

CHAPTER 7

The canal barge's progress was painfully slow as it moved down the narrow waterway like a lumbering beast. Its engine coughed and groaned, pushing the hull through the murky brown water.

A solitary man stood at the tiller, rigid against the biting two-degree wind. Wrapped in a waterproof coat slick and wearing a woollen beanie pulled low over his brow, he looked more like a spectre. A thin trail of smoke curled from the pipe clamped between his teeth, the smell of burnt tobacco drifting behind the boat.

Along the towpath, a few disinterested dog walkers shuffled by, their breath misting in the raw air. Even their sluggish gait was faster than the barge.

Inside the boat, the luxury furnishings had been reduced to clutter beneath piles of takeaway detritus. Bottles rolled gently with the motion of the barge, knocking against pizza boxes and crisp packets scattered across the floor. The lavish well-stocked bar, once a statement of wealth, now resembled a neglected shrine to excess. The air was thick with booze, sweat, and smoke, a miasma that clung to the skin like oil.

A Flat screen TV, bolted to the wall, spewed news commentary into the confined space. Four men occupied the living quarters. Three of them were hard-eyed and alert, their sole purpose to shield the fourth, a heavy, sweating mass slouched on a cushioned bench.

Sidney Finnigan.

His belly poured over the waistband of his tracksuit trousers like rising dough, and his cheeks glistened with a sticky sheen. He clutched a glass of whisky in his right hand while the left sat uselessly in his lap, wrapped in fresh bandages, stained faintly yellow where

antiseptic had seeped through. He shifted occasionally, wincing, the dull throb of the injury never quite relinquishing its claim on him.

Every now and then he caught sight of his own reflection in the small window. The sight of his bloated, unkempt form filled him with a low, simmering fury. Not at himself but at everything and everyone who had forced him into this floating coffin.

“How much fucking longer?” Finnigan snarled for about the fourth time that morning, his voice raw from drink and irritation. “If I stay on this shit heap another minute, I swear I’ll go fucking mad.”

Fred Butcher didn’t look up from his map as he spoke. His tone was infuriatingly calm. “At least another day, Sid,” he said. “Just until I line everything up.”

Butcher was lean, coiled like a spring beneath a thin shirt that did nothing to hide the dark, dense web of tattoos across his arms and chest. His head bore a layer of stubble that looked carved rather than grown, and the scar across his forehead, an ugly, twisted line, gave him the perpetual appearance of a man mid-grimace. When asked how he got it, he would shrug and say, *you should see the other guy*. No one ever did. The other guy was rumoured to be concrete now, part of a new office block in London.

“We can’t risk the roads or the trains, Sid,” Butcher added, tracing a line across the canal routes. “It’s locked down. Cops would sweep us up in no time. Nobody pays any attention to the canals. This will get us south unseen. Then it’s a motor to Southampton. Quiet-like.”

Finnigan sucked air through his teeth. Since Frank Slater’s arrest, he’d been trapped on this floating prison for two weeks. Two weeks of stagnant water, stale air, and the nagging fear that at any second blue lights would flare on the horizon.

He lifted the whisky glass again. “Well, if I have to stay here get someone to clean this

fucking mess. I'm living in a pigsty."

"We'll do it tonight when it's dark, Sid," Butcher said. "We dare not go out in daylight. We can't risk someone spotting one of us."

A few snowflakes drifted past the small windows, dissolving against the grimy glass. The gentle slap of water sluicing against the hull and the throaty hum of the engine created a monotone lull that only worsened Finnigan's impatience.

"Is your lodge in the New Forest sorted, Fred?" Finnigan muttered.

"Yeah. Quiet and safe. We'll hole up, fix the last leg. Can't use a port, so we'll slip out through a cove. Row out after dark." Butcher grinned without humour. "Done it before when we bring gear in from Europe."

Finnigan's eyes drifted to the heavy carryall stuffed with cash and gold. One and a half million. All he'd managed to grab before the police slammed shut every route out of London. His daughter held the keys to the rest of his assets including a villa out in Vietnam. And he'd be damned if she, or his wife, was going to enjoy a life of luxury while he sweated through exile. The plan was to get to France, travel to the south and then across to Africa and finally a plane out to Vietnam which had no extradition treaty with Britain.

"Make sure you get Barbara and Tracy," Finnigan said.

"I've got some lads at your house with Babs, Sid," Butcher said. "And I've put big Nobby with your daughter."

Finnigan nodded his approval. "Tell them not to let either of them out of their sight," he said. "I don't want them doing a runner."

"What if they don't want to come?" Butcher asked.

Finnigan made a dismissive gesture with his whisky glass. "If the old tart makes a fuss kill her and just bring my daughter. I'm not leaving without her. There'll be plenty of

replacements out in Vietnam I can fuck.”

The words slipped out with casual cruelty, but the moment they left his mouth something darker twisted inside him. Rage for the man who had put him in this situation.

Wolfe.

A mobile phone on a nearby table rang, slicing through the oppressive quiet. Butcher snatched it up, pacing the cramped space as he exchanged a collection of grunts.

“Well?” Finnigan asked, testily.

Butcher raised his hand to allay his boss's growing impatience. Then he said to the caller, “Okay, send it through to me.” He hung up.

“Well?” Finnigan repeated.

“My contact says Wolfe came over from Hong Kong three weeks ago,” Butcher began. “He was triad and his gang were taken out by a rival organisation. In retaliation, Wolfe killed the son of the triad boss and then left the country.”

Finnigan's smile was thin and malicious. “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

The phone in Butcher's hand buzzed again and he glanced at the information scrolling down the screen.

“I've got a number for someone in Hong Kong,” he said. “My contact says we have to talk to a Zhou Ye.” He handed the phone to his boss.

Finnigan glanced at the text and slowly dialled the number listed there. He waited, listening for the connection tone. It was answered after the fifth ring.

“I want to talk to Zhou Ye,” Finnigan said. “My name is Finnigan and I have some information about a guy named Richard Wolfe.” He waited as faint, unintelligible noises crackled through the speaker. He spoke again. “Is this Zhou Ye? My name's Finnigan. I understand you'd like to find Richard Wolfe.”

The answer was a tinny squeak in the earpiece that only Finnigan could hear.

“He’s in Westbridge, London, England,” Finnigan said. “Yes I have a newspaper article with his picture.” He handed the phone to Butcher. “Send them the picture in that newspaper article.”

Butcher took out a newspaper from a drawer and turned to the page containing the article about Wolfe. He took a picture and sent it, handing the phone back to Finnigan.

“Good enough?” Finnigan said. His voice dropped to a low, malicious purr. “No I don’t want anything for the information, but just promise me when you find him it will be slow and painful.”

He hung up, nodding with satisfaction. A memory flashed; a crowbar smashing his knuckles, Wolfe’s cold expression, the instant Finnigan realised he was prey, not predator. Even now the pain haunted him, pulsing beneath the warm bandages.

“What’d they say, boss?” Butcher asked.

“He’s sending some boys over,” Finnigan said. “Zhou Ye wants Wolfe as badly as I do.” He topped up his drink, letting the liquid burn his throat. He smiled to himself imagining Wolfe screaming under Chinese hands. The image soothed his rage and eased his throbbing hand.