

CHAPTER ONE

Nothing brings home a sense of your own mortality like being locked up alone in the dark.

Which was, of course, precisely why they'd done it.

My entire world had shrunk to these four rough-rendered walls. The room was barely the length of the narrow cot that filled one wall and took up almost half the floor space. The bed base was welded to the frame, which itself had been bolted to the floor. There was no window, just a stainless steel toilet in one corner, a small cold-water sink in the other, and a steel door in between with no handle on the inside.

Apart from that, there was just me alone with my thoughts.

Without sight, every sound became amplified. The quiet rustle of my torn shirt as I moved, the creak of the compressed foam that formed my mattress. I could smell my own sweat, the rising odour from the toilet pan, and the musky dampness of stale air conditioning.

The only lighting provision came from spots recessed into

the ceiling and covered by anti-tamper grilles. The switch that controlled them was somewhere on the outside. They'd taken away my watch, so my grasp of time had grown hazy, but there seemed to be no logic to the pattern of my artificial nights and days.

Right now, someone had decided it was night, but maybe they just liked keeping me in the dark. Or maybe they were getting their own back.

I sat on the bed, directly facing the doorway, back to the wall, with my knees hunched up and my bare feet tucked in, staring into the confronting darkness as if searching for answers in the visual static.

I flexed my hands out before me. Although I couldn't see them, the knuckles of my left felt stiff and inflamed. I probably should have iced them. If I'd had any ice.

I probably should have done a lot of things.

I rolled my shoulders, felt the sharp stab in the back of the joint where I hadn't got a decent break-fall in fast enough, the long burn of torn muscles in my forearm and thigh, the tenderness of fresh bruises that were rising just about everywhere. If the fluid puffiness along my cheekbone was anything to go by, I was well on the way to a belting black eye.

But, all in all I was still intact, still together – physically, at least. I told myself it was nothing I hadn't been through before, in one form or another.

But not quite like this.

The resistance-to-interrogation exercises I'd undergone in the army had been just that – exercises. Brutal, frightening, but ultimately little more than visceral make-believe. This was different. There was no instructor with an armband

about to walk in through that door and tell me it was all over, pass or fail.

And the one person who might conceivably have come to my rescue, as he had before, was the last person, right now, I either wanted or expected to see.

You asked for this.

That I couldn't deny. After all, I had gone willingly into the cult calling itself Fourth Day, apparently well briefed and well prepared for what lay behind their walls, except for what I might find inside myself, if I was forced to look deep enough, for long enough.

And Randall Bane was the kind of man who could force you to take that look.

I've come face to face with some pretty scary people in my time. Stone-cold killers. People who would go straight through another human being because it troubled them less than going around. But for Bane, the man behind Fourth Day, I had a feeling that mere surrender was only the beginning of what he wanted from me.

The soundproofing was good enough that I didn't hear them coming. The first indication of company was the metallic slither of the bolt on the outside of the door dragging back, then a bright white spike as the leading edge cracked open and light flared in through the widening gap.

I shut my eyes, brought up a shielding hand to my face, to give myself space as much as anything else. By the time my sight had readjusted enough to see past the shelter of my fingers, Bane himself stood leaning in the doorway.

His arms were folded across his broad chest, smooth-shaven head slightly tilted. His back was to the light so I

couldn't see his face, but I knew by his stance that he was watching me intently.

'Going to lend a hand personally with the softening-up process this time, are you?' I asked lightly, aware of the rawness in my throat. I let my wrists drape over my knees, striving to keep the tension out of my arms. 'Or are you just here to watch?'

Bane gazed at me without emotion. There was no hurry to him, no impatience. Everything in here adjusted its stride to fit with his.

'This was all so unnecessary, Charlie.' His voice was deep, neutral, almost without class or nation, and seemed to fill all the corners of the room.

'Yeah, well, you can't say I didn't warn you.'

'You did,' he allowed. 'And then you put three men in the infirmary.'

But there was no disgust in his voice, no recrimination. His curiosity was almost palpable. If I'd failed to get his attention before, I certainly had it now. I blanked out what I'd had to do in order to achieve that aim.

I shrugged, carefully. 'Maybe I just don't like being manhandled.'

'You don't like letting go of control – on any level,' he corrected. 'That scares you, doesn't it?'

'Don't you think it should?' I countered, striving to match his matter-of-fact tone but only reaching weariness. I let one hand lift briefly and flop again. 'Hey, you're the one who's three men down. You tell me.'

'Perhaps,' he agreed. 'But in your case, you know that if you lose control – of the situation, of yourself – people die. How many is it now? Do you even keep a count anymore?'

Sitting with my back hard up against the blockwork, I felt the moment my heart rate began to climb. *How could he possibly know that – any of that?* I stared at him and said nothing, and Bane nodded as if I'd spoken anyway.

'Ah yes, I know who you are, Charlie. More to the point, I know *what* you are.' His voice was utterly calm. There was nothing in it for me to latch onto, to rail against. It was as if I could feel myself begin to slide down a steep sheer surface into oblivion with nothing to arrest my descent. 'Did you think that story you concocted would hold for long?'

I gave a mirthless laugh. 'Longer than this, clearly.'

'Some things you just can't disguise,' Bane said gently. 'And ordinary young women do not carry the kind of old knife and bullet wounds that you bear without an extraordinary history of violence.'

Apart from the fading jagged scar around my throat, the other reminders etched onto my body of that violent past were all well hidden. Thinking about the circumstances under which Bane might have seen them brought a sudden tightness in my chest, an ache in my hands that fast became active pain. I realised I had them clenched into fists.

Scrabbling for grip, I said, 'I've saved more lives than I've taken, if that makes any difference.'

'Is that how you justify it to yourself?' he murmured. 'How interesting.'

He began to turn away, this audience over. Then he stopped, halfway into the light now, so I could see his brooding expression for the first time. It did little to reassure me.

'Tell me, Charlie, do they haunt you – the faces of the ones you killed?'

I tipped my head back against the wall. ‘Does it matter?’

For a long moment we locked eyes, and there was profound disappointment in his level gaze, like I had let him down. Maybe it was shame that made my face heat. Or maybe not.

‘To you, it should,’ he said at last, finally allowing the steel to brush surface. ‘What do you hope to gain from this attempt to infiltrate our community, Charlie? There is nobody here needs protection from anything – except possibly from you.’ He smiled, a little sadly, and asked in that utterly calm and reasonable voice, ‘Can you suggest one salient reason why I shouldn’t follow my first instincts and rid myself of you at the earliest opportunity?’

I swallowed. Now came the risk, the gamble. ‘You think I’ve come here simply to spy on you?’ I said, keeping it flat, devoid of emotion. ‘Alone and unarmed?’

‘Oh, I think you’ve given a more than adequate demonstration of your...fitness for any such task,’ Bane returned. ‘What other interpretation can I put on your presence here at this time?’

At this time...

‘I’ve told you already,’ I said with a tiredness I didn’t have to fake. ‘I came because I thought you could help me.’ If that was no direct lie, it was as much of the truth as I was prepared to tell him.

‘You will not accept my help because, deep down, you do not want it. All I see in you is rage and sorrow, and without them you have nothing to sustain you.’ The coolly delivered assessment sliced all the deeper for its icy objectivity.

I looked down at my hands, noticed for the first time I

had blood under my nails that didn't seem to be my own.

'It's better than feeling nothing,' I muttered. 'Or, I thought it was.'

'Ah, and now, suddenly, you've had some kind of epiphany,' Bane said with an edge to his voice that, in a lesser man, might have stooped to sarcasm. 'When, exactly, did you reach this desire for such a fundamental change in your life?'

I'd been warned, before I'd gone into Fourth Day, that I'd need a story within a story. I'd expected Bane to break through my primary cover, if not so easily, and I'd considered and rejected a number of options before finally deciding, at the last possible moment, what to tell him. The truth – or a version of it.

I raised my head very slowly.

'When I discovered I was pregnant.'

Smoothly, he stepped forwards, loomed over me and, before I could react, his fingers had brushed down the side of my face, lingering almost delicately at the swollen area under my eye. I flinched, and he caught my chin, his grip deceptively light. I wasn't fooled for a moment, but refused to give him the satisfaction of trying to twist free, of letting him see how badly he frightened me.

He stared straight down into my eyes and stripped my soul bare.

'There,' he murmured eventually, 'that wasn't so hard, was it – that first step?'

I glared back at him until my vision began to shimmer.

He sighed, a quiet outrush of air. 'We'll continue this later, I think. When you've had a little more...time to consider.'

He released me and stepped back into the corridor

outside my cell. I resisted the urge to rub the skin where he'd touched me, but could still feel the imprint of his fingers. He nodded to someone I couldn't see, and the door closed him out with the heavy clang of finality, leaving me in darkness once more.

With no pride left to hold them back, the tears streamed hotly down my face. Because, much as I hated to admit it, what Randall Bane had said was absolutely true. For years I had allowed my anger to drive me forwards, to dictate my thoughts and override my actions. It had brought me inevitably to this point, as if seeking the means of my own destruction. My timing, as always, was impeccable.

Alone again in the dark, I thought a good deal about life and death.

But mainly about death.

CHAPTER TWO

The first time I saw Fourth Day's California stronghold was through a pair of Zeiss ten-power binoculars from a little over six hundred metres out. I was propped on my elbows amid the dusty scrub, feeling the gathered warmth of the earth releasing up slowly into my body.

It was mid afternoon in mid January. Everyone had told me to watch for the chill factor, but I'd just been on assignment in London, where it had been mostly cold and sleeting and miserable. In the current windless fifty-five degrees, I was a basking lizard by comparison.

'How's our target?'

Sean's voice was low, clipped, at my shoulder. He spoke without moving, without even a vibration. There was a preternatural patience about him that made him a master at covert surveillance operations such as this. He could have laid up for days, watching, waiting, if he had to.

'Still in position,' I said. We were taking turns to keep obs and it was easiest to pare our blips of conversation down to emotionless terminology. At least, that's what I told myself.

I scanned across the area in front of us, keeping my movements slow. We were in the south with the sun behind us, where the twin lenses of the binocs would not readily catch and return the light, and where people were less likely to stare long enough to spot us in our careful concealment.

The compound itself was a huddle of squat prefab buildings, rather like construction site Portakabins, clustered around a dusty central courtyard. I assumed that was a defensive layout, although the building walls didn't look able to withstand a hard-kicked football, never mind stronger ordnance.

There was an accommodation block to one side, and a main building with a higher pitch to the roof that I took to be some place of worship. Apart from that, all it needed was a flagpole and it could have been a barracks.

Throughout our observation, there had been activity in the compound. The land was not suitable for large-scale agriculture, but citrus and avocado trees had been planted around the buildings, fanning out into the scrubland beyond. From what we could see, there was also some kind of hand-dyeing fabric thing going on. Rainbows of it hung out to dry, draping listlessly in the still air.

The men and women who formed Fourth Day's membership appeared to share the labour equally, with little regard for traditional male and female roles. And so, in the centre of the compound, on a bench set beneath an ancient juniper tree with a group of children clustered round his feet, sat a man who'd been identified to us as Thomas Witney.

Witney sat slightly hunched forwards, leaning in towards his class, some of whom looked as young as four or five.

His file had listed him as a teacher by profession, probably a good one. He spoke with animation, using his hands to give additional shape and colour to his words. I couldn't help but wonder at the doctrine he was spouting to hold their attention so absolutely.

He wasn't a big man, with a close-shaved head tanned to caramel. He looked so different to the photograph we'd been given that we had initially hesitated over confirming acquisition of our target.

The old picture had showed an altogether thinner, paler man, with a haircut designed to cover his inadequacies, and thick-framed glasses. He'd discarded both somewhere along the way. It was only his prominent Adam's apple that had finally settled his identity.

Now, in khakis and a baggy hand-knitted sweater the colour of old moss, he looked a far cry from the successful vice-principal of an exclusive private school. Before he'd dropped out, gone in, gone under.

Amid all the other activity, I didn't initially clock the girl who came out of one of the buildings with a still-chubby young child balanced on her hip. She was perhaps in her early twenties, small and dark. Her movements had a furtiveness about them, like a feral cat that's consented to domestication but isn't entirely happy to walk in human footsteps.

But Witney caught sight of her the moment she emerged, and I saw his hands falter as his thought process stuttered. A momentary hesitation, then his attention returned to his little al fresco class. But from the stiffness in his back, the sudden self-consciousness in his movements, it was obvious he was minutely aware of her.

The girl jiggled the child as she carried him around the edge of the dusty square, frequently glancing towards Witney. I read nothing but anxiety and distraction in her body language.

‘Report,’ Sean said, reaching for the camera with its telephoto lens.

With a wrench of effort, I closed out the image of the girl and the child. ‘We still have eyes on our target, but he’s surrounded by civilians. Minors,’ I added, just in case that wasn’t enough. I glanced across at Sean’s face, all hard planes and angles. ‘Lucky coincidence, or deliberate defensive position?’

‘Does it matter?’ Sean asked, the last vestiges of his Lancashire accent flattening his vowels. ‘Either way, he’s going to be bloody difficult to extract.’

‘Of course it does. Whereas one is unfortunate, the other means they know we’re coming for him, in which case—’

‘Two Bravos,’ he interrupted as movement flared in my peripheral vision. ‘Inbound. North-east corner. Rifles.’

Still keeping it slow and smooth, I eased the glasses across. Two men had stepped into view between the buildings. One was tall, with skin so black it had a tinge of blue. He was built like an American football player, that impression emphasised by the way he carried himself. The other man was smaller, lighter skinned, with overtones of several races in his Eurasian features, combining to give him a certain regal air. From the way they interacted, the Eurasian was in charge, and it wasn’t just the way they were dressed that set them apart from the other occupants of the compound.

Both men wore desert pattern camouflage, like you’d buy from any outdoorsman store or military surplus supplier for

a weekend's hunting. But the long guns in their hands were not shouldered on their webbing straps, the way returning hunters would carry them, but cradled ready, like a patrol.

'M16s,' I said, and moved up to focus on their faces. 'When the hell did Bane bring in armed guards? Can you get a shot of them?'

Sean already had the viewfinder to his eye, adjusting to compensate for the falling light. The shutter release was set on continuous. It whipped quietly through a rapid series of shots as the men advanced. If they were on any databases, we would ID them.

I panned back and found we weren't the only ones following the progress of the pair. Witney had stopped all pretence at instruction, hands resting limply on his thighs as he watched them pass. In contrast, his spine was tense enough to crack. I felt rather than saw him start to sweat.

The group of children still concentrated on their teacher as the two men walked by. The Eurasian man raised a hand from the stock of his gun in what might have been no more than a friendly wave, a casual salute. Or might not. Witney nodded in jerky reply.

A couple of his pupils also cheerfully returned the wave. The sight of men with unshouldered weapons was obviously so common a sight to the children in this place that it didn't even warrant a second glance from the others.

That alone was enough to chill me to the bone.

I reacquired the girl with the baby. Like Witney, she too had faltered, her gait more uncertain now. Her unease communicated itself to the child who stiffened in her arms and began to struggle. There was a long pause, then a thin high wail reached us.

The two men with the guns halted, both turned almost blindly towards the sound. The big guy took a step in her direction. The girl whirled, hunching over the child as if to hide or protect it, and scurried towards the building from which she'd emerged, with the little figure clutched tightly in her arms. I watched her until she was all the way out of sight, feeling the wrench of isolation as the closing door cut off the child's screeching cries.

'What?'

I glanced across, found Sean watching me with darkened, piercing eyes. I could read nothing in his face.

'There was a possible threat to the woman and the child,' I said, aware of a sudden tension in my shoulders. Aware, too, that it was a thin excuse.

'Maybe those two just don't like the noise,' Sean said, choosing not to call me on it. 'Can't say I blame them for that – it goes right through you.'

I hid the flinch, said quickly, 'It's designed to get your attention, otherwise we'd have all died out by now. I just didn't like the way they looked at her.'

'We're not here to save them all, Charlie,' he said, flat. 'Don't let yourself get sidetracked. Our focus is on Witney. One at a time, OK?'

I didn't respond. We watched in silence as the impromptu class came to an end and Witney led the dozen or so children inside in what seemed unnaturally ordered pairs. Every other class group of kids I'd seen was more like a controlled explosion. I opened my mouth to comment, if only to try and ease the pressure shimmering between us, when the cellphone in my breast pocket began to vibrate. It was all I could do not to gasp at the sudden buzzing against

my ribs. I reached up and tapped the receive button on my wireless earpiece.

‘Fox.’

‘Charlie – sit rep?’ The voice didn’t need to identify itself for me to recognise the cultured New York tones of Parker Armstrong. Sean’s senior partner. My boss.

‘It’s quiet,’ I murmured. ‘We’ve had eyes on the target all day – and much good it’s done us. He hasn’t left the compound and he’s never alone. Looks like Fourth Day have got themselves some additional security.’

‘He’s under guard?’ Parker asked, terse.

‘Not exactly,’ I said dryly. ‘If we’re really unlucky it could be more in the nature of a human shield. Oh, and someone needs to update the guy’s file. Just how old is the picture you showed us?’

There was a pause, an uncharacteristic hesitation, unusual enough for me to pick up on it. ‘Five or six years,’ he said at last, and there was a trace of reluctance in his voice, hardening as he added, ‘It’s what we had available, Charlie.’

Safely unseen, I let my eyebrows climb. Sean caught the gesture and fired me a warning glance of his own.

‘O...K,’ I said, knowing this was not the time to pursue the cons of outdated intel. ‘How long do you want us to sit out here and wait for a slip-up in the security arrangements?’

‘I don’t,’ Parker said dryly. ‘Pull out for now. The rest of the team should be landing shortly. I’ll bring everyone up to speed as soon as you get back.’

He cut the connection without wasting time on goodbyes, which was indicative of urgency, I judged. Parker was nothing if not unfailingly polite.

I glanced to Sean. ‘Right, we’re out of here,’ I said. His only reply was a raised eyebrow of his own. ‘Parker’s promised a briefing.’

‘About time,’ Sean muttered, taking his weight on his elbows and beginning to inch himself backwards out of our makeshift hide.

Even without the binoculars trained directly on the compound, I caught the flash of colour below us and we both froze, ignoring the natural reflex to duck back into cover.

The girl we’d seen with the distressed infant came bursting out of the doorway from the main building, arms windmilling, as though she’d just jerked herself to freedom. Of the child, there was no sign.

She hit the ground running, clenched fists pumping up to full speed, heading straight for our position. Unless she jinked, in less than four hundred metres she’d literally trip right over us.

The reason for her flight was only a couple of seconds behind her. The pair we’d seen with the M16s barged out of the doorway and started in pursuit. No longer armed, the two men were no less menacing empty-handed. And they didn’t waste their breath shouting. They knew she wasn’t going to stop unless they forced her to.

My hand snaked behind me to the SIG P228 that lay concealed in the small of my back, made sure it would glide out of the Kramer inside-the-waistband clip. ‘Sean—’

‘Hold your position,’ he cut in through clenched teeth. And just in case that didn’t dissuade me, he reached over and grasped my arm at the wrist. I tensed under his grip, felt the iron resistance.

This time of year, sunset was around five and the light was dropping fast now, grainy in its descent, smearing the contours of the terrain into deception. Two hundred and fifty metres from us, the girl misjudged her step and went sprawling. A proper face-plant in the dirt. She lay winded for maybe a second, then she was scrabbling onto hands and knees. Small whimpered sounds of fright escaped her as her pursuers gained and pounced. The Eurasian guy, lighter and faster, grabbed her shoulder. The big black guy latched onto her outstretched arm, yanked her upwards.

Automatically, all the right defensive manoeuvres unveiled behind my eyes, a rapidly expanding blur of sound and motion, as if someone had fired up an instant wireless link between us, so that I was right there, inside her head, inside her body.

Physically, we couldn't have been more different. Where she was dark, I was fair. Where she was skin and bone, I'd worked hard to acquire muscle without bulk. There was maybe five or six years between us, but it seemed like a generation in terms of mindset and experience. She had already given in, but I had sworn a long time ago that I would never again submit.

So in my mind's eye I watched my own ghosted image swarm over her and take command.

An elbow into the long thigh muscle of the one who's grabbed my shoulder, dead-legging him. A clenched backfist up into his groin and he falls away. His partner's thinking capture, not containment. The big guy's trying to pull me to my feet. So I let him drag me up, swing me round, ignoring the hold he's got on my arm. He's not got a decent lock on yet. Big mistake.

The instant I'm up far enough to use my feet, I do so, exploiting his own grip for added momentum. A swift, hard, downward stamp to the outside of the knee, hearing the graunch and splinter as the joint collapses.

I shake him loose, and then I'm off and running again. Free, and filled with a fierce, raging pride...

My vision cleared, heart rate slowing. Two hundred and fifty metres away, the girl was still on her knees in the dirt. The men still had her by the arm and shoulder and she'd drooped under the burden of capture. She was weeping, great wracking sobs of wrath and heartbreak. Briefly, I considered another challenge to Sean's restraining hand again but, with a last squeeze, he let go, withdrew.

I turned my head, found him watching me intently. And suddenly that cool gaze angered me. Not just his confidence that I wouldn't do anything to jeopardise our purpose here, but because he was right. If I wasn't professional enough to ignore such distractions, then what was I?

But there were questions here. What was Thomas Witney's connection to the girl, I wondered? Were the guards there to keep people out, or keep people in? And what were they afraid of?

Sean's eyes flicked back to the girl, and her captors. They had her on her feet now, were leading her towards the building she'd so nearly escaped, one on either side. Her keening had reached a pitch where she was almost incoherent with it, losing coordination along with whatever burst of energy had fuelled her failed attempt. They were forced to support her, keep her upright as she stumbled along, pliant, between them.

Just as the three of them reached the doorway, it opened

and a new figure stepped out. Sean had the camera to his eye and I heard him suck in a sharp breath as he recognised the newcomer. It was hard not to.

Parker had shown us pictures of Randall Bane, but they were poor-quality images, snatched perhaps from a moving car, through glass, on the fly. They'd showed a man with a high-domed head, close shaven in the style that his follower, Thomas Witney, seemed to have taken to heart.

But by contrast, the man behind Fourth Day was tall, well over six feet, and fast approaching fifty. The covert photograph had been taken as he walked along a city street with a long stride that flapped the skirts of a well-cut overcoat around his legs. He had been surrounded by people but somehow elevated above them. Command radiated from him like a Roman general.

If I'd been staring at him through the scope of a sniper's rifle, I wouldn't have needed to see his badge of rank to know he was a high-priority kill.

Now, Bane folded his arms almost delicately and waited for the girl to be brought before him. The men let go of her when they were only a couple of metres away. Without their support she dropped straight to her knees, shoulders bowed so the vertebrae of her spine formed a peak at the back of her neck, utterly subjugated.

A cold fear pooled in my belly. I'd seen this pose before, in South America, and the Balkans, and the parts of Africa they don't mention on the wildlife documentaries. When he reached towards her, it took a blinded moment for my mind to recognise that his hands were empty.

Instead of the execution I'd been half-expecting, Bane touched the top of her head, so lightly it was almost a caress.

She lifted her face very slowly, fearful, and then through the magnification of the glasses I saw wonder there, as if she, too, had been expecting a bullet. He said something, only a few words, and let his fingers skim the side of her cheek with a softness that made me shiver.

He spoke again, receiving a downcast nod in reply, then held out his hand to her and there was something vaguely sensual about the gesture.

After the briefest irresolution, the girl put her hand in his, allowed him to help her to her feet, slide his arm around her shoulders. The four of them went back inside the building. The door closed behind them with a faint rattle that was barely audible at our current distance, amid the clicking of the insects all around us, and the rustle of a sudden winding breeze.

Beside me, I heard Sean hiss out a long breath. When I looked back across, it was to see a muscle jumping in the side of his jaw. His head turned slowly to meet my eyes and I put words to what was going through both our minds.

‘Jesus Christ,’ I muttered. ‘Just who the hell *are* these people?’