responsible for the carnage in the streets of London that December evening.

Shifting his gaze from the spectacle of violence radiating from the wall of his own personal command center down to his computer, Andrenov checked to ensure the correct stocks were set to automatically begin trading as markets opened across the globe on Monday morning. Satisfied that everything was in order, he took one last long look at the new London he had created, before turning in for an early night's sleep. Come Monday, Vasili Andrenov would be an extremely rich man.