

## CHAPTER 1

*A thunderous roar filled his ears.*

*Ramps down, they came in fast, came prepared, arrived in the middle of nowhere. Longitude: 29 degrees, 32 minutes and 28 seconds. Latitude: 63 degrees, 40 minutes and 78 seconds. Google maps revealed nothing more than desert and rocks. USA 161, a spy satellite, revealed the area in somewhat more detail.*

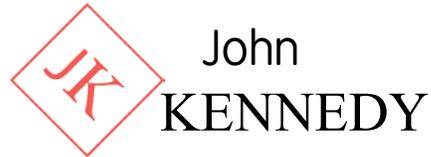
*Many men, far, far away, poured over the images and planned the assault from the comfort of air-conditioned rooms.*

*They hit hard, heavy machine guns, Mk19 grenade launchers, and sniper fire. Two man teams pepper-potted: hold firm and advance.*

*They killed, he killed. The Yanks arrived. They came in F18 Hornets. They sent missiles.*

*He knew it was coming, knew he was helpless. He closed his eyes; dry swallowed, opened his mouth and waited.*

*The pulse of air hit first, followed by an enveloping rush of heat.*



*He turned his head away. He wanted it gone, for it was no longer Corporal George Pierce who lay next to him.*

*He held his breath. The pain in his lungs intensified. He thrashed. He begged. He wanted to scream.*

*It knew. It waited.*

*He could hold his breath no longer. He exhaled and gulped air.*

*George smiled. Burnt lips curled over white teeth. Smoke seeped from his charred face.*

*George spoke. 'Kiss me Hardy.'*

*George was always a joker.*

*The smell of roast pig pervaded his nostrils, followed by a sickly sweet copper tang from boiled bodily fluids.*

*He wanted to retch.*

*Then George screamed.*

*A faint pin prick of white light appeared within George's gaping mouth.*

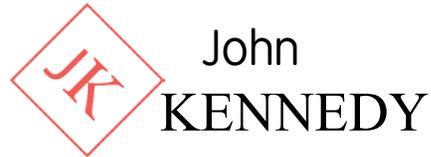
*He smiled, the end was near.*

Quinn Tempest-Stewart sat bolt upright. His chest heaved.

The hum from the air conditioner replaced the imaginary roar from quadruple turbo props reverberating in his skull.

Quinn focused on the alarm clock. He did not need to stare at the big red neon numbers to know what time it was: Six thirty A.M. Greenwich Mean Time, Eleven A.M. desert time, killing time.

He shivered. The cold air chilled the sheen of sweat covering his body.



Quinn Tempest-Stewart flung the clammy Egyptian cotton sheets away from his body. He swung his legs to one side and stood on uneasy legs.

He padded across the carpet toward the window, pulled the ivory hemp fabric of the curtain aside and stared into the street lamp illuminated street four stories below.

A trickle of perspiration gathered at the thick rib of muscle separating chest and abdominals. In one continuous movement, he flicked the offending liquid away, spattering opaque fluid against the window.

The noise in his head abated, to be replaced by the faint tickety-tick of an idling diesel engine, barely audible through the double paned glass.

Parked in front of the hotel entrance a black cab waited. The hotel concierge leant against the taxi roof. Wisps of hot breath curled from his mouth as he jawed to the driver.

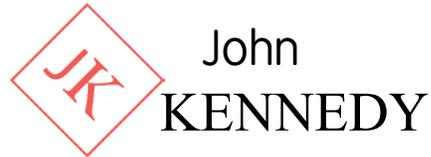
Opposite, a man padlocked a bicycle to an iron railing fence, running along the length of the Alison Jacques gallery.

Within Quinn's peripheral vision a red light blinked. Quinn craned his neck to the source and stared at the British Telecom tower extending above London's roof line.

Early morning sunrise silhouetted wart like rows of dish antennae, giving the tower the unfortunate appearance of a cross between a Jedi's light sabre and an Ann summers vibrator.

Wrapped around the top of the building, just above the old revolving restaurant, and covering a full two floors, British Telecom's new multi coloured L.E.D display board displayed the number 106.

One hundred and six days left until the World athletic championships opening ceremony. That was one hundred and six days for every lunatic, and fringe organization, to vye for their Warhol fifteen minutes of fame.



Atop the tower a red light flashed, a warning to passing aircraft.

*Red, danger, red, muzzle flash, red, blood.*

Quinn's head spun. Reeling, he reached out to the window ledge for support. He felt a sharp twinge in his lower back as he twisted awkwardly and rested his backside against the window sill. He rocked forward and closed his eyes. He drew slow breaths. He blinked. The room came back into focus. It was over, for now.

An oblong shaft of light speared from a gap in the curtains and dissected the room.

Quinn traced its path across the Voltaire inscribed floor rug, up and over the silver sleigh bed, until it crested the mound of his sleeping companion.

The light bisected the nightstand. Centre stage a 2-carat diamond glinted. His sleeping companion snorted, flicked out an arm, and rolled over.

He met her at a paraathletics fundraiser, organized by the Help for Heroes charity for athlete Jenny Edeson.

In stark contrast with the dour dress sense of those surrounding him, she wore a short petrol blue dress. Chosen deliberately, he surmised, to showcase toned legs. The colour of her dress clashed with dramatic, auburn, razor cut hair.

She walked upright, aloof, and held an absolute air of confidence.

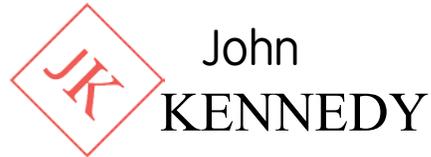
Quinn ran through his short checklist: fourth finger left hand – bingo.

Their eyes locked. Quinn felt the rush. Hunter and prey in equal amounts.

She drank thirsty. Men flocked to her.

They played their game.

Quinn talked with Jenny Edeson, ex Royal Army medical corp. A landmine took her legs.



They sat for dinner, the food bland; the wine cheap and plentiful; the cheques big.

After dinner, she joined Quinn at the bar, The conversation short. First names only, Zara, Quinn.

They made for the nearest hotel, five stars.

She hate fucked.

Quinn smelled of sex and fear. He needed a shower. He levered himself from the window ledge and pushed past ceiling to floor silk drapes, that acted as room dividers, and stepped into the wet room.

Quinn turned the temperature dial to devil hot.

The jets pummelled the top of his shoulder. He stretched his neck: chin to chest, ear to shoulder, releasing knots of tension as he did so.

The combination of pounding water and heat relaxed him, relaxed him a little too much. He peed, letting the stream flow. It felt good.

A female voice interrupted his moment.

‘Your mobile,’ said Zara.

She leant against a glass panel and posed in Agent Provocateur: Black lace bra and matching garter belt. She traced a circle in the condensation.

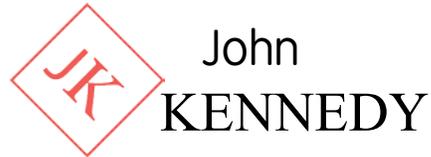
‘Another woman,’ she said.

Quinn grabbed a towel from the rack and wrapped it around his waist.

Rubbing fingers through dirty-blond close cropped hair, careful to avoid the bloodied welt just above his ear, a trophy from an overzealous open side flanker, he followed the girl into the room and sat on the edge of the bed.

She handed him his phone.

The screen ID read Munroe.



Quinn fluffed a pillow against the headboard and rested his back against it. ‘Munroe, Quinn,’ he said.

Munroe talked. Quinn glommed. He watched his fuck buddy step into her dress.

‘What does the good doctor say... suicide...’ said Quinn, watching her slump on to the bed and extend a leg. ‘Ulrich... thought so...’

She pointed toes toward the ceiling and teased a stocking down her calf.

‘I’m close, give me twenty,’ said Quinn, ending the call and tossing the phone onto the dishevelled bedding.

Upside down, she stared at him. She rolled backwards, simultaneously splaying her legs and mounted him, reverse cowgirl style.

She wore no panties.

She looked over her shoulder, watching his expression as she ground herself into him.

She was wet.

Quinn reached.

She pivoted as she felt his touch and knelt beside him. Sweeping a bang across one eye, she bounced from the bed.

‘Hey, don’t start the engine unless you intend to take it out for a ride,’ he said.

She traced a line down his chest. ‘I’m more of an eight-cylinder woman, not a two stroke,’ she said, pausing at a small white round scar. She traced a finger around the raised tissue before continuing her downward trajectory and pausing on a similar scar closer to his hip.

Quinn closed his eyes and groaned. ‘Don’t knock the little engine that could.’

He felt the warmth of her lips on his forehead. She retraced the same path, this time using her lips.



He held his breath. He hoped.