

PROLOGUE

On The Palm

Shaheen Soroush was a nice man but not necessarily a good man. Life had been kind to him since he had left Iran, supposedly converted to atheism and established a satellite and internet distribution business for pornographic films that were made in ‘Tehrangeles’, the nickname given to LA by the expatriate Persian community.

He now lived in a luxurious villa on M-Frond on the prestigious Palm Jumeirah in Dubai. He owned a six-month-old Rolls Royce Ghost, had an elegant and immaculate Iranian wife, two Western-educated kids and the most expensive and beautiful, white, pedigree Persian cat that the mind could ever imagine.

Bunny was three years old and in her prime, her fur was white as fresh snow, her huge and perfectly shaped eyes were blue as an Icelandic lagoon, her face was large and flat, her nose small and pink, and she loved people.

In return, everybody adored Bunny; she wore a delicate Louis Vuitton cat collar; her nails were even painted vivid pink, which was a significant subject of amusement for all house visitors. However, in reality, it was for practical purposes that they had this acrylic covering, in order to blunt

her nails and protect Shaheen's overpriced furniture. The pink was simply Shaheen's way of playing to Bunny's adoring crowd.

No one had ever pushed Shaheen on the subject of his priorities in life, but if one had to guess their marching order, it would be earning and spending money as fast as life would let him, followed by Bunny, and only then his family. Certainly when he was at home, the outpouring of affection that Shaheen showered on Bunny was inversely proportional to that which he showed his wife and family.

Naturally, not everyone approved of Shaheen's foray into pornography. The Iranian government had pledged that if he ever returned to his country, they would put him in jail for un-Islamic behaviour; this despite the fact that every senior minister had viewed and, in all likelihood, masturbated to his product. Shaheen's defence, in part, was that he was no longer religious; this, however, was not recognised by the Iranian regime, nor was the fact that he did not actually make the films; he just distributed them and took advertising revenues from the sites and channels under his ownership.

Meanwhile, those that socialised and partied with Shaheen were clearly of the opinion that his generosity and lavish hospitality by far outweighed any consideration regarding the origin of the funds that paid for such events.

So it was perhaps ironic that the most controversial and notorious source of income reaped by Shaheen was not the cause of the contract to kill him; rather it was something far more innocuous...

CHAPTER ONE

Good Debt, Bad Debt, Worse Debt

It all began during the pre-meltdown boom years of Dubai when all property was good property and no one could lose. Saudis were sleeping on the beach with briefcases full of money just to put a deposit on an apartment in tower blocks that were more imagination than reality. However, the buyer's intent in many cases was not to see the property achieve delivery. The strategy was to buy and flip the off-plan properties to make a profit of five percent a month on something that did not even exist. When demand became so high in Dubai that buyers could no longer buy off-plan, then the lesser-known Emirates became a popular area of speculation; after all, logic dictated that these were buildings and not a dot-com boom, so how could the bubble burst?

A little known, relatively adjacent Emirate to Dubai, called Ajman, was introduced to Shaheen Soroush as a 'no-lose' opportunity. The *Burj Takseeb* Towers, two blocks to be built to house lower-middle-class workers that could not afford to live in Dubai were designed to push the occupants onto a new level of quality of life. The apartments were cheap to build and even cheaper to equip, with plenty of landlord buyers looking for investment properties. Shaheen bought the development rights, commenced construction

and had a scale-model tower built that could be displayed on a sales stand in Dubai's Mall of the Emirates.

The entire deal was a huge mistake but, once again, it was not the core deal that caused a death order to be issued.

Shaheen had known that Ajman was not everyone's cup of tea, so he needed a hook to attract potential buyers to the replica of the *Burj Takseeb* Towers on a stand outside the Mall's Seddigi Rolex watch shop. The sales slogan was emblazoned across the stand and sales material:

Burj Takseeb – to enrich your living and your life

Shaheen decided to go the route of hiring two stunning Russian women to attract the attention of passing shoppers. However, the unseen hazard was that these tall, perfectly proportioned women attracted male 'birds of a feather'; Russian men who were not so interested in the merits of the Ajman properties than in getting these beauties in-between the sheets. He should have seen it coming, but he did not.

The girls worked on commission, and when a couple of Russian studs turned up at the stand dressed in designer clothing from head to toe, Olga and Elena did their job. They sold multiple apartments to their countrymen who were money laundering funds on behalf of a cartel, led by Alexei Delimkov, who also happened to be a representative of the Russian State Duma. The girls collected their commission for the multiple sales of 144 apartments and also obliged the two buyers by fucking their brains out when called to do so.

Shaheen was elated that he had accrued his 55 percent in cash in the form of deposits totalling \$12 million, which was enough to build and deliver. Yet this was the issue that would eventually bring two Moscow hit men into town to snuff Shaheen, because delivery was something Shaheen did not achieve.

To be fair, like everything else that was about to cause an

implosion in Shaheen's life, it was not his fault; nor had it been his intent to fail the buyer. However, he really should have checked that water and electricity would be available for the properties being developed in Ajman. The prominent Lebanese businessman had undoubtedly known about this crucial omission when he had sold on the project to Shaheen, but failed to disclose such things because that would surely have killed the deal. Then on top of that, a legendary Wall Street financial institution went bust in the US and caused a worldwide financial meltdown; so even if there had been utilities, Shaheen's *Takseeb* towers were beyond redemption. They were built but undeliverable.

Naturally, the decent thing to do would have been to give the Russians their money back, but this was not going to be easy on a number of counts. Firstly, there was the simple fact that Shaheen had taken the deposits before the introduction of an escrow law, so he had spent most of the money on building the towers themselves. What was left was blown on the best things that money could buy.

Shaheen had repeatedly explained the shortfalls of the Ajman infrastructure to the Russians, and had also pointed out that the deposits were non-refundable. All parties were well aware that only a civil case in the Ajman Arab courts could solve such an issue, but the Russians wanted no such process to bring attention to their money-laundering operation.

Shaheen was unaware that several years previous to his current problems coming to a head, Sulim Yamadayev had been assassinated in Dubai; it had been a perfect hit.

Sulim was the rebel commander during the first Chechen war in the days when young Russian soldiers were being slaughtered in Grozny. He subsequently showed the depth of his loyalty by switching sides to become the commander of the Russian Military Special Battalion Vostok. So by the time of his death, he had pretty much pissed everybody off on both sides.

Following the two and very separate assassinations of both of his brothers, the latter of whom was shot while driving Sulim's car in Moscow, Sulim had understandably and discreetly relocated to Dubai. Here he had lived under a pseudonym and only permitted himself one very inconspicuous bodyguard.

The small two-bedroom apartment in the 44-tower Jumeirah Beach complex should have been enough urban camouflage to protect him, but it was not. When the Russians finally tracked him down, the assassin waited in the underground car park for his quarry to show. As Sulim walked from his car to the lifts, the assassin moved innocuously past him, spun around and shot him twice through the back of the neck with a silenced pistol. It was all over for Sulim. The assassin then pistol-whipped the bodyguard into unconsciousness, picked up the two empty cases that had been ejected from the pistol, and simply disappeared.

In reality he walked out of the car park onto the busy street and turned the corner so as not to be tracked by a camera; he was then driven towards Abu Dhabi, where he was dropped at Raha Beach Hotel; the Russian driver was not aware of his identity or of the job. The assassin went to a prearranged room in the hotel for which the driver had given him a key; he showered before leaving his clothes with the pistol in a sports bag that would be retrieved by the 'Fixer' who had booked and paid for the room. He then left the hotel, walked to the shopping mall next door, got into a taxi to Abu Dhabi Airport and caught a Qatar Airways flight to Doha. From here he flew to South Africa before travelling home via Spain. He would never again return to the United Arab Emirates, even though his real identity would never be compromised.

His ultimate paymasters, the Delimkov cartel, were accused by Dubai's police of ordering the hit, and a warrant was issued for the arrest of the cartel's leader. This, of course, would never happen.

Rather than be deterred, the cartel's godfather was keen to reaffirm the extent of his reach to Interpol and the Dubai police and send an unambiguous 'I'm still a factor' message to other would-be debtors. He was, for these two reasons, unusually eager to send two of the assassin's colleagues to Dubai, but this time to dispatch a Persian who had screwed them out of 12 million US dollars.

CHAPTER TWO

Harry's Game

The precise sequence of events that caused Harry Nicholas Linley and Shaheen Soroush to meet was not clearly recalled by either of them. If anyone had asked, they would have guessed that it was a friend of a friend that had asked Harry to meet her at one of Shaheen's lavish parties in his villa on the Palm.

In any case, the meeting and the acquaintance that followed would result in destiny for one of them and fate for the other.

Harry certainly recalled being dropped off by the taxi outside of Shaheen's villa and being suitably impressed with the super-cars double-parked in the roadway outside, the Rolls Royce in the driveway, and the latest and loudest Iranian chart music booming out from the back garden.

As he walked through the large double front doorway, Harry did not know whether to soak up the lavish decoration, art and furniture or the stunning beauty of the Persian women who were flocking about the hallway and living room entrance. He decided to concentrate on the women, who were amongst the most beautiful he had ever seen in Dubai.

Harry must have been on his second beer when someone offered to introduce him to the host. He noticed straighta-

way that Shaheen was a man of some style and, while Harry deemed that, had he worn white flannels with a white shirt he would have looked a bit on the gay side, the look somehow suited Shaheen. It also did not hurt that throngs of women were hanging around the man.

As both men made small talk, they became acutely aware of a male chemistry between them, and both knew from experience in life that such events did not happen very often.

Shaheen explained that he ran a number of television channels, conveniently omitting the pornographic distribution element, and Harry explained that he worked in Dubai's financial district, conveniently omitting the multiple tours he had served as a British Special Forces officer in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Frankly, they both viewed each other as equals but from worlds and sectors apart. They also recognised that they kind of complemented each other.

Whereas Shaheen was wealthy and carried a small paunch, Harry was upper-middle-class with a concealed but hard-earned six-pack. Where Shaheen was married but unfaithful, Harry was divorced and cautious towards relationships. Where Shaheen longed to be anything except from the country of his birth, Harry could not be prouder of his Queen and country. Finally, where Shaheen was inherently dishonest but had never physically hurt anyone, Harry was inherently honest but had completed a kill-list as per the mandate handed him by Her Majesty's Special Air Service Regiment.

What both men did not realise was that the very differences that separated them would now thrust them together; it would cost a few men their lives and only much later, or possibly never, would either of them ever understand what had really happened.

Shaheen deemed the nightmare of Ajman and *Burj Tak-seeb* to be a dormant issue and he was happy because the

money had funded the Rolls Royce. Harry had resolutely put all his Special Forces work behind him. He was grateful, however, that someone in the financial sector had recognised that if he could manage risk in a world where the blood ran red, then he could sure as hell manage risk in a world where it ran green; they had been right, and Harry planned to buy a property on London's Richmond Hill before he exited Dubai and the hedge fund industry.

Following their conversation, which Shaheen's wife had noted was longer than any exchange her husband had had with a male in her presence, Harry did what all Brits do at parties: he made his way to the kitchen.

Here he was glad to find likeminded loiterers and he managed to get himself a seat at the large kitchen table, where conversations regarding sex, politics and religion were already well into their second round.

It was about this time that he felt something rub his leg. Harry half-hoped it might be the foot of the Persian beauty, Ava, who was sitting beside him; he glanced down, but was bitterly disappointed. Rather than the first covert physical contact that could lead to a night of debauched sex with said beauty, it was, in fact, a cat. Harry hated cats.

However, this was clearly no 'moggy' saved from the dumpsters of Dubai. This was a pristine white ball of perfectly groomed hair. The cat sensed that she (and she was most certainly a 'she') was being looked at, and locked onto his blue eyes with hers. Harry smiled; after all, if he was cool with animals, then that might be cool with Ava too.

"And what's your name?" he asked, knowing and hoping the answer would come from his right.

"*That* is Bunny," Ava said on cue. "And she's a right little slut, she just loves men."

Ava was half-right: Bunny did love men, but only because her instincts told her to keep things sweet with those who exuded the smell of male musk, which she could easily sense.

She also loved to soak up heat, so orientated herself towards any human who pushed out body heat. She did not know it, but the difference between a European and an Aryan Persian body was that the former generated heat to cope with a cold climate; the Persian DNA did the opposite.

So this combination of musk and heat was good enough for Bunny, and it wasn't long before she was up onto Harry's lap with one graceful leap and purring.

Within a couple of minutes this instinct had been misinterpreted as desire by the ladies present, who concluded that Bunny must be able to recognise nice personalities and that Harry must therefore be a really nice guy. Shaheen's wife was captivated by the sight of her cat, normally so aloof, now purring on Harry's lap, just as if she had known him for years. She was quick to point this out to Shaheen when he came into the kitchen; he liked Harry all the more. For once, Harry's body heat had proved an asset in the heat of Dubai.

Ava also showed Harry her appreciation later that night.

During the ensuing weeks, whenever Shaheen was having a social event, he touched base with Harry to see if he wanted to attend. He liked having the Brit connection; he deemed it gave the impression of respectability, and they chatted about business in a bland but friendly manner. Harry was well aware that doing business with anyone who was Iranian was a nightmare due to international sanctions, and therefore it was not worth the trouble to pitch Shaheen for investment. However, there were no rules about being entertained and it did not hurt that Shaheen's wife, Farah, was a brilliant cook.

Since his divorce, Harry had lived on his own in Marina View Tower in Dubai Marina. He was happy enough, but had come to realise that the inevitable sequence of change and loss that divorced life delivered was forcing him to the

periphery of his children's lives. Like so many of his Special Forces mates, his single life was a product of his instinctive quest for adventure adapted to the service of his country. His marriage, although one that had been entered into for truly the right reasons, eventually revealed his and his wife's steadfast refusal to adapt to the inconvenient situation that it had come to represent.

Its conclusion had always been inevitable; Harry's ex-wife even admitted that she had married him because he was different, but that now she needed him to be like everyone else. She had sadly come to realise that most men, and especially Harry, could not do that. So she had instinctively selected her alpha-male to provide her with a couple of kids and then turned her attraction towards softer beta-males. Hence her affair and eventual marriage to a young Hereford bank manager, who thought that all his fantasies had come together when he was able to boast he was screwing the wife of an SAS man. Of course, by the time he realised what he had got himself into with two teenage kids and a pre-menopausal woman, the vows had already been sealed.

Despite the fact that Harry should have seen the divorce coming, he did not, and it had been anything but easy to cope with the break-up; leaving the Army had also proved a bitch. In truth, he missed his kids and he was lonely. The whole event of post-divorce had taught him that loneliness is not about having someone to do something with but much more about having someone to do nothing with. However, he had to be grateful for a well-paid job and the occasional experiences with the likes of Ava. Life could be worse, but he so wanted something to happen, something exciting. Or would life just be this dull for the rest of his days?

He often reflected that his situation was much akin to the poster of three vultures sitting on a branch with one of them saying: "*Patience my arse, I'm going to kill something*". Of

course, it did not have to be that extreme; to be honest, any excitement would do. These musings would transpire to be a regretful case of 'be careful what you wish for'.

While Harry got on with his life as a relative hermit with very few close friends, Shaheen's life of social interaction and dodgy deals continued. The demand for pornography was predictably global and served as a foot in the door for further TV channels and advertising in far-flung places, including Singapore.

Shaheen was discovering a whole new market in this beautiful country that he viewed as Thailand's back yard. He quickly concluded that if he could achieve a foothold there, then Indonesia would be his next venture. His experience in the Middle East had taught him that he could make much more money in countries where pornography was blocked, and he silently thanked the United States Navy for developing the Tor browser that enabled internet users to download his films despite the most ardent attempts of religious zealots to block them.

Much to his surprise, Shaheen had discovered that the freedoms and climate of Singapore were preferable to those of the Middle East and, even with his life of privilege in Dubai, he was acutely aware that no taxes also meant no rights; so with Singapore discovered, he decided it was time to transition his home and business out there. However, he had to convince his wife before that could happen, especially as her entire social life and family were either in Dubai or an hour's flight away in Tehran.

His plan was simple enough: let her visit, smell and see the country. She would fall in love with it like any other visitor, and with that approval he could unwind his operation in Dubai and start anew, free from the shadow of debtors' prison that loomed in the event that a real-estate debt claim were made against him, which would prevent him from leaving the country.

Shaheen's wife did not leap at the thought of a week in Singapore, but she also thought, what the heck. It would at least be a decent break in a five-star hotel and if she did not like the place, she could simply veto the whole idea.

They tried to find some dates when the kids were off school and when Shaheen's business contacts were in town; they also needed to ensure Farah's social calendar was not full and when the mother-in-law could come from Tehran to housesit, mostly for the purpose of looking after Bunny. The matter was so complicated because Farah refused to have a live-in maid as a result of previous theft problems.

As it transpired, just when most of the jigsaw pieces had fitted into place, there was, as ever, one that did not. Shaheen had been getting increasingly frustrated, before finally they found a good 10-day stretch; only then did his mother-in-law make some lame excuse as to why she could not come to Dubai at the required time. A huge family row erupted. From Shaheen's point of view, he supported his in-laws' lifestyle for 52 weeks of the year and now the bitch could not even bother her arse to come and help when called? The ensuing domestic explosion resulted in his wife threatening not to go at all, which would dash his entire relocation plan.

Shaheen needed to find someone who could be relied upon to stay at the villa and look after Bunny without throwing parties every night. These parameters actually excluded most of his parasitic friends, who he had no doubt would bring in the white powder as well as everything else. He scrolled through his phone contacts to prompt an idea of whom to ask.

He got to 'H' and stopped at Harry Linley. He did not know the guy that well, but from what he did know, it would work. Sure, he was not part of their inner social set; but that was the perfect way to keep his Iranian friends at arm's length, because he was a Brit. He certainly was not a party animal and it seemed his biggest flaw was that he

was honest (or so Shaheen assessed). However, the ace in the pack was that Bunny loved him and Shaheen's wife knew it.

Shaheen picked his moment to pitch the idea to Farah and, to his amazement, she actually agreed. If he could persuade Harry to cat-sit, then his future in the Far East could begin.

CHAPTER THREE

Don't Mess With The Duma

For the Delimkov cartel, which, in addition to its money laundering and other mafia activities, authorised the odd hit here and there, the decision to dispatch Shaheen Soroush in Dubai was not complicated. It would send a clear message to their debtors and show their disdain to credible law enforcement; so they called in another Duma member, their trusted Controller in such matters, to order the hit.

Former KGB Colonel Ilyas Soltegov's link to the Delimkov was well known in dubious circles, but he had always remained clean from a legal perspective. He explained to the Godfather that it would be "money for old rope" and that they would even get a chance to give one of their new boys a "bit of a run" to get him blooded.

Ilyas explained that he could make it all cost-efficient, from the labyrinth of flights, to the false but entirely authentic identification material, and the payment to the Fixer in Dubai. The cost would be about eight million roubles (about 250,000 US dollars); he would need 50 percent, plus logistic costs up front.

The subsequent planning process was procedural and, for a man with Soltegov's experience, second nature.

It ran: selection of the striker team (so named because of his love of football), entry route to country, reception team and equipment in country, linking of strikers to equipment, route to target, method of entry, method of dispatch, extraction to detach from equipment, sanitise, exfil from the country, route home. Nothing to it.

The striker team was an easy decision, the only restriction being that neither must have previously been in the UAE. This was in light of the facial recognition technology that had been installed after 2010, when Israel's Mossad had inadvertently blown their cover following their successful assassination of Hamas's Mahmoud Al-Mabhouh in his hotel room. That operation had gone brilliantly with regard to all of the above phases; it had been assumed that Al-Mabhouh simply died of a heart attack since his body was discovered as if he had been sleeping peacefully in his bed; there had even been heart medicine sitting on his bedside cabinet. His hotel room was tidy and his body showed no signs of struggle, with no bruising or wounds of any sort.

Had it not been for the keen, young and highly skilled Emirati pathologist who was on duty the day after the death, Mossad would have totally got away with it. However, knowing what he knew about the man on the slab, the pathologist had paused before signing the death off as 'Natural Causes' and looked at his watch. He had 30 minutes left on his shift, so decided to just take one more look, and this was when he noticed what looked like two little birthmarks just five centimetres under the deceased's left armpit. Probably nothing, but he asked his assistant to pass the magnifying glass and light.

As he peered at the two marks, he felt the blood drain from his face. These cells were not this colour because they were birthmarks but because they had been burned very shortly before death. Al-Mabhouh had been tasered!

The Mossad team were long gone and the humiliation they had inflicted on the entire security mechanism of Dubai was complete.

They had, however, underestimated the tracking ability of the Dubai authorities, and every surveillance tape was re-run. The painstaking detective work of the Dubai Police quickly identified the entire compilation of the Mossad team; they also ascertained that all had left the country and all had false (but real) passports. Ten days after the hit the faces of the Mossad agents were plastered over every newspaper. Yet none of them were ever publicly identified, let alone captured.

In a pledge that such matters would never again happen, the UAE spent well over \$100 million on the best facial recognition technology money could buy. Everyone who entered the country was to be digitised for a match to their own passport, which was, of course, a vain attempt to seek out any of the Mossad team should they ever set foot back in the UAE – which, of course, would never happen.

With all this in mind, the Godfather agreed with the Controller that Maxim and Boris would be perfect for the job and that they should replicate Mossad's killing technique in order to cover their tracks. The Controller knew that this would probably be Maxim's last job. He was fit enough, but any man in his fifties got a little slower and, although no one would suspect Maxim's tradecraft, he had learned that knowing when to get out of such a business was a lot more important than knowing when to get in.

For Boris, this would be his first blood-job for the cartel. He had fallen into organised crime shortly after leaving the SpN PDSS, or Naval Spetsnaz as it was better known. Life out of the military had been a difficult transition with no job or prospects, so when he was asked to start driving and delivery for the cartel, he took it. He was then trained to help them with 'Methods of Entry', called MOE in the trade, but

lock-picking by everyone else. In the back of his mind he recognised that each job they gave him was more complex (and more criminal), but the payouts were good and their network was as secure as any. Even so, Boris was surprised when they contacted him and subsequently explained that they had an elimination job abroad for which he had been selected as the 'number two'. Would he take it?

Even though the information was understandably scant, he knew that there was only one response. To turn down a job would effectively mean no consideration for 'promotion' and ejection from the inner circle.

From here the process was simple: behind closed doors Maxim was told that the target was an individual living in a single-family, luxury villa on the Palm Jumeirah. He would put his plan together and present it to the Controller. If the latter agreed with the plan, then he would quickly open the logistic support links. The key to the entire operation was the tight circle of knowledge; just one controller in Russia and one fixer in the UAE. No one except the Controller would be aware of all the elements involved. The UAE Fixer would not know the where, the who, or the what. Her job was to obey instructions to the letter and ensure that all the requested components were ready at the given time and place.

Even the *ab initio* Boris would not be briefed until it was time to go, and neither he nor Maxim would know the identities of anyone they met in Dubai, except Shaheen.

Maxim had his plan together within 24 hours, and the following day he met with the Controller at the State Duma offices, which, ironically, were considered entirely secure for the purpose of discussing such matters.

Maxim explained that they would enter the country from Germany and carry German passports. Maxim knew that these were easy to procure due to the old East German/Soviet network; he emphasised to the Controller that the

actual holders of the passports should be of similar age to the two-man team (he did not yet know the identity of Boris) and they needed to make damn sure that neither assumed nor real individual had set foot in Dubai since 2010. The Controller nodded: no problem.

“We’ll be there to attend a convention, there’s always one going on in Dubai; we’ll pick one that’s on at the time. The Fixer will need to organise the reservation of a white Toyota Camry from one of the large car rental companies. Whoever books the car should say they need it in white because the driver is very particular about having a white car that helps reflect the heat.” Maxim paused to give the Controller the opportunity to interrupt. He need not have done so.

“Concurrently, prior to our arrival, the Fixer in Dubai should have identified a separate, recent-model, white Toyota Camry, and will need to steal the rear number plate off the car and have a similar copy made for the front of the car. He should also reserve a room at a hotel that is popular with Germans so that we have a reservation form to show immigration – but we won’t use the room, so he can cancel the reservation as soon as we’re in the country.” Evidently, Maxim did not know that the Fixer was a woman.

“We need to rendezvous at a safe house with the equipment and the number plates. It needs to be a discreet private residence, preferably with a garage or driveway that can’t be viewed from the road. The place should also be equipped with a decent washing machine, plenty of bottled water, a gas-fired barbecue grill and a kettle.”

Here, the Controller did interrupt: “A kettle?”

“Yes, I like to drink tea,” Maxim said simply before continuing.

“We also need two sets of surgical gloves, two bottles of spray-bleach, a local mobile phone, a pack of bin liners, two bottles of unscented Dettol soap and shampoo, washing powder, two ski-masks.” He paused for a moment. “He can

buy those from that indoor ski-slope they have there; I'll also need two roles of quality clingfilm and a Taser gun." He handed the Controller the shopping list.

The Controller smiled; he had been wondering if Maxim would agree to the method that Mossad had used to dispatch their victim. He would stun the target with the Taser, then wrap clingfilm around his head until he was asphyxiated. They would then remove the clingfilm, place the body in a natural position and exit the house. If there were any problems with Shaheen's family, they would presumably get the same treatment. The Taser and clingfilm combination was also an easy option in terms of procurement because there was little chance of such equipment being compromised, unlike firearms, which were more likely to be ratted out on by someone down the chain.

Maxim explained that once they had arrived at the safe house he would SMS "*thank you*" to the only number to be found in the local phone's memory. This would indicate to the Fixer that they were in the country and that he was to book their Etihad flight out any time after 6 am on the day after the text was sent. The Fixer should be instructed to text back the booking number and time of the flight. While at the safe house, they would detail-brief each other and prepare their equipment, and drive a dry-run if there was time.

Maxim then set out the details of the 'neutralisation' itself. It was just how the Controller had envisaged and he ever so slightly smiled as he listened to the assassin.

"We then return to the safe house to forensically cleanse. Strip our clothes and stick them in the washing machine, bleach down the surgical gloves and the ski-masks, before burning them on the barbecue. We bleach the Taser and clingfilm and put the clingfilm back in the car. Then we shower, bleach down the showers after use, and change into our exfil clothes, switch the number plates back to the correct ones and depart. We drive up to Abu Dhabi and stop

briefly on the roadside in the middle of the desert to destroy the Taser by crushing it under the car. Finally we exfil by catching an Etihad Airlines flight back to Germany.”

The Controller instinctively interrupted: “You don’t want a filter country?”

“No need”, responded Maxim. “We’ll head back from where we came so that it looks as if we just cut our trip short. The Fixer should book the flights after we are in country,” he added. “I reiterate, his should be the only saved number on the mobile phone. I’ll simply text *‘see you’* to the Fixer when we’re clear of the safe house. If I don’t send that text three hours before the flight, the Fixer needs to call me; if I don’t answer, the Fixer needs to come to the safe house, because it’ll mean there’s been a change of plans that I can’t discuss on the phone.” Maxim paused. “Where was I?”

“No filter country,” the Controller prompted, glad at this juncture to be asked anything by Maxim.

“Right, we’ll throw the clingfilm out of the car on our way to Abu Dhabi, I’ll text *‘thank you’* to the Fixer when we’re close to the airport. We’ll then dismantle the phone, soak the pieces in the drinking water and let the desert consume them. We then board the flight and return via Munich.”

The Controller leant back in his chair; if Maxim truly were going to retire after this job, he would miss him. He so hated getting young dispatchers coming in with ever increasingly fancy plans. This one exuded all the tradecraft that Maxim had learned over the years and was elegantly simple. So much so that he thought it worth the target’s life just to see it happen. The only flaw was the family, but he knew how well and silently Maxim did his work, so it would only get complicated if they were all in the same room when the team entered the house. He assumed that Maxim would mitigate against such risk, so he was happy.

Maxim stayed silent, waiting for the verdict.

The Controller broke the silence. "It is approved."

"How soon?" asked Maxim.

"As soon as the passports and IDs are complete and the Fixer is ready to receive you." The Controller smiled. "You are my favourite employee, Maxim; I hope you won't hang up your boots after this one."

Maxim did not know what to say so instead made a 'let's see' expression.

The Controller continued: "You will meet and brief your number two 24 hours before you leave for Germany. This is his first dispatch for us but he's what you were 20 years ago; he won't let you down."