

Hazy Shade of Winter

Stephen Kemp was walking the dog, Brave, through the thick forest when the first bomb went off. By the time he had returned to the country house he was staying in, boots muddy and dripping nose from the cold, a further nineteen had gone off in major cities across the United Kingdom.

The icy ground crunched underfoot. *We're due snow soon*, Stephen thought, as he reached into his coat pocket for a tissue. *I better not be coming down with a cold*. He could see Brave in the distance sniffing and huffing at a fallen tree.

'Brave! Here boy!' Stephen called, slapping his thigh.

Brave's ear's pricked up and with a final look at whatever was under the tree trunk he bounded back to Stephen.

'Good boy.' Stephen said, rubbing the soft honey-gold fur. 'We better be heading back, now. Mrs Rose would have prepared breakfast for us both and will be cross if it gets cold. You know what she's like.'

Mrs Rose was the housekeeper-slash-cook who came with the country house Stephen was staying in as he recuperated from the wounds he suffered in his last mission. His leg had healed, fortunately the bullet had gone clean-through the thick thigh muscle rather than into the femoral artery a few inches to the side, however he was still having mobility issues with his right arm, barely able to lift it above shoulder height. *More physio today I think*.

As the impressive Edwardian-era country house showed through the bare-leaved trees, Stephen indicated to a panting Brave trotting beside him that he could go and watched the dog race towards the house. *Such a beautiful creature*, Stephen looked wistful. *I'd love to have one again but I'm never home for long enough, it wouldn't be fair*. An image came to him of a young brown-furred puppy with a red bow tied to the collar next to a sparkling Christmas tree and Stephen's parents looking happy and much younger. Stephen smiled at the memory. *In a couple of years, I'll be too old for this work then I'll see*. The smile faded as he saw Mrs Rose rushing out of the house.

'Mr Kemp! Mr Kemp!' She called as she hustled.

'Good morning Mrs Rose, I'm sorry we're late for breakfast... the leg.' He lied, tapping his leg for effect.

'What?' She said as the distance between them closed. 'Haven't you heard?'

Stephen stopped walking and looked at her, her eyes were red rimmed, her usually perfect grey hair was askew, and she was wearing a frilly robe over a modest nightgown.

'Mrs Rose, what's wrong? What's happened?'

'Oh Mr Kemp!' She wailed, 'It's awful, truly awful.' A heavy sob escaped her.

'Mrs Rose.' Stephen said, sternly.

'London has gone!'

'What are you talking about?' But Mrs Rose didn't hear him as she buried her face into his chest.

Stephen guided Mrs Rose back into the house and set her down at the kitchen table. He made her a cup of tea and let her cry it out. He put the tea on the table and asked her what had happened.

'I heard it on the news.' She began, 'The BBC in Manchester said that a large bomb had exploded in London. They then showed footage from someone's mobile of large cloud

above the city. Then the BBC went off the air. I tried the other channels but they're just fuzzy.' With that she started sobbing again.

There were no warning or escalations of tension like there should have been if it was an attack by Russia. Could it have been an accident? Stephen turned on the radio sitting on the counter, it was an old-fashioned model, no DAB stations on this antique, and he twisted the dial to see if he could pick anything up. There was just static on the FM channels, he switched to AM and repeated the process. He found towards the upper end of the scale a message playing. He caught it mid-way through the message and waited for it to repeat.

'This is the National Emergency Broadcasting Service. This country has been attacked with nuclear weapons. Communications have been severely disrupted, and the number of casualties and the extent of the damage are not yet known. We shall bring you further information as soon as possible.'

'Fucking hell,' Stephen said, his face pale and with a quiver to his voice.

The message continued. 'Meanwhile, stay tuned to this wavelength, stay calm and stay in your own house. Remember there is nothing to be gained by trying to get away. By leaving your homes you could be exposing yourself to greater danger. If you leave, you may find yourself without food, without water, without accommodation and without protection. Radioactive fall-out, which follows a nuclear explosion, is many times more dangerous if you are directly exposed to it in the open. Roofs and walls offer substantial protection. The safest place is indoors. We shall be on the air every hour, on the hour. Stay tuned to this wavelength, but switch your radios off now to save your batteries. That is the end of this broadcast.'

Holy hell, Stephen thought, what the fuck are we going to do?

'Mrs Rose... Mrs Rose!' Stephen shouted to wake her from her pity. 'Fill up any container with a lid with water. Bottles, jam jars, anything. Fill up the bath, we'll use that to

flush the toilet. Once you've done that you need to seal up any windows, I'll help you when I return.'

'You're going out? But they said-'

'-I'm going to the village to stock up on supplies, we're in the middle of nowhere, miles away from any major towns so it'll take a while for the fallout to reach us. I'll be back.'

Stephen sped in to the village in the 4X4, there were a lot a people milling about. Shocked faces and tears were widespread. He parked in a disabled bay outside the village's supermarket. He checked his gun's safety was on and slipped it into his jacket pocket. *You can't be too safe.* He left the car and locked it using the remote on the key fob. He grabbed a trolley beside the entrance and entered. There were queues of people at the tills and a lot of shouting. He headed straight to the drinks section and put bottles of water in the trolley, he then collected a number of tinned goods, throwing them in the trolley without looking at the contents. The aisle to the fresh meat was blocked with shoppers so he quickly went round to the household goods sections and grabbed batteries, candles, and tape. He stopped for a second to think of anything else. The house had a good supply of medical supplies so that was ok. *Shit, Brave is going to have to eat.* Stephen went round the aisle and put in as much dried dog food as he could fit. He then retraced his steps wheeling the trolley out of the entrance, avoiding the blocked exit and ignoring the shouts from other shoppers and staff. He loaded the back of the car and got inside.

He was just about to start the vehicle when his satellite phone went off. He took it from the central console and answered it.

'Kemp speaking.' He said.

‘Stephen, its Greg, thank god you’re ok.’

‘Hi, Greg, I’m fine. I’ve just done a little shopping and I’m heading back to the house. What happened?’ Greg Nolan was Stephen’s boss in MI6.

‘A complete-fucking-disaster. As far as we can tell nuclear bombs went off in London, Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds, Glasgow, Cardiff, Liverpool and more... all the biggest cities in the country. Around twenty of them.’

‘Twenty? Fucking hell Greg. Who was it? The Russians? North Korea doesn’t have the range.’

‘There’s been chatter on the internet that it was Iran or an Iran-sponsored terrorist group.’

‘I’ll just put you on speaker so I can get back to the house while we talk. The roads are going to be insane soon, if they’re not already.’ Stephen pressed the speaker button on the phone and put it in the console. He started the engine and quickly pulled out and away.

‘Terrorists? How the fuck did that happen?’

‘We have no idea. We’re still trying to gather credible intel.’

‘Where are you?’ Stephen asked.

‘I’m in France, sorting out the mess you left behind, thank God. I would have been in London otherwise.’

‘So, in effect I saved your life.’ Stephen laughed. ‘I’ll add it to the slate.’

‘Thanks mate. I’m going to go, just wanted to check on you, I’ll keep you updated.’

‘Bye Greg.’ Stephen closed the call and drove through the narrow roads back to the house.

Stephen and Mrs Rose were sitting opposite each other at the kitchen table. Brave was lying on the hard floor beside Stephen, his large brown eyes looking forlornly at Stephen's plate.

'Mr Kemp,' Mrs Rose said, breaking the silence. 'When do you think it'll be ok?' Shadows over her face danced in the flickering candle light.

'It depends on how widespread the fallout gets. It could be a long time before it's safe to leave. I should find out in a day or two.' Stephen looked at his plate. He'd barely eaten the gammon and mash potatoes Mrs Rose had prepared. *Thinking of all those people in the cities all I can taste is ash.* Stephen thought. He placed the plate on the floor.

'Go on boy, at least one of us deserves to enjoy this.'

Brave eagerly ate the food.

'Sorry, Mrs Rose. I don't have an appetite tonight. I think I'll turn in. Goodnight.'

'Goodnight, Mr Kemp.'

Stephen was awoken by the shrill ring of his satellite phone. He answered it groggily.

'Kemp.'

'It's Greg, sorry for waking you but I thought you'd want to know this asap.'

'Give me a sec to clear my head.' Stephen said.

'Sure.'

Stephen put the phone down beside him and slapped his cheeks a little to wake himself up. He blinked a few times then picked up the phone. 'Ok, I'm back.'

'You won't believe this but the bombs were nuclear fizzles. They didn't reach the optimum explosive yield to reach fission. They still caused a massive explosion in each city,

killed a lot of people, disrupted communications and transport, but it could have been a lot worse. Radiation clean-up crews are out there already trying to collect the widespread radioactive material. But it means that there will be no nuclear winter for the UK.'

'Well that's good news, so where I am it's safe to go outside?'

'The Lake District? Yeah you should be fine; the radiation is confined to the surrounding areas around the affected cities. In fact, the other reason for me calling is that we're going to need you to go outside. We have a mission for you.'

'A mission? I better warn you I'm still not 100 percent from Paris.'

'You'll be fine. It's a straight-forward fuck-them-up mission.'

'Who's the target?' Stephen asked cautiously.

'The Iran Supreme Leader, Mahdi Hosseini.' Greg said cheerfully.

'Oh, very straight-forward then.' Stephen replied gravely.

'There's a chopper coming in twenty minutes to take you to Heathrow. Be ready. Oh, Stephen, when you get to Iran kick the shit out Hosseini from me.'

Stephen laughed. 'Will do mate, will do.'

Stephen squinted in the desert heat, the heat shimmering off the asphalt runway in the distance. He was five hundred metres away in the dunes on the far side of the airport. He'd been lying in wait for the past seven hours for Hosseini to arrive, among the sand-flies and scorpions. Hosseini's private jet was due to touch-down in the next ten minutes. Stephen checked his sniper rifle for the hundredth time, brushed some grit and sand from the barrel. He had already dialled in the range of where he estimated the plane would stop. The red carpet, steps and honour guard were a big giveaway. He wasn't operating with a spotter for

this mission so he had to ensure he picked up the target quickly with his scope. He was at a disadvantage that the aeroplane doorway would be facing away from him, towards the airport, but this was really the only place he could be. North or South would put him in line with the runway and he'd be covered in sand and shit from aeroplanes taking off and landing above his head. He'd have to catch Hosseini on the carpet; he was elevated so that would help with the shot if Hosseini was surrounded by bodyguards.

Five minutes. Stephen could see at the end of the red carpet a silver Rolls Royce Phantom park up. The driver got out and opened the rear door so it would be ready for the Supreme Leader. Stephen checked the range to the doorway, the rail-mounted scope on the rifle calculated the distance at five hundred and thirty-five metres. *Well within the rifle's maximum effective range.* Stephen thought. He checked the wind direction by looking at the flags fluttering on the sides of the Phantom's bonnet. He took a drink through a straw from the camelback rucksack he was wearing. *In this heat it was important to stay hydrated.*

Two minutes. Stephen could hear the plane coming; the jet engine could be heard from miles around. Trying to minimise movement he didn't look for it in the sky. He'd see it soon enough. He went over the plan once more in his head. *Hosseini exits the aircraft and goes down the steps. The honour guard salute him. The Iranian ministers meeting him will stop him and shake his hand for his success in carrying out God's work. I may get a clear shot there. He heads down the carpet towards the car. Another opportunity. Hosseini enters the car, the final opportunity, before the door is closed. The tinted windows are probably bulletproof and even if they don't withstand a bullet they will affect its flight making it a lottery. Take the shot, the engine noise will mask or disguise the shot noise. Confirm the kill. Slowly back off down the dune and then head to the jeep hidden in a wadi a mile away. Drive like fuck to the rendezvous point and board the helicopter that'll be waiting for me and get the hell out of Iran.*

Showtime. The aeroplane taxied to the waiting steps, the pilot expertly parking it on the button. The honour guard came to attention. Bodyguards exited the plane first, creating a wall between the guard and the Leader. Stephen had the bottom of the steps in his sights. According to the briefing material Hosseini was one metre sixty-five tall. Stephen raised the barrel the appropriate amount and waited. A cheer went up from the waiting ministers and Hosseini appeared, flanked by three much taller bodyguards. *Fuck, no shot.* They stood both sides side and one behind. Stephen could barely make out the man's black turban. Hosseini started forwards. He reached the ministers and they all bowed their heads in devotion and praise. Then as one man came forward to heap their praise. *A gap, just a two second one, that's all I need. Nothing.*

Hosseini neared the car. He stopped, turned and waved in triumph at the ministers and the guard. A big smile on his face. *Now.* The rifle shuddered into Stephen's shoulder, through the scope he could see a hole appear in the centre of the Supreme Leader's forehead, in slow motion the hole expanded and then exploded in a fine red mist. *Fuck you from Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth and the people of the United Kingdom.*