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Isias Secret

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Chapter 1

My BlackBerry rang as I drove around Parliament Square in pouring rain but I ignored it. If anyone wanted Enda Osin he was not available until he had drunk two cups of tea, especially at six on a dark autumnal morning.

Black clouds threatened a day of half dawn as my car joined a long queue of bright taillights choking up London's city center. The area was an architectural nightmare. Old buildings weathered and covered in grime together with tinted glass obelisks, rose up to create a confused skyline of historic masonry and vacant office blocks. This day they looked forlorn, huddled in blocks sandwiched between hissing city streets. A sea of black umbrellas joggled for space as crowds hurried along the pavements and down dark passages between the buildings. Each was heading for a boring job in some big business or government office in Whitehall.

Up ahead, the lights changed green. I moved forward feeling a little depressed.

Work for me was an office block in Wapping, another developing area of east London and headquarters for the Hart newspaper group. I was late for an appointment with Max and by the time I arrived at my space in the labyrinth of cubicles on the fifth floor there was a note on my desk ordering me upstairs. This meant leaving rows of metal desks sitting on linoleum tiles and rising up above the tenth floor to sink into management's Axminster carpets, soft leather furniture and the aroma of fresh coffee.

I was heading for Hart's suite on the fortieth floor, not that he was there. He was in Seattle for the World Media conference. That didn't mean he wasn't aware of what went on thousands of miles away. I was betting he'd had a call from D.C. or Whitehall. That's why Max had summoned me.

Max wasn't going to pat me on the back. Instead he'd taken the unusual step of inviting me upstairs instead of issuing a summons to his own office. It was because he wanted to shout at me in private. This suggested I might be looking for another job by the time we were through.

I tossed my raincoat over the desk and ran my fingers through wet hair. Brushing some graying black hairs from my shoulder, I made for the elevator that pinged at me all day long. The damn thing was a few yards from my desk and irritated me intensely, especially at lunchtime.

When the elevator arrived it was empty. I took a deep breath and stepped inside. The door closed, leaving me in silence. Bad thoughts and nightmarish dreams started rebounding off the walls of the metal box I had no escape from.

I concentrated on the changing numbers above my head, willing the elevator to speed up. I tried thinking about the previous day's column and all the names Max was bound to call me. After a minute I lost the fight as I always did in enclosed spaces. Loosening my tie, I leaned against the wall and closing my eyes, I heard mother and father shouting. Then the smell from thick acrid smoke engulfed me. I could almost taste it. Relief came with a slight bump, a loud ping accompanied by the hum of the doors sliding open. I stepped out onto the Axminster and sucked in a lungful of roasted

coffee.

An ex-fellow journalist, Gilbert O'Grady, stood to one side waiting to go down. He had a silly grin on his face. He'd been promoted a year earlier and obviously wasn't used to management dress code yet. His creased trousers looked as though they'd been dropped concertina fashion on the floor and stepped into again the following morning.

"Good morning to you, Enda." His grin broadened.

He passed me and stood in the elevator with one hand in a pocket hitching up his pants. His eyes never left me as a nicotine-stained finger stabbed at the button violently, as though hammering a nail into my coffin. I ignored him and straightened my tie. The man made me feel untidy.

It took over a minute to walk to Hart's office and by the time I got there I'd decided how to annoy Ms. Linguard. Ms. Linguard was Hart's first line of defense, a woman who I'd never seen eye to eye with since I greeted her as Ms. Mudguard the first day we met. She never forgave me.

I walked in and smiled nicely. In her mid-forties I guessed, tall with short blonde hair and smartly dressed, Susan Linguard was busy sipping coffee. She sprang from the desk and stood between me and the inner sanctum.

"Well, good morning, Ms. Linguard. I believe the fuehrer is waiting for me in the bunker."

She didn't return the smile. She turned her back on me and opened the door into Hart's office.

"Mr. Enda Osin, Max. Her nose rose an inch. "Max, can you please refrain from smoking in here? You know Mr. Hart doesn't like it."

I didn't wait for her to usher me in. "It's alright Ms. Linguard," I said, making her jump as I brushed lightly past her. "I'll make sure he opens all the windows before I leave - okay?"

She looked me up and down with tightly drawn lips and disappeared back behind the door without slamming it.

I gave Max a limp seig heil salute. "Since when have you been on first name terms with Doris Day?"

"None of your stupid humor, Enda." He paused and stubbed the cigarette out. "I've been given hell over your column. Hart's furious."

I expected he was referring to my column two days previously when I gave vent to a personal opinion and a little name calling over the crash of Amerigo, an American aero manufacturer. I regretted that and guessed I was going to pay the price.

"You mean I didn't stick to writing the truth and nothing but the truth according to Hart?" I glared at him defiantly and stuck both hands deep inside my trouser pockets.

Max was a little bald headed man in his late fifties. A pair of rimless glasses sat precariously on the end of his nose. He always dressed smartly in a casual way, wearing a suit only when necessary and never loosening his tie like many of his contemporaries. A large red nose and ruddy complexion gave one the impression that he drank but he was teetotal. Smart both physically and mentally, Max Edwards had wit but no charm.

"Why can't you remember there are times when you keep your damn mouth shut?" Scowling, he

leaned forward across Hart's antique rosewood desk, spreading both palms flat across its surface as if readying himself to pounce at me.

He'd survived in the industry since starting an apprenticeship in the print shop and there wasn't a lot anyone could tell him, especially the likes of me. He had the ear of anyone with influence within the news media and the City and especially politicians.

He waved me to a chair.

As I sat I crossed my legs and nonchalantly jiggled a scuffed Italian leather toe in the air. I told Max the article on the Amerigo scandal was one of my best stories in a long time. It was controversial, well informed and presented in the style our readers had come to expect.

"Bollocks." His fist hit the desk hard, making me jump. "You called the American President and the Prime Minister a deceptive double act. While one told congress what they wanted to hear about falling unemployment the other convinced parliament they were going to reap millions from the Amerigo project." The cloud of blue smoke above his head thickened as he puffed on another cigarette.

Max had taken a week's vacation and while he was away I slammed the project without worrying about the editor's red pen. His deputy, a long time buddy of mine with over thirty years on the Herald, loved the piece and left it uncut. Less than a year from retirement, neither Max nor Hart were going to fire him. I was a different matter.

"The project was a disaster from the start," I answered.

Max reached for a copy of our newspaper from the desk, his angry blue eyes never leaving mine.

Political advisors had warned their respective governments that the project was high risk. Now Amerigo had folded after taking a billion dollars from the government.

"Where are the new C25 transporters? Nearly five thousand people staring at redundancies."

Max held his hands up as I spoke. "You can't resist going over the top can you? Half the population calls our political leaders names but none of that goes into print, does it?" Let the readers make up their own fucking minds what they think. You don't tell them." He picked the newspaper up, folded at the article, and waved it at me.

"This paper supports the government."

"The owner supports the government."

"Shut up. I haven't finished." Max took a deep breath and coughed before continuing. "Hell, Enda, I don't have to tell you the basics." There was a pregnant pause. I was about to speak when Max spoke again, this time in a low growl. "Hart got a call from the PM. He's on the warpath."

"I."

"Shut it." Max's hand slapped the desk top with a loud thwack. "The White House were in secret negotiations with Panair and a European consortium to take over Amerigo. Your financial forecasts have now stalled the talks. It's about time you were slapped down to size."

His words stung. There wasn't any point arguing with him. He was right. I'd let the pen flow.

With a worsening economic downturn on Wall Street, caused partly by financial bailouts for some members in the European Union and ten percent unemployment at home, President Walker was desperate for a miracle before the presidential election. He promised congress five thousand jobs if they voted in a billion dollars for Amerigo.

My sources in DC and Whitehall were whispering. The company didn't have a chance, despite government orders for the new C25 aircraft.

I knew they didn't.

Auditors had been into Amerigo the previous year and come away shaking their heads. In Britain the Prime Minister told parliament that the joint trade agreement guaranteed two thousand jobs for assembly workers in the midlands and was worth fifty million pounds in the first two years. He didn't say the new fabrication factories would cost taxpayers at least half that amount. I'd called the two leaders the best deceptive double act since Roosevelt and Churchill signed 'Lend-Lease.'

I sat there taking it all in, wanting to say a lot more, annoyed at Hart and the conservative's he sucked up too.

For a moment, we both stared at each other in silence, my eyes never leaving his. Then Max raised both hands and dropped the bombshell. Until I behaved myself, my column was suspended.

"You can thank your lucky stars you still have a job, Enda." He jerked forward, making me jump and slam my mouth shut. "I want you to know I spent over an hour on the phone with Hart telling him to keep you on."

I flinched then sank back into the chair.

"He wanted you out right away." Max waved a hand at the window indicating the way Hart wanted me to go.

The door opened and Ms. Linguard's face appeared around it. "Max, Miss Du...."

"Get out." thundered Max.

The door slammed. I felt a moment of satisfaction. Only a moment, mind. I was too busy grasping at straws.

"Max, I'm sure I could sort things out with Hart. I'll apologize. Maybe I was a little over the top."

"No, absolutely not." Max jumped out of his chair. "You and Hart are like oil and water right now. You'll stay out of his way. You're being reassigned."

I gripped the edge of my chair. "What?"

It's a hell of a drop from columnist to correspondent. I felt sick and angry- very angry.

His words were hitting home and my face must have shown it.

"If you feel that bad about it you can resign. I'm not fucking around. I had to crawl to Whitehall this morning."

"Sorry, Max, I didn't know."

I was sorry for Max. He was stuck on the great divide, walking a tightrope between management and scribes, trying to keep everyone happy. I wasn't sorry about the article though. A lot of honest workers were out of a job because of two politicians.

Max shrugged, picked up a folder and tossed it at me.

"What do you know about Hrisacopolis?"

The name sounded familiar. I opened the folder and saw his face staring up at me. He was into merchant shipping, oil tankers and cruise ships. But what I remembered were the rumors of political corruption. Word had it he was not averse to using a little muscle. He was a supporter of General Grivas and EOKA during the fifties, fighting for Greek sovereignty over Cyprus. There were a lot of Turkish Cypriots who died at his men's hands.

"A nasty piece of work worth billions," I concluded.

Max nodded. "He wants the chairmanship of a new EU agricultural and fisheries committee."

I whistled. "I smell a story."

Max scowled. "You concentrate on the man's philanthropic side. He's offered to transport the Elgin Marbles on one of his ships from London to Athens."

I smiled and slowly shook my head. "That old chestnut."

The British Museum had refused to let the Greeks have the marbles back since the turn of the century. Things came to a head when Greece demanded the stones for an exhibition during the last Olympics. An argument ended in stalemate.

Max updated me. The Prime Minister was negotiating with the Greek Cultural Minister for the marbles' return. They were going home for good but at the moment there were no further details.

He pointed a short stubby finger at me, his face set with that hard look that dared me to argue. Sometimes it was better to keep quiet especially when Max lowered his voice. "Here's your chance to write something nice," he emphasized the word 'nice', letting it hang in the air, "about the Prime Minister. I want a four-part article covering the history of the marbles."

The series had to be a politically correct and authorized version of the Hrisacopolis family history and about the preparations to reinstate the marbles in Athens. The articles were going to run during the month lead-up to the voyage.

Max rose to his feet and walked around the desk, indicating the meeting was over. Patting my back while walking to the door, he said, "I don't want any dirt dragged up or personal opinions, just a nice pullout article for our Sunday supplement. Got it?"

"Yeah sure. Is that all?" I nearly choked. Sunday supplement.

"I've also assigned you a photographer who's a damn fine researcher as well. She specializes in art and antiquities and has already been briefed."

"She?"

Things were looking black. First a Sunday supplement article and now a sidekick. What the hell did I want with a female chaperone?

“Jessica Du Rosse - been working for us freelance for five years.”

The name didn't ring any bells with me.

“She doesn't live out of a suitcase or eat at McDonalds,” he added.

I let the remark go. Max was tired and in a bad mood and I was past caring. I still had a job, albeit second best. With a bit of luck I'd get my column back provided I was a good boy for a while. I thought a diplomatic retreat would be in order and reached for the door.

Max went back to thumbing through a sheaf of notes he was studying when I'd first walked in. Without looking up, he said, “Don't let me down, Enda.”

I opened the door, smiled nicely at Ms. Linguard, and looked back at Max. “Don't forget to open the windows.”

He half smiled and waved me out. “Fuck off, Enda.”

Ms. Linguard wasn't impressed. Neither was the beautiful West Indian with her. Tall and slender with an hourglass figure, she was dressed in a dark mauve cashmere suit that looked as though it had just walked out of an expensive boutique in Paris. The faint hint of gardenias set my pulse racing.

Linguard bared her teeth. “Mr. Osin, this is-”

“Miss du Rosse,” I interrupted.

Jessica smiled and held out a hand. “Enda, nice to meet you. I'm looking forward to working with you.”

We shook hands. “And I you,” I replied. “This is the first time I'm going to share a byline with someone. I need to spell your name correctly, don't I? I don't want to get off on the wrong foot.”

I looked sideways and smiled. “Isn't that right Ms. Linguard?”

Ms. Linguard's face froze and colored from pink to scarlet. I was beginning to feel a lot better.

...excerpt....

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