

STEPHEN MORRIS AND RALF LITTLE

THE GOLDEN GENERATION

PART 4

A NOVEL BY STEPHEN MORRIS AND RALF LITTLE

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PART 5 AVAILABLE 3 SEPTEMBER

PRIVATE INVESTIGATION

26 JUNE 2006, 15:01

“Good morning,” Jack greeted the concierge, who nodded in return. Damn. Jack was attempting a covert operation and had already drawn attention to himself by voluntarily acknowledging a potential witness. His nerves were getting the better of him. Jack had decided to have a quick look around Stefan’s flat. It was the same flat he’d visited the previous evening. A while ago, Stefan had given him a key so Jack could use the resident’s gym whenever he wished.

As he took the lift to the top floor Jack started to feel really guilty about the action he was about to undertake. After all, his friend had entrusted with this key and given it to him as gesture of goodwill. Jack knew his intentions were less than honourable but something was very wrong and he felt sure that the flat would provide some answers.

Jack stepped from the lift and unlocked the front door of Stefan’s place. With the care and precision of a forensic scientist arriving first on the scene of a multiple homicide, he cracked open the door and tiptoed two steps forward. Once inside, he let go of the door and it slammed shut with such force that Jack almost jumped out of his skin.

He stepped into a storage cupboard and closed the door to calm himself, just for a minute. It was pretty much a certainty there was nobody home as Stefan was in Manchester for the day, but his adrenaline was pumping so forcefully he only had room for irrationality his fight or flight instinct swamping any semblance of rationality. Jack cursed the architecture of these new apartment blocks and wondered why every single door in the building shut with the force and authority of a cell door at Penn State.

When he had reached the point that his ears could pick up something other than his own heartbeat, Jack stepped from the cupboard and crept towards the lounge.

SPYING ON YOU, SPYING ON ME

26 JUNE 2006, 15:04

“He is going for the lounge, Lothar,” Stefan called to his brother, who was in the kitchen, making coffee.

Stefan was sitting on a large black leather chair in front of one hundred monitor screens. He could see every room, in every flat he owned, from this leather seat. He had instructed the engineer to design the same system as William Baldwin’s character had used in the movie *Sliver*. Stefan was mildly obsessed with Sharon Stone at the time and it seemed a way to get close to her. It hadn’t worked, of course, but either way it was a fucking good system.

“It’s in the bedroom. He is definitely going to find it.”

Chip was panicking. He sat on the left arm of the leather chair. There was nowhere else to sit in the room - exactly how Stefan wanted it.

“Calm down. If you are going to bring that negative energy in here then you must leave. If he finds it then we deal with it with accordingly. We are watching his every move are we not? We have had his new lady-friend and his group of friends monitored. We are, as they say, ‘on the case’. If he doesn’t find it then we deal with it differently. Fuck this. Why am I explaining myself to you? Just shut the fuck up and watch.”

Stef pressed a button on his remote control and an image of Jack’s face flashed up. He zoomed in closer and closer, until all that was visible in the middle of the huge screen were Jack’s eyes.

“Jack, Jack, Jack,” Stefan said softly to the screen. “We spoke about loyalty, my friend. It is the most important quality in a man, and you are betraying it. Such a shame Jack.”

There was genuine sadness in his voice. It had always been the plan that Jack would be groomed to take over from Lothar who had decided to take a step back to focus on the financial side. That would leave Stefan and Jack to carry out the fieldwork. It looked impossible now, but Stefan and Lothar had never let that stop them before.

WHEN THINGS CAN NEVER BE THE SAME AGAIN

26 JUNE 2006, 15:06

Jack opened a few cupboards in the lounge. There was nothing in them. The flat was almost completely empty. The decks were still there, as were the records, but aside from those items - nothing. He turned and walked out of the lounge. This flat must have been one of the least used. It didn't even have the pictures on the walls hung at perfect right angles, which appeared to be a trademark of the brothers' flats.

Jack walked into the master bedroom. It was empty apart from a Stone Roses CD on the bed. All this risk and no end product.

He pushed open the door to the second bedroom. Same story, except an Oasis CD. *Definitely Maybe* lay on an unmade bed. Jack opened the wardrobe, but it produced nothing. Then just as he turned to leave a glint of metallic silver caught his eye. He walked towards the bed.

Over on the other side of the city three very dangerous men watched his every move in widescreen.

Jack threw the pillows on the floor and looked at what he had revealed. It was a laptop. Jack pushed a key but nothing happened. The screen remained blank. He held a couple of keys down and the screen began to change. A profile began to appear, then a photograph. Jack's legs bucked and his stomach flipped. He stumbled to the corner of the room holding the wall for balance. As he looked at the photograph on the screen, Jack's stomach somersaulted again and he vomited violently.

KEEPING YOUR HEAD WHEN ALL ABOUT YOU ARE LOSING THEIRS

26 JUNE 2006, 15:08

"For fuck's sake, let's go."

Chip was screaming. He had repeated those five words to the brothers six times since Jack had entered the bedroom, each time his voice rising by a decibel. He was now roaring.

"Calm him down, now Lothar, or I will damage him beyond repair."

"Be quiet." Lothar instructed.

"Well, what are we going to do about it?" Chip asked, trying to be softer, calmer.

"We are on it. And when I say *we*, I mean my brother and I. You are staying here."

When Stefan spoke, people listened. And Chip had learned from painful experience to be no exception to that rule.

IN A NEW YORK MINUTE

26 JUNE 2006, 15:10

Jack stumbled through to the kitchen banging into the doorframe on his way through. He felt like he was choking. He ran the tap and took large gulps from his cupped hands. He had been an accessory to the assassination of a major world figure. He could hear the words of the judge, the media, his family, all slowly saying those words individually, then collectively. He put his hands to his ears to stop it, then his stomach contracted again and he gagged, choked, panicked, and threw up in the sink.

“Stef, it’s Graham.” It was a Scottish voice.

Jack raised his head from the sink and could just about see an image flashing up on the intercom screen.

“Fuck,” Jack whispered. If he was expecting visitors, it was almost certain that Stefan would be on his way over.

Self-preservation instincts kicked in, and he realised he had to get out of there, but where to? The concierge knew he had been in and would tell the brothers if asked, and since there were incriminating pools of vomit in various locations throughout the flat, Stefan and Lothar were definitely going to have a few questions. Jack decided to go to the gym. It was the only feasible explanation for his visit. He was wearing shorts and a t-shirt so his outfit was at least believable. He rinsed the vomit from the sink and ran out of the flat, stopping only to close the laptop. His legs felt weak and hollow, but he willed them into some sort of working order knowing he had to get to the gym before he was detected.

He slammed the door shut and bounded down the corridor.

“Floor seven,” an automated voice announced from somewhere within the lift shaft. Linford Christie was often quoted as saying the way to start strongly in a race was to power off ‘on the b of the bang’. The Olympic Gold medallist would have been proud of Jack as the lift doors opened, and he launched himself inwards on the ‘b’ of the ‘bing’, Jack slammed into the mirrored far wall and turned to the keypad. Luckily for Jack the lift was empty. He had not stopped to check. He hadn’t had time. He scrabbled at the ‘close doors’ button desperately. Nothing happened. He pressed the button hard, again and again and again, but the door remained resolutely open.

“Floor seven,” said the same automated voice, but this time it came from the next lift along.

“Bing”.

The noise that moments ago had been so welcome had become a harbinger of doom now that it had emanated from the lift next door. In one final last ditch panic, Jack slammed his fist against the button again. Finally the doors began to close, but so slowly, oh so slowly. The lift door was about a third of the way closed when he heard the sound of the adjacent lift door opening.

“Come on. Come on. Please God, close,” Jack prayed desperately.

The door was nearly there. He could see the outline of a suit, but then nothing. The lift doors had closed just in time and he began his descent to the lower ground floor and the gym.

INSUBORDINATION

26 JUNE 2006, 15:11

“You let him get away,” Chip moaned incredulously.

Chip couldn't understand why Jack was still alive. Killing him was not even sport to an accomplished hit man like Chip.

“Yes, I did.”

Stefan was becoming increasingly irritated by having to explain himself to Chip. He saw it as unnecessary, an irrelevance.

“But why?” Chip whined.

“Because we will find him.”

There was not an ounce of doubt in Lothar's voice. He had remained quiet throughout, being happy to take a back seat and allow Stefan to run things alone. Now, however, he could see that his brother was a second away from breaking Chip's back, and it was time to intervene. He and Stefan were a unit on this one - as always.

“We do not want to kill him. We want to bring him round. We have invested considerably in Jack and killing him off would be bad business practice. Be quiet Chip. We will find him. And we will be successful.”

“You better,” responded Chip; without thinking.

He bit down hard on his tongue but it was too late. The words were out there and travelling. Stefan and Lothar turned slowly and steadily, both gazing at him thoughtfully, as though seeing him for the first time. Chip realised it was now last orders at the Last Chance Saloon and he was being circled by the doormen. He knew it was time to lift his

pint glass, down his drink and get his coat. Survival instincts chiming, he shrunk back in his seat and closed his mouth tightly.

Still the brothers continued to stare at him.

AS IF EXERCISE ISN'T BAD ENOUGH ALREADY

26 JUNE 2006, 15:20

Jack tried to focus on the screen in front of him. Shakira shook her svelte body at him and assured him that her hips were always truthful, but Jack barely noticed the image. He was panicking. Had he been seen? The more he tried to distract himself with the hip-shaking gyrations of the small blonde; the more he thought about his own impending capture. And as surreal as it sounded - his death. Images he had seen on the laptop swam around and around his head - the lifeless ambassador sprawled almost comically on the concrete floor with news cameras everywhere.

He held the handles of the exercise bike tightly. The sensor had kicked in informing him his heartbeat had reached 190 despite Jack only pedaling gently. The large guy next to him - bright red and sweating buckets - would have been shocked to see that his heart rate was twenty beats lower than Jack's.

Jack grabbed the headphones that swung from the exercise bike and placed them over his ears. He didn't want to hear his heartbeat any longer.

"From Paris to Berlin..."

The image on the screen had changed, as had the song, though Jack was too distracted to listen to it with his usual disdain. How many more people had Chip killed? Was he an

international assassin? Jack was a normal working class boy from Liverpool who was apparently intricately associated with a hit-man. A murderer. How the hell had this happened? Questions and more questions thumped through his skull, exacerbated by the repetitive and infuriating song.

Jack's heart rate increased even further. He looked to his left to see if the exhausted gent had noticed the little screen displaying evidence of an inordinately stressed heart. He had left. Jack was alone in the gym. He was relieved to be alone as he no longer had to worry about behaving erratically under his stress. His only worry now was simply staying alive.

Surely the guy in the lift, whoever he was, would have caught up with him by now. Jack took his mobile phone from his shorts' pocket to check the time. He had been in the gym for over twenty minutes. He was safe now, wasn't he? It would not have taken a crack assassin this long to find an everyday Joe Schmo like Jack. Was the guy an assassin? He could have been anything, in truth. It was possible that Jack was hiding from a book-club representative, or a Jehovah's Witness. (Although, in Jack's opinion, hiding from a Jehovah's Witness was still a key feature of his survival instinct.)

The fact was Jack had no idea who the guy was, but he thought it safe to assume the worst. Chip was a dangerous man, so it was fair to assume that the brothers' other friends could be equally unsavoury. Jack considered whether he was still accurate to say he was an everyday Joe Schmo and began to wonder how many everyday Joe Schmos had caused the death of a world diplomat and ambassador. Probably not very many.

His heart rate was spiking again as his thoughts began to run away with him. Desperately, he forced himself to calm down. Gradually his heart rate began to lower, he

started to breathe more deeply, and his thoughts cleared a little. There was still no sign of anyone in the gym. It was possible, just possible, that he was going to be alright. Then suddenly, he felt a sharp pain on the back of his head, and then nothing.

As he fell from the seat onto the floor, blood poured from the back of his skull and splashed onto the screen, the bike seat and then the floor. The heart rate monitor flashed a new figure: 0.

COMING ROUND

26 JUNE 2006, 15:41

“Wake up, Jack. Now.”

“Do you think he is dead?” Stefan asked his brother.

“You have just told me he has a pulse,” Lothar retorted sardonically.

“Yes. But he is certainly acting like a dead person. And it was a pretty hard hit you gave him. That Louisville Slugger hadn't been touched and now it's completely ruined.”

“He is not dead. He's moving. Look.”

Jack had indeed started to move. He groaned and his right arm twitched a little, as though it was experiencing its own personal electric shock. The brothers had dragged him into the sauna, and as he now lay sprawled on the floor, Jack's eyelids fluttered and he let out an odd, wailing moan as he tried in vain to raise the rest of his body.

“Wake him up properly. He's no good to us like that,” Lothar instructed his brother.

Stef picked up the metallic silver jug of water and poured the entire contents over Jack's head.

“Huggghhh,” Jack grunted as the water seared through the deep gash in the back of his head.

“Huugggghh,” he grunted again.

Jack's arms began to move more forcefully now. It seemed his brain was now engaging them rather than just his reflexes.

“Lift him up Stef.”

Stefan picked Jack up and sat him down on the bench. Jack's head drooped forward like a lolling drunk and he looked, at any moment, as if he would collapse.

“Fill that jug up again.”

Stefan ran from the sauna as Lothar held Jack's head back and his body upright. Jack's eyes rolled around in his head like the eyes of a cheap doll.

Stef returned, closed the door and tossed the freezing cold water from the plunge pool over Jack's head. It drenched his vest and shorts, and his eyes began to focus. Jack tossed his head about, his hair throwing water everywhere.

Lothar still held him tightly.

“Jack, are you with us now?” he asked softly.

His bedside manner was clearly better than his exercise bike-side manner.

“Wake up you little Fredo,” Stef screamed.

“Huggghhhh” Jack groaned again. Lothar looked at his younger brother and saw again the signs that Stefan's patience was not far from worn through.

He turned to Jack again. “Jack, my friend. Wake up. Before I let my brother wake you up.”

Jack felt as though he was surfacing from a black ocean. He was only dimly self-aware and all he could tell beyond the certainty of his own existence was that his eyes were hopelessly blurred and he felt overly warm and desperately thirsty.

“Wtr... Wr... water. Water,” Jack whispered hoarsely to the world in general. Stefan looked ready to explode with fury, but Lothar held up a restraining hand. Under normal circumstances, Jack’s lack of fear or concern for his situation would have been a terrible mark of disrespect, but Lothar was calm enough to realise that, at this point, Jack had no idea even *who* he was, let alone *where* he was. Certainly, Jack had no idea who he was with. Lothar nodded to Stefan. “Get him some water.”

Stefan left the sauna, once again carrying the empty jug. As he returned, he passed it to Lothar who began pouring it into Jack's mouth. Jack drank from the jug greedily, purely by animal instinct. Every mouthful was gratefully received by his damaged and dehydrated body, and as his sore, arid throat was soothed, he started back on the journey towards being *compos mentis* again. Stefan and Lothar looked on, patient now, knowing that for the next few minutes of Jack’s life, words were still impossible. They didn’t mind. He wasn’t going anywhere. They would wait.

A NEW WORLD ORDER

26 JUNE 2006, 15:43

Ten minutes later Jack sat with his back against the wall of the sauna, opposite a stern-faced Lothar and an equally mean-looking Stefan. Neither of their faces portrayed even the slightest hint of friendliness.

Jack had eventually come to, but it had taken him a moment to remember the events that had led him to his current predicament. The brothers had watched him recover, and then recoil with recollection, without saying a word. Jack looked straight into Lothar's eyes but then something that had been nagging at his attention finally stomped stropily forward and made itself known. Lothar was naked. He looked to his left - so was Stefan. In his current state Jack could not have been more confused. It sort of made sense they would be naked in a sauna, but not under these circumstances. Surely you don't need to don your birthday suit to kill somebody. Maybe that was how they got their kicks, Jack considered. He didn't like where his thoughts were taking him. Plus he was amazed to find he was slightly annoyed that both of them had huge penises. This realisation was immediately followed by a further discomfort of where his thoughts were taking him. Still in shock, he uttered the first words spoken in the last eleven minutes and four seconds.

“Which one of you hit me?” Jack said.

He didn't care. What difference did it make? So why did he ask it? Well, anything to take his mind away from the thought he was about to be buggered and butchered. In that order.

“What difference does it make?”

Fair enough, thought Jack. It was nice to know they were at least on the same wavelength in certain respects.

“None,” he conceded.

“Well, do not fucking ask it then,” Lothar said. “You have a limited time frame in which to ask questions Jack. I suggest you do not waste it on unimportant ones.”

Jack gathered his thoughts with more clarity.

“Okay then. It doesn't matter which one of you hit me. Why did you hit me?”

Jack knew the answer to this too. Presumably, the brothers had known he had been snooping around their apartment and had discovered they were... what? He didn't know exactly, but at the least, they were dangerous men.

"Because you broke into our apartment."

This conversation was developing at a snail's pace. All three parties were aware of the same information. There was no point in using any icebreakers here, especially when the skull-breaker had already been administered.

Pragmatism dictated that Lothar remained icy calm, if only to be able to stem the fury that threatened to erupt from his brother at any moment. In truth, though, Lothar's blood was also boiling with frustration. He always liked to think of himself as a character in a movie, and Christian Slater did not discuss the weather and what the traffic was like on the way in. Lothar liked his rhetoric to sparkle and fizz. This was maddeningly limp and lifeless. Perhaps Jack needed some coercion. He nodded at Stefan.

"Good, I have had enough of this." Stefan spat at Jack, grabbing his head and forcing his thumb into the still open wound on his scalp.

Jack screamed as Lothar continued.

"You found a laptop. You know that we arranged for the ambassador to be killed. You know that Chip did it. You know that you are implicated because you gave the order to Chip. So let us use this as our starting point, and proceed like gentlemen. Yes?"

Stefan released Jack on cue and sat back quickly causing his penis to jump up and slap loudly against his stomach.

Through the agony, Jack had to suppress a hysterical giggle. Stefan had clearly just played the tough guy but his sizable appendage had completely ruined the moment for him.

"Are you smiling, Jack?"

Stefan's question had the quietly threatening ring of an old-fashioned schoolmaster whose patience had just run out. Pretty soon, Jack felt he would be asked to share his

thoughts with the entire class. Lothar silenced Stefan with a look and leaned towards Jack.

“Do you realise all the major governments in the world and their intelligence agencies could have been looking for you since last Saturday?”

Jack did realise it all too well. It was what had caused his spontaneous vomiting in the flat and his stomach flipped once more, but it was over-ridden by a surge of adrenaline that pumped around him. He was probably going to die, that much was fair enough, but he could at least have a bit of dignity in his response. This wasn't his fault. It was their fault.

“Yes, I fucking do know that. And I also know that I knew nothing about it. I gave him an envelope that's it, and I'm sure the authorities are more likely to believe me when I tell them. In fact, I'm off right now. We'll have it out at the station.”

Jack stood to go. He knew he wouldn't get very far. Lothar didn't even flinch as Stefan quickly pushed him back down with a grin. Jack's face and chest were now bright red and bathed in sweat.

“There really is not any point threatening us. We have been here before. You are, as they say, fucked. We have you on audiotape discussing how you planned to kill the ambassador, and we have captured you on video in the same room the shot was fired. You have one and a half million pounds sterling sitting in your bank account wired in from Geneva, and you have the tiniest traces of gunpowder on your jeans. If we chose to, we could sign, seal and deliver you in the next five minutes. Would you still like to, what was the expression... ‘Have it out at the station’?”

Jack felt like asking how they had done all this, but he knew it was a waste of time. Even if they had told him, it was likely he still wouldn't understand. He was essentially a technophobe. Most technology in the past five years had passed him by. He wasn't even on MySpace for God's sakes. Setting him up the way the boys had was probably child's play nowadays, but he would never know. Jack knew that voice manipulation went back

to the days of *Tango and Cash* so it was probably elementary nowadays. Jack had never thought that film could have caused him any more torture than the act of having to sit through it, but it seemed it had. He put his head in his hands.

“Jack. We own you now. There is no way out. You are defeated. You are fucked. Do you understand this?”

He needed only to look at the distraught boy - his bloody t-shirt hanging from his sweat-laden shoulders; hands running backwards and forwards through his sopping wet hair - to know the answer.

“Yes,” he muttered. “Yes. Yes. Yes. I do.”

Jack stood and began to scream at Lothar.

“And you've fucked me. You. You.”

Jack's finger pointed straight at Lothar's nose, inches away from connecting. Saliva collected at the corner of his mouth and hot tears burned his eyes as he spewed forth the hatred that burned within him.

“You've done this to me. You've ruined my life. You bastards,” he roared through a wet mask of tears and snot, a broken man, the last vestiges of dignity shattered. Exhausted by his outburst, he sat back down again, head in hands, and sobbed. Great shudders racked through his body and the hopelessness and injustice engulfed him. If there was one figure, one sight to define abject misery, then Jack was it.

Lothar, however, remained impassive. His facial expression did not move one iota. He stared straight back at his would be aggressor. This was more like it. Now he could get into character. His fellow performers had finally started to play their roles.

“Finish weeping Jack, it will not help you now, I have seen it before, more times than you could possibly imagine. Finish weeping, and listen carefully. Yes, you are fucked indeed, but you are also not. You have two roads open to you. When we open that sauna door, consider yourself at a crossroads. You can take the left-hand fork and run straight to the authorities if you wish, but make no mistake, you will be met with the full force of

our retribution. We will release the tapes to our friends in the media, police force and the government. We will unleash the wolves upon you, and they are even more aggressive when they land at your feet. Jack, you will be banged to rights before you even have the right to remain silent.

On the other hand, you can take the right-hand fork, and come to work for us. No, not for us, *with* us, Jack. We like you. We think you have what it takes. Do you think for a minute that this has all been an accident? Since the night we recruited you, every experience you have had has been meticulously planned and monitored. We want you to be second-in-command to the two of us. We will groom you, and train you, and eventually, you will take over from me. I will take a more operational role and get out of field operations. Take a back seat, as you English say. You and Steffi will work together going forward.”

Stefan leaned towards Jack. “Oh, and Jack, you know the cars, the women, the flats, the foreign travel, the exclusive restaurants? It’s all fucking yours if you want it.”

Lothar smiled. Stefan’s manner of speech was somewhat cruder than his own, but he knew how to make a point.

“So, Jack, before you reach the cross-roads... any questions?”

WELL, WHAT ELSE CAN YOU ASK?

26 JUNE 2006, 15:50

Nothing in Jack’s life had prepared him for this conversation. He had no idea what to do or say. At this point, the best bet what to find out what he could so he could fully weigh up his options. That said he didn't realistically see that he had any options.

“So what exactly do you do?”

“Whatever somebody, or some party, with enough money wants us to do,” Stefan replied.

“Assassins?” Jack asked.

“Yes,” said Lothar. Jack had suspected as much but was still taken aback by the frankness of the reply. It was such a huge thing that he again felt an almost hysterical urge to laugh. It just sounded so ludicrous. But, he knew, it was more real than anything he had encountered before. Feeling foolish, but knowing he had to ask again, he stared back into the Dane’s eyes.

“Really assassins?” he said.

Lothar smiled. “Yes. If you like. But we are much more than that Jack. We do not just perform assassinations. We will do anything as long as the price is right. We can accommodate kidnapping, high-value thefts, whatever the market demands.”

“And you work for governments?”

“Very good Jack, yes. Predominantly governments. They have the money, certainly, but sometimes we do highly paid favours for big corporations. Although typically, corporate jobs do not involve the, shall we say, disappearance of people. And of course the jobs are very lucrative.”

“It’s all About the Benjamins,” Stefan chipped in.

Lothar looked slightly pained.

“Yes, thank you Stefan. Who could have said it better than Puff Daddy? Indeed.”

Jack wasn’t listening; he wanted to continue the conversation.

“So you’re mercenaries then.”

“Yes. And no. Strictly speaking, mercenaries are soldiers for hire. We are so much more than mere soldiers. Call us... facilitators. We make things happen. And we truly are specialists.”

Jack was amazed. He had to admit, this conversation was morbidly fascinating, and yes, even glamorous, perhaps it wasn't so bad to be a, what was it... facilitator? The thought left him as suddenly as it arrived. He was disgusted with himself for being seduced by fancy wording that attempted to describe something so reprehensible.

“Facilitators are you? You know, I thought you guys were fluent in English, but there's obviously been some sort of confusion. A 'facilitator' is not defined as cold-hearted, murdering fucking scum.”

The brothers were emotionless.

“These sorts of things only last so long.” Jack continued, filling the silence. “You'll be caught. Evil never triumphs. How can you work and kill for despotic, evil tyrants?”

Jack had been aggressive and Lothar's face finally betrayed some expression. It wasn't the look of anger that Jack had been expecting. Instead, smiling, condescending, utter disbelief.

“You have to be joking. Please tell me, Jack, that I haven't chosen to groom somebody that would utter a comment of such ridiculous naivety.”

“Fuck you Lothar. Don't patronize me. It's evil. It's wicked. It's immoral. What else is there to say about it?” Jack asked.

“It is democracy and it is world politics. The world cannot run on your left-leaning ideals, Jack. There are too many contradictions. Unfortunately, as much as George Bush would like it to, the world does not fit snugly into little compartments of good and evil. This week's terrorist is next month's statesman as they say, Jack. And believe me, could we give you some examples of that happening in a literal, not metaphorical sense.”

“That's not to say it's ever right to kill people,” said Jack in a little voice.

Jack's rage had ebbed away. His brief moment of defiance had ended as the adrenalin surge had drained from his body. He was lost, confused and he had no idea which way was up or down, left or right. Wrong or right were the last things left to cling to.

Lothar looked at Jack and began to address him using a slow, considered tone.

“Not right to kill people? Are you sure Jack? If we killed Bin Laden for a few pounds you wouldn't say that - or Saddam Hussein. But once they were both on the side of the righteous. Your perfect, fighting-for-good, governments backed them once, Jack. Remember that? And what about the CIA in Nicaragua? Who was fighting on the side of good there? For God's sake Jack, even John Rambo fought with the Mujhadeen. There are no 'good' world leaders, fighting for peace and justice for all – despite what you may think. There are just people. Trust us. We have met with the top men. They are all out for their own interests. They want money and power and status, but above all they want to be re-elected - without that, they have nothing. So to be re-elected they will do anything and everything, whatever it takes - including calling upon people like us. We don't pretend to be fighting for good, Jack. At the cutting edge of human politics on any real scale, the lines between 'good' and 'evil' are hopelessly blurred anyway. We don't take sides, we don't concern ourselves with rights and wrongs, we are, in fact entirely objective. We simply work for whoever is willing to pay us the right price. There is a certain purity to it, a certain honesty. We may kill people, but at least we don't tell them it's for their own good.”

Stefan was still impatient and Jack's lack of understanding was infuriating him further. He jumped in to support his brother.

“Listen to me. We know about these things. We do not spout clichés about fairness and justice. We do not support any government apart from when they are paying us. We back each other and our associates. The family.”

Jack could feel himself being swayed. It was convincing. It was a long time since he had believed that world leaders fought for just causes. He knew that couldn't be the case;

otherwise there would be no war. No death. No innocent children slaughtered. It was true that one man's terrorist was another man's freedom fighter, and equally true that in a complex world of historic ill feeling, religious fervour, hatred, starvation, death, and friendly fire, the only thing that really talked, the one thing that could unfailingly be found at the root of every aspect of human political interaction... was money. It was all true. So why not be outside the system? Why not be the tools of corruption, making no judgements but simply facing the harsh reality that someone has to do it, so it might as well be you – at profit?

Why not? Because at least he could stand there on Doomsday without blood on his own hands. There was a big difference between rolling your eyes and tutting ineffectually on the periphery of the machinations of the world's superpowers, and getting directly involved in the slaughter of the murderous merry-go-round. Jack could see this as it was, no conclusion, no end, just more and more death. And Stefan and Lothar were running the ride, or at least oiling the gears. Plus, there was something else he didn't understand.

“OK. So why me?”

Lothar smiled. “Because you tick all the boxes,” he replied. “You're smart, you're witty, you're okay-looking, women respond to you and, crucially, you look good next to us. Basically, you're *suitable*.”

“Oh,” responded Jack not knowing what else to say. It was odd, but even though his current captors were despicable in the extreme, it was still a little disappointing to receive such lukewarm sentiment.

His next question was yet more specific.

“Okay, so, what exactly do you *need* me for?”

The second Jack asked this question, all three knew he was a beaten man. Strictly speaking of course, the brothers had never doubted that he would bend to their will, but Jack had not realised until now that there was no fight left in him. The bottom line was, he saw no way out.

“Jack. It comes down to this: are you in?”

A simple three-word question, yet with more weight than anything he had been asked before.

“I don't know,” Jack thought.

“I don't know,” he said.

“What choice do you have? Nobody wants to hear what you have to say. We are so knee-deep in the horrible shit, treachery and murder that goes on in this world, Jack, that nobody will want us to talk about the things we have done and seen, and the people that have paid us to do it. Nobody will want to listen to you.”

Of all the reasons Jack had been considering to take the easy route this was the one that he just couldn't dispute. His instincts were telling him that he had no choice at all, but he couldn't explain why. But Lothar had, rather succinctly. Jack knew it was true. Why would any government want to listen to him? Far better to blame him and save any scandal. He would just be another statistic.

Jack considered the numbers of people who die daily, mere cogs as the world is pushed around on its axis by the powerful. What was one more person? What was he in the great scheme of things? Nobody. No-one. Nothing.

“I guess I'm in,” he choked.

THE SPIRAL DOWN FURTHER

26 JUNE 2006, 16:36

The boys were sat in the lounge of Stefan's flat. Chip, from his vantage point on the other side of town, looked on via the TV monitors relieved that the boy had obviously been placated. How the brothers had done it he had no idea. It was damned impressive that they had.

"To the three of us." Lothar raised the toast.

Jack didn't speak, just raised his glass in resignation.

Stefan sat beside him. He put his arm around his shoulder.

"What we said to you in the sauna, it is all true. You will come to realise that. Without us doing what we do, nothing would change. Somebody else would just slip into our place. We may as well make money, or somebody else will. Do not worry my friend. You will see."

"How bad does it get? Have you ever worked for Islamic fundamentalist groups?" asked Jack.

"Yes, but why is that any worse?"

Jack's tried to think of a reason. Hundreds came screaming to the forefront of his mind but burned up instantly in the blowtorch of the brothers' flawless logic. It was true. The same phrase swam agan into his mind, 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter.'

"Death is death, my friend. Besides, they are the easiest jobs. Who is going to suspect Lothar when he pulls up in his Ferrari? Or, when they are going through the CCTV

footage, who would even bat an eye at me in my suit tapping away on my BlackBerry? I am just answering important work e-mails, am I not? No, that is the trigger. They love using us because we are above suspicion.”

“Well, what's next? What is the next operation?”

Jack could scarcely believe his own words. He feared the worst.

He got it.

“Our biggest operation yet. You have come in at just the right time my friend. We will understand if you want to stay in the background on this one. You can do as little, or as much, as you like. Either way, you will be rewarded very, very handsomely. But if you do get fully involved, the sum you will receive will be beyond your wildest imaginings. Put it this way, everything that we own, you will be able to own yourself, just from this one job. Big, big money my friend. A yacht, luxury property all around the world, Ferraris, Bentleys, Lamborghinis, the most exquisite women on the planet. All yours. The City will be yours. Fuck, the *world* will be yours.”

And like that, Stefan turned the decks on and Jay Z's *City is Mine* played all over again. How things had changed since the last time he'd listened to this track with his two new pals – how he wished he could turn back the clock.

“Are we showing him the plan, Lothar?” Stefan questioned.

“All in good time my brother, all in good time. First we feast.”

With that, Stefan produced what looked like a jewellery box, encrusted in huge sparkling diamonds.

“A gift from one of our employers,” remarked Stef rotating the box, which glinted as it caught the light overhead.

He opened the box.

“This is a gift from another one of our employers,” Stef laughed as he revealed the contents inside.

It was almost overflowing with cocaine. The Danes had said that they didn't touch it. Hardly the most serious of the many lies and contradictions Jack had uncovered in the recent past, but another betrayal and a reminder to Jack of how easily he had allowed himself to be taken in.

Stefan handed the box to Jack. The last vestiges of his principles now withered and dying, Jack didn't even bother to remove the cocaine from the jewellery box. He thrust his left nostril in and snorted forcefully, before repeating the same routine with his right nostril. He was glad that his first time snorting the drug had made his eyes water, as it meant that Stefan and Lothar would not notice the fat, hot tears that would roll down his cheek.

WHEN YOU CAN'T EVEN SPELL MORALS

26 JUNE 2006, 21:11

Jack looked around the room but still couldn't focus. Stefan was on the decks mixing something, he didn't know what, but he looked like he was lying on the floor. A bottle of champagne hung precariously from Jack's right hand - a goofy grin fixed on his face. He had decided sometime earlier if he was going to sell his soul to the devil, he was going to screw the bastard for every ounce of flesh he could get.

"Ready to see the operation, my brother?" Lothar asked Jack who had become a *brother* to Stefan and Lothar twenty minutes earlier during a bizarre initiation ceremony. They had each snorted a line of cocaine, drenched in champagne and a drop of each other's blood. Jack knew he must have been beyond smashed to do it. For somebody so queasy, it was incredible he had managed to stay conscious.

“Go on then,” Jack slurred.

He really had not been this inebriated in his entire life, even when he factored in his pre-pubescent experimentation with White Lightning and Mad Dog 20/20. The effect of tonight's consumption on his much more sizeable frame was twenty times worse.

“Here it is,” Stefan said, producing a board mounted on a frame.

Jack couldn't focus. He tried to, but it was nigh on impossible. There were pictures and words, but none that Jack could make out in his pissed state.

“Do you know what that is?”

“No,” Jack half laughed.

“It's the new Wembley stadium.”

“Oh right. So what?”

“We're going to blow it up.”

It was as if ten thousand tonnes of coffee had been injected through Jack's breastplate and straight into his heart. He had sobered up instantaneously. He jumped off the sofa.

“What?” he shouted.

“We are going to blow it up, Jack, my friend, my brother. Our client has paid us an obscene amount of money to raze the fucking thing to the ground.”

“What?”

Jack hadn't meant to ask that. His brain was not firing on all cylinders.

“I mean, when?”

The better question was probably, “why?”

“On Saturday. One stand is fully functional and they are erecting a big screen for the public to watch the England versus Portugal game. We were going to wait till the final,

but as it looks like your useless national team may be going out at this stage, we cannot risk waiting any longer. We are going to blow the thing to bits and take every person in there with it.”

Not for the first time that day, Jack emptied the entire contents of his stomach all over the brothers' flat. Whether it would have happened anyway - given the foreign and potent substances he had been pouring into his orifices that evening - Jack did not know, but he did know with absolute certainty that the massacre of more than twenty thousand British citizens had triggered the latest vomiting attack.

“It's always tough breaking their hymen, isn't it Steffi?” Lothar laughed to his brother, who acknowledged it with a smile, a one-fingered salute and a quick spin of a record to change the track.

Jack's stomach was exhausted. It had nothing left to give. He fell from his crouched position, hit the floor and passed out.

TRUST IN THE FAMILY

26 JUNE 2006, 23:04

“He is obviously not going to wake up is he?” Stefan asked.

“I do not think so. He hit it pretty hard tonight. Let's let him sleep it off. Shall we head out to pick up a couple of girls?”

“And leave him here?” questioned Stefan incredulously.

“Of course. He is not going anywhere, is he? I think he understands now, and he is 90 per cent with us, I would say. We shall not know about that extra 10 per cent until he

does a job with us, and gets over the shock - or until he gets his first pay cheque. Now we must leave him to consider. Steffi, if he is not voluntarily one hundred percent with us, then he will always be against us. We shall go out and give him a day to mull things over.”

“But we cannot take that risk Loth,” insisted Stefan.

“Steffi, my brother, my closest friend, what do you want to do? We cannot follow him around forever. If he is going to be one of us we have to let him make that choice. If he chooses to be against us then he will be dealt with. Besides, I am not totally certain he is with us on the plan, but I am certain he knows that running to the police is not an option open to him.”

“Are you sure Lothar?”

“Certain,” answered Lothar with his typical assuredness.

“Good enough for me. Let's go and fuck something.”

Stefan grabbed his jacket and they began to walk out of the lounge.

As Lothar went to turn off the light switch he called to his brother, “Just a minute.”

Stefan stopped and Lothar ran over to Jack, put a couple of cushions behind his head to keep him on his side and made sure his mouth was dribbling safely onto the floor. Then he clipped a tiny piece of metal onto the back of his vest.

“We would not want our new boy dying on us, would we now?”

“We would not.”

Stefan switched off the lights and they left the flat.

Jack lay comatose in the darkness. His dreams were dark and disturbing, but nothing compared to what would await him when he woke up.

THE AWAKENING, IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE

27 JUNE 2006, 06:04

Jack was on his seventh glass of water. He had drunk the first four in about thirty seconds. His stomach was now completely bloated and in his soiled white vest he looked not unlike Rab C. Nesbitt.

Try as he might, he just could not quench his thirst. Apart from the obvious dehydrating effect of copious amounts of alcohol; he had slept only a few feet from the windows. As the floor to ceiling windows took up pretty much the entire width of the far wall, there had been plenty of opportunity for the sun to burn and burn some more down on him. He had woken in a huge puddle of sweat. His drunken sleep must have been so deep that even as the sun grew stronger his defence mechanisms had failed to kick in to tell him to move out of its path.

During his sadistic sixes, Jack had spent many a sunny day out in the back garden with a magnifying glass in search of ants. It seemed that Karma had finally caught up with him, and he bet that if there was an ol' ant heaven in the sky, those ants would be raising a glass at his suffering right then and there.

Finally, he realised his stomach could not take any more water, and though he did not feel his thirst was quenched, he walked away from the sink. Every square foot of the flat was absolutely roasting. There was no getting away from the sun. He decided to head to the shower and take a cold one.

Then it hit him. Recollection of the entire evening came flooding back in terrifying detailed clarity. It took him a few moments to fully recall the horror of the last twenty-

four hours, but when it sunk in, Jack began to wail hysterically. An infant child will often cry because it cannot comprehend pain, so wailing is the only way it can relieve the stress. Jack felt the same way. Pain, frustration, fear, disgust and guilt, all fought each other to get to the forefront of his agony, but he couldn't do a thing about any of his emotions other than express them in a heart rending wall of noise.

The one point that had been made perfectly clear to him the previous night was that he had no choices and no options open to him. He was a prisoner of the situation. Of all the crippling emotional trauma that he was going through, it was this futile helplessness that was the most distressing. Unable to comprehend anything but the weight of his anguish, Jack lay down and dedicated his last energy reserves to sobbing quietly onto the floor.

After about half an hour, Jack made the decision to get out of the flat. He had no idea where to, but at least now he felt if could just get some space he could take stock and collect his thoughts. He remembered the last time he had felt he needed to take stock was when he had split with Sarah. Looking back with the kind of sharp honesty that accompanies fear and trauma, he realised he hadn't taken time out to collect his thoughts or make any plans at all. True, he'd lived more in the weeks following that train journey than all of the years preceding it. He'd had more new and outrageous experiences. But had he made the right choice? He longed for the chance to be back on the train again with Sarah, even just to argue about trivialities, living the simple life of a simple man.

STOP THE WORLD, I'M GETTING OFF

27 JUNE 2006, 07:00

There were only three other people on the tube platform. They stood right down at the far end. A young guy, about Jack's age was reading the *Metro*, obviously about to make an early start of it in the office. The other two people sharing the platform at King's Cross with him, were an upper-middle-aged couple; in "his and hers" chino shorts. He wore his blue cap squashed onto the top of his head in that odd position common to people over the age of fifty. In contrast his wife wore a determinedly fixed black visor.

They had two suitcases at their feet and a large pink holdall. Jack did not have to be at his perceptive best to guess they were on their way to the airport.

Jack was in an odd trance and he couldn't stop staring at this couple, angry that they were off on a carefree foreign jaunt, whilst he had to shoulder the burden of being privy to plans for the biggest terrorist attack on British soil, or maybe even be forced to be the executer of it.

A train pulled up and the couple and the young guy stepped on. The train pulled out leaving Jack standing on the platform. He had no idea why he hadn't got on. There hadn't seemed much point. His original plan had been to go back to Balham and see Sarah. He needed to see her right now, needed to feel as though he could still be normal again. She was the only one who would be able to understand him and hold and hug him. But would she anymore? Sarah had moved on and was seeing Mark now. Jack had waived that privilege when he had finished with her hadn't he?

He just stood rooted to the platform. There was, of course, another option. Jack really felt ready to jump. It was the only way out. Going to anybody in authority was completely pointless and he couldn't bring himself to actually give in and be a part of it. Could he? He had thought he could, but now he thought he couldn't, but then he thought he could again, and finally he realised he didn't know what he thought. Of all the options, jumping in front of a train was the single most appealing available to him at that moment. At least he would not have to think any more.

It wasn't the first time Jack had found himself feeling like he was about to jump in front of a train. Back in the days when he hadn't had a care in the world, sometimes Jack would be stood waiting on the platform looking at the track convinced he was about to throw himself on at the last second.

It was the same when he was on top of a high building; he just had this feeling that he might launch himself off it. He often stepped a couple of paces away from the track, lest he actually go through with it.

Jack had never thought he would see suicide as a viable option. He always thought that no matter how bad things got, he would never consider taking his own life. It occurred to him that you never know how bad things might get until you got there.

Jack looked up at the screen overhead to see when the next train was due. It told him there was a train approaching. He stepped nearer to the edge of the platform and saw the lights of the train in the distance.

Much like Lothar, Jack had often imagined himself as a character in a movie. He suspected a lot of people did, it was a way to contextualise life and in some way feel as though you had an idea how certain things might go. Jack would think about how this

character would react in the face of different situations and usually what soundtrack would be playing in the background.

Years ago, when he was fifteen, he had been chased by a gang of ten older boys who had tried to mug him. As his lungs expanded and his heart pumped, the 15-year-old Jack had lamented the lack of music in the background to add to the drama.

But nowadays of course it was possible. Despite his utter failure to grasp the fundamentals of technology he had just about mastered the iPod. A few months ago, he had wandered around London and passed all of the main landmarks - Big Ben et al. - choosing different tunes to suit each spot. He had thought of himself as the lead character in a romantic epic.

It had felt fantastic until the near completion of his montage, as he had finally been forced to stop in embarrassment when a group of tourists had caught him acting out the final dramatic shot in Trafalgar Square with *I Knew I Loved You Before I Met You* pumping into his ears.

Jack had spent most of his time with his iPod earphones in, and as he stood there now about to end it all, *Acrobat* by Maximo Park began to play softly in his ears. The song seemed apt, perfect for the scene in which he now found himself.

Bizarrely, that thought brought Jack some comfort.

If he was going to do it, the time was now.

JACK

27 JUNE 2006, 07:01

“I don’t remember losing sight of your needs

I am not an acrobat

I cannot perform these tricks for you

Losing all my balance

Falling from a wire made for you

The sky is often used as a metaphor

I suppose it’s because it’s so big and expansive

When a long stranded cloud sits just above the horizon

Leaving a strip of clear blue beneath it

It becomes the panorama

And you turn your head 360 degrees

And the same line follows you round

If the land is sufficiently flat

Really nothing can be compared to it

I don’t remember losing sight of your needs

I don’t...”

JACK

27 JUNE 2006, 07:03

END OF PART 4

**THE FINAL CONCLUDING PART OF THE GOLDEN GENERATION
AVAILABLE ON 3 SEPTEMBER.**

NEXT TIME IN THE GOLDEN GENERATION:

