

Pilgrim 11

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*'People sleep peaceably in their beds
at night only because rough men
stand ready to do violence on their
behalf'*

George Orwell

Chapter 1 – New on the Job

'Stonesfield, Martin. 61223459, Staff Sergeant, 14th January 1980' he uttered flatly as blood from the cut above his eye trickled down his nose, some remaining matted to the two weeks of stubble on his cheeks, the rest mixing with the water and dripping onto the filthy orange overalls.

Lean, tanned and heavily muscled, he was obviously a man who spent a lot of time outdoors, and the multitude of tattoos the interrogators had found when he had been processed, suggested an adventurous lifestyle, with regular travel. His brown hair was showing the first signs of grey, and the skin around his brown eyes was creased and lined from fatigue.

'Don't fuck me around Stonesfield. Do you want the water again?'

Sitting cross legged in the wire framed dog kennel, Stonesfield's arms strained against the plastic zip ties that bound his wrists as he stared ahead into the dark recesses of the room. There was a brief moment of silence, before the interrogator snatched up the metal end of the fire hose and turned it to full pressure, the water blasting in the sitting man's face as his protagonist held the end inches from his face. He desperately gulped for air, but after a few seconds

had resorted to holding his breath as each time he opened his mouth it was instantly filled with water.

After twelve days on the run, and twenty-three hours of stress positions, humiliation and abuse filled interrogations he was beginning to fade with the fatigue and intense stress of the past two weeks conspiring against him. Sensing this, the interrogator turned off the hose and threw it down angrily onto the bare concrete floor, as a second man ran a baseball bat along the wire grill of the dog kennel, making a loud zipping sound as it passed just millimeters above his head. Stonesfield shuddered, and gulped in air, beginning to relax against his zip ties as he did so.

'Let's start again Martin. We know from our records that you grew up in a village called Holmfirth in Yorkshire, and you joined the Parachute Regiment as soon as you left school in 1998. We also know through our contacts in England, and believe me, many of your countrymen provide us with information, that you have been a member of the Special Air Service since the early 2000's'.

Stonesfield sat impassively, still looking straight and ahead without making eye contact with his captor; the man was looking for any cue that he was hitting the mark or getting to his prey, and he was going to get nothing from him. The interrogation continued with the same questions repeated again and again, with the ever present hint of

menace, and Stonesfield sat in defiant silence. His captor continued, becoming more frustrated until he unlocked the kennel, reached in and pulled him out, head first, and by the collar.

His interrogator was an older man, Stonesfield guessed he was in his late fifties, and large; he'd kept in shape for many years, but the years had begun to take their toll and he was now sporting a pot belly. His breath stank of garlic as he moved in closer, face to face with his prey.

'So, what are you doing in my country? What was your mission? Why did the British government send you to Akazia?'

As he lay on the floor with his hands still zip tied behind his back, the second man, heavysset and wearing a black balaclava, sat astride his chest weighing down on his chest. He slapped Stonesfield several times across the face, lightly, but enough to let him know what was coming if he didn't answer the questions.

'Stonesfield, Martin. 61223459, Staff Sergeant, 14th January 1980'

His captor exploded with rage and, as he rang a bell, two guards, also in balaclavas, and with AK47's slung across their shoulders entered the dark room and dragged Stonesfield roughly to his feet. The heavysset man replaced the heavy hessian hood over his head, as one of the guards picked up his lace less boot which had come off when he'd been dragged from the kennel.

'Get this imbecilic piece of shit out of my sight'

The hood was uncomfortable and made restricted breathing as he attempted to suck in lungful's of air, but as the guards dragged him from the room and down a long corridor, Stonesfield smiled to himself; second by second, minute by minute, hour by hour, he'd kept going and had revealed nothing.

They turned left into a room and, clad only in soaking wet overalls, he felt an immediate chill. Cutting his zip ties with a knife, they placed his hands against a rough wall, pulling his legs backwards and kicking his feet apart. Shivering, and hooded, he knew the position he was in would start to hurt shortly. In his head, he switched off from the pain and tried to work out how much concrete he'd need for the footings of an extension to his small cottage in Yorkshire, blocking out discomfort as he slowly replayed the numbers in his head.

Calculating amounts of concrete, sand and other materials he slowly forced his mind through the process of building the extension, brick by brick, all the way to the roof. However, the pain from the stress position, restriction of his breathing and assault on his eardrums eventually bought him back to the present.

The soundtrack this time was Arabic music, played at high volume; earlier it had been a baby screaming, and before that thrash metal. The music was on a loop, and for the few

short seconds when it reset, he could hear water dripping nearby. He sensed other people in the room, but he had no idea if they were fellow prisoners or guards.

He was surprised how short a time he was on the wall for, but grateful for a break when the guards moved him from the wall, and plasticcuffed his thumbs together, as his thick forearms burned with pain and the cold of the room chilled his bones, and it was a relief as the guard's zip tied him and manhandled him down to a room where he was forced into a chair and his zip ties were cut. His hood was pulled off, and he was initially blinded by the intense brightness of the room.

As his vision slowly returned, he found himself in a small, brightly lit room with a window and a table. Squinting against the light, he saw a blurry figure of a tall, lean man and as the blurring lessened he made out the uniform of a colonel. Greying at the temples and with cold, blue eyes, the commanding officer of 22 Special Air Service regiment was smiling, and sporting a white armband.

'Do you recognise me Stonesfield?'

'Yes Sir'

'Who am I?'

'Colonel Flynn, my Commanding Officer'

'That's correct, and I am here to tell you that the exercise is over'

'Thanks Sir, how did I do?'

'Apparently you're a, and I quote, stubborn-headed fucking Yorkshireman, but despite that you've passed'

'I didn't realise my ex-wife was doing the assessments' he laughed.

The colonel also laughed for a second, and removed the armband as the door opened and a younger man in an expensively cut navy suit entered and closed the door. With dark, wavy hair and brown eyes, he assessed his age at early forties, and there was an air of entitlement about him that Stonesfield had seen before in some of the privately educated officers he'd encountered, but he put his misgivings aside as the man handed over a steaming caramel macchiato in a takeaway cup and a bar of chocolate.

'We're not all heathens, Stonesfield' he whispered with a grin.

'You remember Thomas Collisby from your recent interview?' the Colonel continued.

'Of course, one of the few men capable of talking me into doing Combat Survival for a second time'

'Hmm, a requirement not set by me, I hasten to add' Collisby added quickly, glancing at the Colonel *'I just wanted to congratulate you on your successful completion, and also to check in. Why don't you clean up, get some rest and we can catch up tomorrow afternoon in London?'*

Stonesfield sipped at the coffee, noting it was too hot to drink yet and nodded his thanks as the suit left the room, leaving him and the Colonel alone. The older man sat down

opposite him, removing his sand coloured beret and placing it on the table as he rubbed his chin for a second, before he began to speak deliberately, as if choosing his words very carefully.

'Stonesfield, you have been a fantastic asset to the regiment, and, as you've just proven, still as sharp and switched on now as you were when you passed selection nineteen years ago. You are the second person I have had this talk with since I took over as CO two years ago, and I will tell you the same thing I told the first. If you walk through this door, you will be leaving the regiment'

Stonesfield looked at the Colonel, and although he already knew the terms of the deal, he was absorbed by the seriousness of his boss, and the gravitas in his words. He scanned the older man's face, and looked for some hint in the piercing blue eyes.

'If you were me, would you go?' he asked.

'I think you know the answer to that, otherwise I doubt you'd have saved yourself an uncomfortable two weeks or so on the run and the last 24 hours under the hood when you didn't have to' replied the Colonel.

'Well I am a, and I quote, stubborn-headed fucking Yorkshireman' laughed Stonesfield.

'But seriously, sir' he continued *'I'm forty in three months and I know my time with the regiment is coming to an end. I think it may be time to look for a new challenge, and I don't see myself*

on the circuit, taking the cash and babysitting Arab princes in Chelsea, but I don't think my days as a gunslinger are over just yet'

The Colonel laughed, and stood up; it was clear the conversation wasn't going any further. He replaced his beret and turned towards the door. He paused for a moment, looking up to find the words, before turning to look Stonesfield in the eye.

'We agreed with the intelligence services that we'd supply a cadre of eight operators for the detachment; you are the eleventh pilgrim we have sent them. Read into that what you will. Good luck, Stonesfield'

With that, he nodded and left the room, leaving Stonesfield to ponder his cryptic words for a moment, before sipping at the rapidly cooling coffee and painfully trudging over to the accommodation block, where he removed the several layers of dirt and grime he'd acquired over two weeks in the shower, lanced several painful blisters and gulped down a bottle of water before climbing into bed. In his mind he replayed the Colonel's words, but eight days of little or no sleep and brutal physical activity caught up with him and he was asleep in seconds.

The steam of the shower brought him back to life after twelve hours of deep sleep, during which he had hardly moved in the narrow single bed. Pulling on a pair of jeans and a polo shirt, he walked the short distance across the camp to the Sergeants Mess for breakfast. Breakfast was nearly over, and the dining room was empty, but for a few uniformed soldiers and after a week with very little food, he piled bacon, sausage and eggs onto a plate with some toast and found an empty table.

He ate with purpose, having lost several kilos of bodyweight in the past two weeks, and the food disappeared quickly, a little too quickly, as he quickly began to feel full. As he eased back on the cholesterol consumption, a civilian member of the mess staff entered holding a large jiffy bag envelope and scanned the room, before heading directly for him as he finished the last of his toast.

'Mr Stonesfield?' she asked, with a quizzical expression.

'Yes, that's me'

'A gentleman at reception asked me to give you this' she said, handing over the envelope before retreating back to the mess office leaving Stonesfield alone in the empty dining room.

Opening the sealed jiffy bag, he fished out the contents one by one, placing them on the table in a neat pile next to his empty plate. A sheaf of documents, a wallet, a letter, a new iPhone and a set of house keys, and a car key

fob. Placing the documents, phone and the keys aside, he opened the letter and began to read as he sipped his coffee.

You are no longer Martin Stonesfield born 14th January 1980, you are now Martyn Stonesfield born 26th March 1979; we'll talk about that later, but you'll find a wallet containing a driving licence, credit and bank cards to that effect, with this letter. The American Express card is for work purposes and has a £25,000 limit and the PIN is 8693; you must keep receipts. You have a £1000 a month clothing allowance, please use it.....

There are documents attached, please keep hold of these; they include your new birth certificate, educational certificates, a utility bill and bank statements. Should you need to verify your identity, these are for that purpose. If you have any issues with the Police that you can't resolve, ask them to call 020 11358679011 and say nothing.

Your car is in the car park outside the Mess; it is an Audi A4 registration DE67 XUN. It is registered in your name, and all the documents are in the glove box. It is fitted with a tracker, and a safe in the boot with the key code 98-47-32-16.

The Yale keys on the key ring are for your new flat. The address is Flat 2, 18 Denbigh Street, Pimlico, London SW1V 2ES. The rent and utilities are paid

each month by a company called New Ventures Energy, another thing we'll cover later.

Finally, your phone. The number is programmed in, but please set up the biometric lock as soon as you can. Again, it's registered to New Ventures Energy.

Your room in the mess at Hereford has been packed up and the contents placed into storage, along with your car. When you are finished at Chicksands, leave your keys for the MT vehicle and all your belongings in the room, along with your wallet. Take nothing other than the clothes you are wearing and the contents of this envelope.

Your meeting with Mr Collisby is scheduled for 1500 this afternoon. Please present yourself to the reception at the New Ventures Energy corporate office at 206 Upper Tachbrook Street, Pimlico, SW1V 1SN and give them your name.

Welcome to New Ventures Energy.

'Martin with a fucking 'Y?' were his only words, as he scooped the contents back into the jiffy bag and headed back to his room.

He changed the polo shirt for a check shirt and packed up his remaining belongings, leaving everything in a neat pile at the end of the bed, including a pile of the clothes he had worn for the previous two weeks. Carrying just the jiffy bag he locked the room and

returned to the mess reception. This time, a tall, grey haired man in a black leather jacket was waiting as he entered, sat at a table in the Mess ante room, drinking tea and reading the Daily Mail.

'Mr Stonesfield?' asked the man, looking up over the newspaper.

'Yes'

'If you're all done, Sir, I will take the room key and ensure everything is taken care of' he replied, holding out a hand for the key.

'Thanks' he replied, returning his gaze and tossing the key towards him. If this guy wanted the pleasure of bagging up the clothes and underwear he'd spent the last fourteen days in, well, good luck to him.

'You're welcome. Have a safe trip'

Walking out to the car park, he scanned the dozen or so vehicles, pulled out the keys and pressed the fob; sure enough the lights on a black Audi A6 flashed with a beep. Opening the driver's door, he tossed the jiffy bag onto the passenger seat, and walked around to the rear of the car, with just the keys and the letter. Opening the boot, he found a car safe the size of a briefcase inlaid at the left hand side, with a small numerical keypad.

Entering the code in the letter, the keypad beeped and flashed green, and the door of the safe cracked open slightly. Reaching in, Stonesfield opened

the door to the safe; inside was a 9mm Berretta pistol fitted with laser sight. It sat in a foam inlay, like photographic equipment, and beside the pistol was a suppressor and two magazines. He removed one the magazines and checked the top round before replacing it and relocking the safe. He cradled the pistol in his hand, feeling the weight and adjusting to the grip, before replacing it in the safe and relocking it.

He walked round the car and climbed into the driver's seat, pressing the start button and watching as the dials span into life and the dial indicated a full tank of fuel. He also noticed that his new phone was already synced to the car audio system. He selected the satnav and typed in '*18 Denbigh Street*' and selecting the single Pimlico option from the list.

Finally, he looked through the wallet; there was a driving licence with his new details, a gym membership card, the AMEX card and a Metrobank cash card. There was a condom in the small pocket, and £500 cash in £20 notes.

Out of interest, he selected Bluetooth audio on the car system, and was surprised when a familiar playlist flashed up; someone had gone to the trouble of cloning the music collection from his old phone and transferring it to the new. He selected one of his favourite *foo fighter* tracks and drove out of the car park,

leaving the base at Chicksands heading through Stevenage initially for the A1(M) and then Central London.

As he drove slowly through a patch of heavy congestion near Edgware, his mind wandered back to the previous day's discussion with the Colonel, and to his first real impressions of Collisby. He'd worked with the public school types before, and found that although some could be entitled and selfish, many were actually pretty good guys. Having walked through the door, as the Colonel put it, he hoped he'd made the right call on his new boss.

It was just before 11am when he pulled up outside the Denbigh Street address. There were three parking spaces on what would have once been a garden, and he slid the Audi into the one marked 'Flat 2' before turning the engine off and grabbing the jiffy bag as he climbed out. He let himself in using the keys, and walked through a light and airy two-bedroom apartment, well-furnished and with a modern kitchen. On the rather plush granite workbench was an instruction manual for an alarm system.

He walked into the larger of the ensuite bedrooms and opened the wardrobe. Several suits and a collection of silk shirts were hung, and two pairs of shoes, one brown, one black sat on the base. He picked

them up and turned them over; size 10. Opening a chest of drawers, he found an array of clothing including jeans and cargo pants.

In the bathroom there were fresh towels and a collection of brand new toiletries, and moving into the kitchen he opened the fridge finding milk, eggs and a range of basic provisions, including a six pack of Stella Artois.

After a brief flurry of opening and closing kitchen cupboards, he'd located a plain mug and a jar of instant coffee and made himself a brew. He flopped into a leather armchair and turned on the TV, watching the news as he sipped his coffee and reflected on the past 24 hours. He checked google maps and found the office was half a mile away. He'd get changed into one of the new suits, hanging in his new wardrobe in his new flat, but for now, he was going to watch TV, drink his coffee and let his mind catch up.

It was only four weeks since he'd been approached by his squadron commander, who'd interviewed him and pointed out, as tactfully as he could muster, that his time with the regiment was coming to an end, but that there may be an opportunity suitable for an operator of his experience and reputation. He'd had a cursory interview with the CO, followed by a brief chat with Collisby, which yielded very little other than the

requirement to undertake psychometric testing and a second iteration of the Combat Survival phase of SAS selection.

However, from what he'd seen so far, the new outfit was very well organised and with good attention to detail; the clothes and footwear were all perfectly sized, and only someone of a similar background would have thought to add a six pack of Stella to the basic groceries in the fridge.

The New Ventures Energy HQ was a ground floor suite of offices in what had once been three terraced houses. A brass plaque near a wooden door was all that advertised the presence of a global oil exploration company, and as Stonesfield pushed, the door opened and he walked through into a small reception area, where a smartly dressed lady in her fifties, and with greying hair, sat finishing the crossword as he approached the desk.

'Welcome to New Ventures Energy. Can I help you?' she asked, smiling.

'I have an appointment with Mr Collisby' he replied

'I see, Mr Stonesfield is it? Would you mind signing in?' she asked, handing him a clipboard.

He was in the process of reaching over to take the clipboard when Collisby appeared from behind a heavily locked door and waved.

'It's ok Doreen, he's the new exploration manager' boomed Collisby.

'Welcome to New Ventures Energy, my name is Doreen'

'Pleased to meet you Doreen, I'm Martyn, with a 'Y'' responded Stonesfield fixing his gaze at Collisby

'Martyn, welcome' called Collisby handing over a swipe card on a lanyard *'for fucks sake don't lose that'* he added, as Doreen, a staunch Christian, fixed him with a frosty gaze.

Once through a heavily locked door, Collisby led Stonesfield down a neat corridor, with doors marked with non-descript plates until they stopped at the end door which he opened and ushered him in. The bright corner office had a view out over a well-kept brick courtyard. A large desk was flanked by a large sofa and a board table with 8 seats. There were no pictures, whiteboards or projector screens and he noticed there were no personal items or family pictures anywhere in sight.

'Have a seat' said Collisby as he slid into a leather office chair behind his desk, and Stonesfield took up residence on the sofa.

'So, when we first spoke, I told you I was recruiting for a discrete unit within the intelligence service which comprised ex-members of the Special Forces, and with a very diverse portfolio of work'

Stonesfield nodded, and Collisby continued.

'You were interested enough to go through three days of psychological evaluation and psychometric testing, and undertake combat survival for a second time, so here we are, and I'll explain a little about what has just happened over the past 24 hours'

Collisby walked over to a rather expensive looking crystal decanter and poured large measures of scotch into two glasses, and passed one across to Stonesfield.

'Staff Sergeant Martin Stonesfield, born in Huddersfield 1980, joined the Parachute Regiment in 1998 and served in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq before passing SAS selection in 2006 and joining G Squadrons 22 troop, specializing in mountain warfare. Operational experience in Bosnia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Yemen, Libya, Syria and an exchange to Delta, qualified in signals, languages, Arabic and Spanish, demolitions and qualified as an assault 'Team Leader' Married 2000, divorced 2007, no children and both parents sadly deceased'

Stonesfield sipped his scotch as Collisby paused, there was nothing in his precis that couldn't have been unearthed easily from his army personnel file.

'I'm also a Capricorn and my favourite colour is blue' he added.

Collisby laughed *'yes, I know. I also know your father was a strict disciplinarian and your childhood was rather hard. Water from the well, 4 mile walk to school.....'*

'It's called being from Yorkshire' Stonesfield countered, aware Collisby had made his point. Collisby ignored his response and continued.

'Officially, I am the Managing Director of New Ventures Energy. Although we are supported by MI6, we work across agencies including MI5 and GCHQ and we are actually funded, very discretely and via a number of

holding companies I may add, by the foreign aid budget'
he began

'New Ventures was formed in 2008, following several intelligence failures which boiled down to the constraints of several departmental codes and oversight by parliamentary committee. We do not officially exist and we answer only to three signatories: the head of MI5, head of MI6 and Director Special Forces. We specialize in providing outcomes nobody else can, and nobody else in government questions how those outcomes transpired, because we are highly discrete, and we always deliver'

He took a sip of his scotch, and walked over to look out the window.

'You've never heard of us, because we very much like it that way'

He turned, faced Stonesfield and drained the last of his scotch from his glass.

'But I assure you, we have reached out and touched several key individuals, influenced world events and provided answers wherever and whenever they were needed'.

Collisby poured another scotch and took a seat.

'16 years ago the Director of Special Forces kindly agreed to provide us with eight tier one operators, mainly from Hereford, but we do have a few ex-SBS types. Since 2008, 2 have reached retirement and hung up their spurs, and 1

recently turned up dead in the desert outside Dubai. Which brings me to your first task; find his killer and eliminate them'

Stonesfield placed his glass on the table, nodded and fixed his gaze on Collisby.

'How does this work? What framework do we work under?'

I'm glad you asked. We operate in the shadows, but within domestic and international law as far as we can. We sometimes are forced to step outside of that framework if needed, with an executive order signed off by the three signatories. We can make anything go away in the UK, but if you're caught overseas, there are no guarantees; you need to understand and accept that'

'That sounds morally ambiguous, but I have seen firsthand some of the lowlifes still walking the planet because of a lack of will, so I believe I can live with that'

'Good. Any other questions?'

'Yes' said Stonesfield slowly 'talk me through New Ventures Energy'

'New Ventures Energy is a cover for our activities. It is a real oil & gas exploration company and actually turns a profit, which gives us a valid reason to operate in some of the more colourful parts of the world without attracting attention. You will work out of the office here in Pimlico and keep you off the radar. You'll be working for a guy

called Stan, who runs the cadre and will give you the lowdown on New Ventures and the oil & gas sector'

Stonesfield looked at Collisby quizzically *'Stan Butterfield?'*

Collisby laughed *'Yes, I thought you two may be acquainted'*

'Yes he was a staff sergeant on mobility troop when I first joined, and then he disappeared whilst I was in Baghdad with TF Black. I assumed he'd left to work overseas'

'No quite; he came over to us in 2006, just as you have'

'So how does it work, with Hereford and the Army?'

'Stan will guide you on that, but in summary you can maintain contact with friends at Hereford, but it's not really encouraged. By now Colonel Flynn has let G Squadron's OC know you have opted for early termination to take up a job opportunity outside on civvy street. Most of the time there is an incorrect assumption you've gone to work for SIS and people don't push the matter, which we neither correct nor discourage'

Stonesfield nodded.

'You'll be paid £6000 a month, into an account in your new name. Talking of which, we make minor adjustments to names and dates of birth as you've rightly pointed out. Just enough to redirect or stall any online searches or data requests to our own department'

Stonesfield nodded again as there was a knock on the door and a thickset man with a bald head and heavy beard entered, carrying a laptop and a thick sheaf of documents. *'Stonesfield, I heard you were joining us'*

At six foot two, and heavily muscled, Stan cut an intimidating presence made more so by an intense gaze and a scar down his left cheek. The suit he was wearing, and the grey beard had softened him slightly, but the gaze still acted as a warning to those that may be tempted to cross him.

Collisby laughed as Stan and Stonesfield shook hands, and the former handed over the laptop and documents. *'I think that should suffice for now, and I'll leave you in Stan's capable hands. I'll check in with you when you get back from Dubai'*

Stan motioned to Stonesfield for him to follow him, and they adjourned to a nearby coffee bar where they filled two mugs with coffee and took a seat. As they sat, Stan assured him Doreen couldn't hear them, and had no access to the secure office. Apparently she had her own small kitchen and toilet on the other side of the building, and wasn't allowed into the offices due to the commercially sensitive data and contracts with government oil ministries around the world.

'How are you settling in? flat, car and everything ok?'
asked Stan

'Yeah all good. I have a ton of questions mate' replied Stonesfield.

'I imagine so, and I'll answer what I can, but you're booked on the 10pm flight to Dubai so we do need to move things along'.

'Is this to do with the guy that died?' asked Stonesfield

'Matt Baxter, ex B Squadron air troop guy. Remember him?' replied Stan

'Yeah vaguely. Scottish guy with shit tats?'

'The very man. Came to us in 2019 and was tracking down a senior money man for ISIS in Dubai when he disappeared off the radar and later turned up in a wadi full of holes'

'Shit, that's not good. Do we know who?'

'Our best guess is the guy he was looking for. Pakistani national named Salim Khalid Khan, 40 years old, graduated from a madrassa in the tribals, started out with the Taliban, moved on to ISIS and killed several Westerners in Syria before scooting off though Iran' replied Stan, sliding across a folder with a photo paper clipped to the front cover.

'Turned up in Dubai a few weeks ago and we sent Matt Baxter to help him on his way to paradise. We need him flat packed Stonesfield, and quickly. We don't know what information he may have got out of Matt before he died, or if the New Ventures cover is blown'

Stonesfield nodded.

'Right, you're our new exploration manager, which explains why you don't know much about oil & gas, but you're in Dubai for a petroleum conference. You're booked into the Hyatt Regency Deira, and check your emails regularly – there's a copy of your man's picture about to drop into your inbox'

'What about weapons?'

'Let us know what you need. MI6 have a stock which can be cached for you if required, or you can pick up something locally if you can find a contact. At the end of the day Stonesfield, I don't care if you drop a fucking piano on him, but this guy needs to stop breathing, and rapido. This is a damage control exercise, plain and simple'

'Copied'

'Did Collisby give you the speech?'

'He gave me a few, you mean the one about being on my own if the brown solid matter meets the quickly moving fan?'

'Yep. Just so you know' replied Stan *'We usually get the guys home, but it's far from guaranteed'*

'I know the score' replied Stonesfield, as Stan tossed him a passport.

'Here, Martyn with a 'Y', new details included and some legacy stamps for Nigeria and Qatar, major oil & gas

locations and places you can talk about from experience, I take it?’

‘Unfortunately, yes!’

‘Another thing, if you have a drama, you come to me, not the embassy, or MI6 and definitely not Hereford. We have someone else in region, and if needed you go to ground until we can get them in play and link you up –but that’s pulling them off a live op, and last resort type shit, understood?’

‘Got it. This guy seems to have got the drop on Matt, I’m not planning on making the same mistake’

‘Alright, other than that it’s pretty cool here; imagine a shittier version of Jason Bourne without the budget, talent or the script and you get an idea. Armoury through there, IT cell upstairs and we meet in the Marquis of Westminster around the corner every Friday evening if we’re about. If you need any flights, hotels, hire cars or the like booking, give Holly a call’ finished Stan, sliding across a New Ventures Energy business card, followed by a separate stack of cards with Stonesfield’s name on them; ‘Junior Exploration Manager’

He continued chatting with Stan for an hour, before leaving and buying a suit carrier and a small suitcase from a travel shop near Victoria before heading back to the flat. An email from Holly pinged into his inbox with flight details and directions to a valet parking

drop off at Heathrow Airport, and by 6pm he was on the Chiswick flyover heading out of London on the M4.

Having handed over the car to the valet parking, he found the Emirates Business Class check in desk and checked in, slipping through security and making his way to the lounge where he did his best impression of a junior exploration manager by helping himself to a large scotch and furtively grabbing some snacks. As he sipped his scotch, he booted up the MacBook Air Stan and given him, he logged in and checked an empty inbox, before googling 'New Ventures Energy' and finding a swish site with maps of petroleum licences and pictures of oil rigs, workers in high visibility waistcoats and helicopters. However, he was struck by how much imagery and how little actual information was contained on the website.

As the Dubai flight was called, Stonesfield gathered his stuff and left the lounge and headed for the gate. Presenting his passport and boarding card to the young lady at the counter, he was invited to board and headed down the air gate and onto the plane, slipping his briefcase into the overhead locker and sliding into seat 6A.

A flight attendant appeared with a glass of champagne as he settled into his seat, and he reflected how different this was to the cramped C130 he was accustomed to usually, when deploying on operations.

The flight attendant asked if he wanted more champagne, but he shook his head; he needed to look like a junior exploration manager attending his first conference, but he also had work to do when he arrived.

The A380 aircraft was soon rolling heavily down the runway and lifting off into the night sky. As they banked to the South just to the West of Windsor, and reached ten thousand feet the captain switched off the seatbelt sign and Stonesfield adjusted the fold flat bed, pulled on the complimentary eye mask and went to sleep.

Chapter 2 – Introductions

'Ladies and Gentlemen, we have commenced our descent into Dubai International Airport and will have you on the ground in approximately 20 minutes. Dubai is three hours ahead of London and its currently 8.10am local time in Dubai and a rather warm 32 degrees.'

The seven-hour flight had been uneventful and after a few hours' sleep Stonesfield had combed through the emails Stan had sent on Salim Khalid Khan, and the circumstances surrounding the death of Baxter. In his last message to Stan before his death, Baxter had mentioned a lead, a Bangladeshi smuggler called Ahmed Khatun, who he suspected acted as a runner and may well have a location for Khan. Once he had settled in and orientated, Stonesfield would be sure to pay Mr Khatun a visit.

Passing quickly through Immigration and customs, he walked outside into the heat and hailed a cab for the short drive into Deira, a central Dubai district and what passed for an old town in the exploding construction boom. With the air conditioning cooling the taxi, they passed through dusty suburbs, glass fronted skyscrapers and market stalls into a busy thoroughfare.

By 10am he had checked in at the Hyatt, and finding his room, unpacked and was just stepping out of the shower, a little more alert. He drank some water from a bottle in the