

Jack Sterling & the Argyle Coin
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Chapter 1

As the wind rushed around the tent, which was barely being held in place by the stakes he had only placed a half-hour ago that were already on the verge of coming loose, Sterling took the scarf that was draped around his neck and lifted it to cover his nose and mouth. Sand was penetrating the thin veneer, and he stared at the zip that was supposed to keep the tent weatherproof with a look that could almost cause the wind itself to stop.

“Are you good, Jack?”

Sterling looked down to his waist at the walkie-talkie clipped to it, before reaching down and clicking the talk button twice in quick succession, signalling to Bria that he was, in fact, “Good”.

“OK. I’m just saying... Looks a little windy where you are,” she continued, unable to mask the fun she was having at Sterling’s expense. Again, he glanced down at the walkie-talkie, with the thought of reaching down and giving her a piece of his mind, but he thought better of it.

“Sorry. I’m just bored. Are we good?” she asked, now in a more serious tone.

Sterling reached down once more and pressed the talk-button twice again in quick succession, before unclipping the walkie-talkie and placing it on the floor. He rummaged through his jacket pocket and pulled out the coin, staring at it for a moment. The reason he was there, in that tent, inhaling sand in a way that he was sure to feel the effects of for a day or two. The gold coin, with its inscriptions on both sides, and what would look to the untrained eye like a dent or a hole, still managed to glisten and gleam even though there was no real sunlight making its way into the tent. For a split second, Sterling thought to himself that this small, seemingly insignificant trinket wasn’t worth all of this trouble, but quickly snapped out of it, remembering how much trouble he, Bria, and Bradlock had gone through to get it, and what was at stake if they didn’t see the mission through to its end.

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Chapter 2

It was only a month ago that Sterling and Bria were standing in the middle of Boothe's empty, museum-like office, surrounded by all of the artefacts, artwork, and other fineries that he had legally, and illegally, acquired.

"They look exactly the same, so I don't think he'll be able to tell," Sterling told Bria, who was holding two apparently identical gold coins in her hand.

"I'm holding them right now and I can't lie to you, Jack, even I don't know which one is the fake and which one is real," she said, eyes fixed on the coins in her palms.

"Well, one of them has the power to make an already rich, arrogant, borderline psychotic egomaniac twice as evil as he already is, and the other can just about buy a dinner at that restaurant in Paris you love," Sterling replied, taking the coin in Bria's left hand and placing it on one of the perches in the display case where Boothe kept the original.

"That's the fake?" Bria asked, clearly not as sure as Sterling.

"It better be," he responded, closing the door to the display case carefully, before clicking the lock, and slowly pulling his hand back, hoping not to trip any alarms that they had so far managed not to trigger.

Bria placed what she hoped was the real gold coin in a pouch, then slipped it into her back pocket. Just as they turned to leave, they heard a conversation between two men coming from the hallway leading to Boothe's office, getting closer and closer to the door. Bria, looked at Sterling, wide-eyed, silently trying to enquire if he had a plan. With the same wide-eyed look, Sterling looked back, shook his head and shrugged, clearly indicating that he didn't have one. Tactics were never his thing; that was where Bradlock came in, and right now he was hoping that even if the guests on their way to the office were a surprise to him and Bria, Chris Bradlock would have eyes, ears, or – if it came to it – the sights of a gun trained on them.

Bria started to creep towards the office door, attempting to take up position on one side. She looked back to a still stationary Sterling, and with her eyes and a flick of her head indicated that he make his way to the other side of the door, which he did.

"How many shifts this week?" one of the voices making its way to the office could now be heard saying, as the conversation became clearer and clearer.

"After this twelve I'm done for the week, and away from that bleeding psycho and his mystical magical mumbo jumbo and trinkets," grumbled the other voice, causing the other to stifle a laugh.

"I think half of it is fake anyway. Always talking about his adventures to get charms and goblets that give him powers. Bloody nut-job. Pays well, though," joked one of the two, to the amusement of them both.

Bria's face fell as she heard the two men. If it were ever possible to tell the size of a man by the tone of his voice, she believed that she was currently listening to

the sound of two mountainous humans approaching. Now on either side of the stately double doors of Boothe's office, Bria looked and signalled to Sterling by imitating pulling a trigger, reminding Sterling that he had a gun with him. He reached behind him to the loop of his belt, retrieved the weapon, and cocked it as quietly as he could, hoping with every fibre of his being that he wouldn't have to use it.

At this point the two men had stopped talking, and because the expansive hallway leading to the office was carpeted, their footsteps couldn't be heard, even by Sterling, who had his ear pressed to the wall like a child spying on a sibling. The fugitives waited, breath held, for what felt like an eternity until they heard the click of the doors unlocking. A hesitant Sterling grasped his gun with both hands and, as the doors opened and a figure took two steps into the room, he placed the barrel of the gun to the entrant's head.

"You and I both know you don't want to pull that mate, so why not put it down, eh?" Bradlock said, with the calmness of a man who was used to being on the dangerous end of a firearm.

Sterling lowered the gun, his whole body unclenching, as he breathed out a deep sigh of relief.

"Mate..." Sterling let out almost silently; the relief in his voice and the fact that it was almost quivering broke Bradlock into a quiet chuckle.

Bria, with her back to the wall, slid down to the floor, even more relieved to see Bradlock than Sterling was. She looked behind her through the now open doors to see two bodies knocked out on the ground a good distance from them.

"We done here or what?" Bradlock asked, smirking, as Bria and Sterling exchanged looks; the look of people who had escaped a situation neither of them was prepared for. "Do we have the coin or not?" Bradlock asked.

"Yeah, Chris, we've got it," Sterling answered.

Bradlock clapped his hands and rubbed them together like a builder ready to get down to work.

"So how about we get out of here before those two wake up?"

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Chapter 3

Bradlock looked down at his boots, covered in the red, clay-like mud of the mine several hundred feet below, then behind him, then over to his left, where his guard-duty partner sat, fast asleep, on a wooden chair that was sure to be riddled with termites.

“You get what you pay for,” he muttered, just loud enough for a person who was awake to hear. Luckily for him, his partner for the day was not.

Together, they had been tasked with the job of guarding the entrance to the vast diamond mine, that was at this time almost completely deserted. The high value diamonds that used to be its calling card were almost all gone, but judging by the way the mine was currently being guarded and patrolled, a passer-by would assume that it had just been tapped and was ready for its first excavation.

“Wake up!”

Bradlock’s sleeping partner jolted awake, groggy and annoyed, turning to his disturber with fury in his eyes, fury that instantly disappeared when he realised he wasn’t being brought back to the land of the waking by Bradlock, but by Asamoah, their boss.

“Sorry sir,” he said, doing his best to not seem as groggy as he still was.

“You!” Asamoah hissed, having now turned his attention to Bradlock, “you let him sleep?”

“There hasn’t been any movement, and the perimeter is more than secure, so I thought I’d let him take a break and I would keep an eye out for any trouble,” Bradlock replied, covering for his grateful partner, even though he really didn’t need to, or in fact want to.

Asamoah glared at Bradlock, doing his best to portray a look of intimidation, but the army-seasoned Bradlock looked back blankly, giving Asamoah nothing, so he turned his stare on Bradlock’s now fully awake partner, who looked at the ground, embarrassed. Asamoah wasn’t a man who should be feared for his physical presence, standing at five foot nine, a little portly in the torso, although clearly he had been in shape in his younger years. Now, aged fifty-five, his intimidation factor wasn’t in his physique, but in his reputation. A man whose temper and trigger finger worked hand-in-hand, and could be set off at a moment’s notice. He liked to consider himself a soldier, his army fatigue trousers and dirty t-shirt certainly made him look the part; but the weight of his gold Rolex, the thin gold necklace around his neck, and the frames of his gold sunglasses tucked into the neck of his shirt showed that he not only had taste, but the money to back it up. The permanent scowl on his face completed the look, and his thick but educated African accent and deep voice let you know what kind of man he was from a mile away, on the phone, and in person; a mercenary, and a successful one at that.

“Just be sure things go as planned, OK, Christopher? It may not be a lot of money to the man who is paying us, but I am pretty sure what you are being paid

will keep you and whoever you do this for fed back at your homestead," Asamoah spewed, looking down his nose at Bradlock.

"Yes, sir," Bradlock replied, not physically rolling his eyes, but clearly doing it with his voice.

A weaker man would have watched what he said and how he said it to a man like Asamoah, but Bradlock was confident in his position. He had managed to infiltrate Asamoah's crew of well paid, thuggish, and trigger-happy mercenaries in a matter of months, using his real-life and extensive army background to quickly establish himself as a sort-of leader, now charged with planning today's mission.

"Transport will be ready in less than half an hour," Asamoah said, already turning around, ready to head back into the base of operations inside the entrance Bradlock was guarding, pausing to look Bradlock's beleaguered partner up and down, "so be sure that you are... well rested," and he walked away, swaggering as though someone was watching, although nobody was.

Bradlock shook his head, less than impressed with Asamoah's act, and focused his attention on continuing to survey the landscape ahead of them. When he told Asamoah that there had been no movement, and the perimeter was secure, he was telling the truth. The diamond mine they were nominally guarding was large, covering one hundred and twenty acres, but the surrounding area was even larger, and it was as barren a wasteland as the mine was now, save for the one or two diggers left searching for scraps. There was really no need to secure it, as it had been officially closed for close to a year, and the surrounding towns were so sparsely populated that even though they were fully powered by electricity and generators, at night, they couldn't be seen from the mine. In the distance directly ahead was a slightly mountainous area, a region Bradlock knew was secure and untroubled, as he had stationed Bria there in a caravan, keeping an eye on both the mine, and himself. They weren't in communication, and hadn't been in several days, but she was shown a few signals that she could set into motion if there was any trouble and Bradlock either needed to flee, or go guns blazing on his comrades.

Turning to his right, Bradlock could see nothing but the desert-like landscape ahead of him for miles, but he knew that somewhere in that direction, hopefully close to where they had planned, Sterling was there, waiting. A slight smile crept across his face upon seeing a tree in the distance leaning precariously in the wind, knowing that Sterling was facing those same odds in his tent, but he quickly shook it off and focused his mind on the task ahead. As Asamoah stated, the transport convoy was taking off in less than thirty minutes, so within the hour, he, Bria, and Sterling would have possession of what they came for, or at least he hoped they would.

The plan was pretty simple on paper, but difficult in its execution. Everything had to go as planned, and they were relying on people making decisions that they

had no control over. A convoy of three cars would be transporting a tiny diamond, almost insignificant in comparison to the hauls that had once left the mine in its heyday. All they had to do was intercept the convoy, procure the diamond, and get away safely. Unfortunately for them, even though Asamoah was a walking, talking stereotype of a villain, a warlord with no war to fight, he was a careful man. In his mind, nobody knew or cared what they were doing at the mine, a mine he already had the legal right to excavate, and he had shuttled back and forth with no trouble for months, but today he'd be transporting a diamond, a particular diamond, one that a client of his believed to have magic within it. Because of this, and because of the astronomical price that he was being paid, Asamoah wanted to be cautious. The convoy would contain three cars, each car with two people, a driver, and a guard, including his own car. All the men would be armed, and the route was planned to the very last turn. Unfortunately for him, and fortunately for the crew, the man in charge of that plan was a plant – Chris Bradlock.

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Chapter 4

Through her high-powered, long distance binoculars, Bria watched a sauntering Asamoah turn away from Bradlock at the gate. From her vantage point she obviously couldn't hear, but from what she saw, somebody was just chewed out. She trained the sights of the binoculars on Bradlock next, and watched as his partner walked up to him and gratefully shook his hand. The scene confused her, but she was glad to see that he was OK. There had been no communication for days, but witnessing with her own eyes that he was in good health was enough to keep her anxiety in check. Bradlock had always been confident in his ability to handle himself, but there had been several times over the last few months where neither Bria nor Sterling had eyes or ears on him, and whether or not he was still alive was a Schrödinger's cat experiment that they didn't want to have to contemplate.

Turning to her left, she focused her binoculars on the area where Sterling was stationed. There were several small villages dotted around the mine, tight-knit communities that were often patrolled by Asamoah's men at a moment's notice, and passed through whenever Asamoah and his cohorts were coming to or leaving the mine. Because of this, Sterling couldn't risk being spotted or caught on a random patrol, so he had decided that a few hours before Asamoah and his convoy passed through the village, he would set up camp a mile or two away in a deserted area and await a call from Bria. It was up to her to keep time, and to signal Sterling to prepare for the ambush that awaited the convoy. A mile or two behind the sleepy village, she spotted Sterling's tent, barely visible and blending in with his surroundings. The wind was blowing viciously, and she could see the bottom of the tent lifting up at the stakes, enough to let sand in, but she thought it was enough to keep him sheltered for the next hour or so.

On the dashboard of the caravan, just in front of the driver's seat she was sitting in, was her walkie-talkie, and as she moved the binoculars away from her eyes to set them down, a wry smile replaced the worried look on her face, and she pressed the talk button.

"Are you good, Jack?" she asked, barely letting go of the switch before a stifled giggle escaped her.

A few seconds passed as she sat smirking, waiting for a verbal response from Sterling, but instead what she got was two quick, static-y sounds, which served as the crew's signal for yes, with anything more than two meaning no. A little disappointed that Sterling didn't respond verbally, Bria thought that she would tease him a little more.

"OK. I'm just saying... Looks a little windy where you are," she said into the walkie-talkie; once again, barely able to mask the fun she was having at Sterling's expense. She was sure that this time he would say something, because between Jack Sterling and Chris Bradlock, Sterling was by far and away the member of their trio who had the best sense of humour, even when he was the butt of the joke. This time, more than a few seconds went by. As they did, the smile on her

face began to fade, and the worry she felt for Bradlock was now transferring itself to Sterling's current situation. With no answer from Sterling incoming, she hit the talk button once again.

"Sorry. I'm just bored. Are we good?" she now asked in a more serious tone, hoping for an answer, as any answer, even an angry one, would signify Sterling's safety and the plan could still go ahead.

Two more rapid-fire static-y sounds came through her walkie-talkie, and a sense of relief fell upon her. Even if he wasn't in a talking mood, the winds he was facing weren't a hindrance to their mission. More importantly, to Bria, at least he was OK. She placed the walkie-talkie back on the dashboard, and leaned back to settle in for what she hoped wasn't going to be too long a wait.

Glancing at her watch, she knew that based on the last check-in she received from Bradlock, they should be less than an hour away from setting off. From there, it would be her job to signal Sterling to give him enough time to make it to the first village Asamoah's convoy would be passing through, and then give them enough space before slowly following their tracks. Based on her proximity to the mission, and her status as trailer, she knew that she would either be pulling up to a successful mission, or one with bodies on the ground belonging to her friends. With a slight shake of the head, she tried to send that thought to the deep recesses of her mind and think positively. They had been in dangerous positions many times before, with the most recent being stuck in the office of a rich psychopath's estate with two armed henchmen making their way towards them, but even with the nature of their business, she still wasn't as used to the danger as Sterling and Bradlock were.

Bria thought back to how she had met Sterling and Bradlock. Being brought together by the man they now counted as an enemy was an unorthodox introduction, but she was glad it happened. Sterling's reputation as a jewel thief preceded him, even if his identity was a secret to all, and the fact that his real name – the name he did his legitimate business under – was one of a highly respected jeweller and collector, came to her surprise. After some contemplation, she had realised that it made complete sense: it would take someone with knowledge of not only the items they were stealing, but also access to the places they were kept, to pull off the types of jobs he and Bradlock had pulled off in the past. Meanwhile, her standing as a world-class verifier and curator of fine art and antiquities would surely be torn asunder if her past clients knew she was now working with a thief, even if he and his partner had turned their intentions around, and were now working to procure rare items to keep them away from a megalomaniac like Boothe; a man who sought nothing but the artefacts that he believed would give him otherworldly powers. Bria never thought she'd be in the position she now was, but in the past year, she had seen things with her own eyes that she would never have believed if she were simply told them. From a several hundred year old shaman who performed apparent witchcraft in front of her, to watching animals shift shape, attack, then disappear into a cloud of smoke when struck with a

bullet, she had come a long way from the ball gowns, events, and schmoozing lifestyle she used to lead. Even though the life she was leading was a little too much for her at times, deep down she knew that she wouldn't trade it for the world.

Another look at her watch showed barely a minute or two had passed since she last checked, but that is how things always went for her. She was as patient as they come, willing to wait months or years to feast her eyes on an item, but it was always those last few moments before the big reveal that felt like forever. As the sun began to set behind her, her impatience began to grow, and her use of the binoculars changed from every fifteen minutes to every thirty seconds, hoping that this time would be the time she would see Bradlock and Asamoah's crew heading out. Finally, a check of Bradlock's position through the binoculars showed movement that signified that the moment might well be at hand. Another mercenary had made his way from the inside of the mine compound and was beckoning to Bradlock and his partner. He wasn't sure whether or not Bria was indeed looking down at him, but with one last, pensive look up towards the mountainous area, Bradlock subtly nodded before turning around and following his beckoner's lead. Bria watched as the entrance of the mine was left unguarded, and with a sigh of anticipation, she readied herself.

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Chapter 5

Bradlock trailed behind his two temporary associates as they made their way into the compound of the mine. As alert as ever, he surveyed the surrounding area for anything that seemed out of place, or anything that wasn't where he anticipated it would be. Having been tasked with planning this convoy, he didn't want to leave anything to chance. Asamoah was a man known for switching things up at the drop of a dime, more often out of a sense of schizophrenic panic than out of carefulness, so Bradlock was keen to maintain as much awareness and control of the situation as possible.

"Finally, we can be done with all this shit," Bradlock's sleepy partner chimed in from ahead of him, "right, buddy?" he asked, turning around to an unaware Bradlock, who took a few seconds to realise he was the one being spoken to.

"Yeah mate. Drinks on me after!" he replied, forcing a smile.

"I am invited too, yes?" asked the third mercenary, in his thick French accent.

"Drinks for everyone, mate. As many as you can down," Bradlock responded, throwing the Frenchman a cheeky wink.

"Good. Because this man we are working for, he is... how you say? A pain in the asshole," he said, causing both of his cohorts to burst into laughter, which echoed in their cavernous surroundings.

They soon reached the trailer that served as the central hub for the mine, and before they could start the five-step climb to the door, it swung open, and a visibly antsy Asamoah leaned out, glaring at the three men.

"Hurry up!" he growled, doing his best to once again project the menacing aura that he felt he had to portray twenty-four-seven.

Bradlock's two associates quickened their pace and dropped their heads in response; as usual, Bradlock gave him nothing, almost slowing down in quiet protest, maintaining eye contact with every step. Seeing that Bradlock wasn't going to respond to his barking, Asamoah followed the other two mercenaries into the trailer, allowing Bradlock to make his way inside at his own pace, a move that made Bradlock smile to himself. He needed to be sure that although Asamoah employed him, that he had done enough to assert some semblance of dominance over him, which would play in his favour later on. Bradlock's words, his plan, and his actions needed to hold weight with Asamoah, and that would not be possible if Asamoah at any point felt that he had any more power over Bradlock than the money he was paying him.

Opening the door, Bradlock was met by the rest of today's crew, standing around a table awaiting instruction. There were six of them in total, including Bradlock and Asamoah, and as the door to the trailer closed behind him, Bradlock spoke up.

“Alright, lads, nothing special, nothing different to what we’ve been doing all this time, but we just want to keep our eyes open, alright?” His question was met with agreeing mumbles and grumbles from the crew.

He walked towards the small table the men were standing around, and pointed at the map, which was spilling over all sides of the table.

“Usually we take the simple route, and the reason we do that is because we know it inside out, which is why we’re going to be taking it today,” he said commandingly, “we turn left out of the mine, forward ten clicks into Chancellor village, and then onto the main town-” Before he could finish his sentence, Asamoah interrupted,

“I believe that for today’s excursion we should change things, no? The man paying us strongly believes that we are being watched, and we have been taking the same route for months, it is time for a change,” he said in a matter-of-fact tone, more a command than a question. His index finger was placed squarely on the map, and he didn’t look up at the crew to gauge their reactions, a crew that had now exchanged looks, before all settling their gaze on Bradlock, the de facto leader, waiting for his response.

“What do you want us to do? Trek up the hills directly in front of us? Is that unpredictable enough for you?” Bradlock said smugly, looking at the rest of the crew for chuckles or laughs to back up his words, which out of fear, never came.

“Of course not! Here,” Asamoah pointed on the map, dragging his finger from right to left, “we go through this village. We don’t use it often, but we know it, yes? And a man of your standing should of course have a plan of action for it, isn’t that right, Mr. Bradlock?” he asked, now switching his attention from the map to Bradlock.

Bradlock maintained steady eye contact, but allowed just enough time to pass before responding, knowing that whether too long or not long enough, he might betray his true intentions.

“Yeah, we can go through there,” he said, giving in, “if that’s what you want.”

Asamoah smiled bigger than any of them had ever seen, clearly happy that, for the first time, his subordinate had given in to his demands.

“Excellent! Right out of the compound it is, gentlemen,” he said in an almost giddy tone. “The journey from the village to the town is a little longer, but the rewards at the end of this journey will make the time worth it. We move now!”

Asamoah turned after giving his order, knowing that the crew moved at the behest of Bradlock, who nodded, stood straighter, and prepared to assign members of the travelling party to their cars.

“Boss and I will take the lead car,” he said, pointing at his chest and flicking his head in Asamoah’s general direction, “you two will take the blue Jeep, and you two in the white one. Are we clear?” he asked, to which the men grumbled in affirmation. “Right. Stay on our tail, don’t leave too big a gap between cars, and we’ll set the pace. Let’s move out.”

The men split from the table and began to amble towards the door, slowly and lackadaisically, just as Bradlock had hoped. For months, he had drilled them on being aware, being alert, being attentive, and being vigilant, even though they had no real need to be until today. By staying on their backs, he was hoping that they would be truly blindsided and unprepared for the ambush they were about to face, and those few split seconds of confusion would be enough to get him and Sterling out of the situation unhurt, and with the diamond.

“Sir!” Bradlock called to Asamoah, who was following the men out, leaving Bradlock to pack up the map behind them, “the... item, sir? Will you be carrying it or will you be using one of the trailing cars to carry it and use us as a decoy?”

The question left Asamoah stumped. As the door closed behind him, leaving them alone in the trailer, for a moment, he let his guard down and dropped his warlord-like persona. The look on his face switched from the perma-scowl that had become etched on his face, and changed to one of a man who, even if it were only in front of Bradlock, could concede that he wasn't in charge of their current situation.

“What would you suggest?” he asked, not quite sheepishly, but not anywhere near as demanding as he would be if the rest of the crew were watching him. Bradlock made a point of acting as if he were seriously mulling over their options, but his mind had been made up long before he even asked the question. He wanted Asamoah to have the diamond on him; he just wanted to know exactly which pocket or part of his body he would be keeping it in.

“I suggest you keep it on you. There isn't anywhere safer than that, and there probably isn't a safer car for you to be in than mine,” he responded confidently, a confidence that clearly put Asamoah's mind at ease. Bradlock watched as Asamoah patted his top right shirt pocket, before reaching inside of it with two fingers and sliding out a small black diamond pouch.

“On me it is, then,” he said as he checked the contents of the pouch. A small pink diamond, inconspicuous to most, just as valuable as any other diamonds its size to others, but to Asamoah and the man he worked for, Boothe, it was their ticket to more. For Asamoah, it was his retirement plan, the last job in a long life filled with many dangerous, murderous, but nowhere near as lucrative ones; for Boothe, it was his ticket to power. Not just power in name only, but the kind of power that would strike fear into the hearts of any who crossed his path. He believed that this particular diamond, from this particular mine, set into a gold coin that he had obtained from the mountains of South East Asia, would give him the type of power that influential men had yearned for and sought for eons. For that reason, Sterling, Bradlock, and Bria could not let him get it, no matter what or who was in their way.

“OK, let's make our way into town now,” Bradlock stated, extending an arm towards the door. Asamoah, now full of confidence, his mind already on the

riches awaiting him at the end of this short excursion, sauntered out of the trailer. Bradlock hastily folded the map and slid it into his back pocket, took his sidearm out of his holster, cocked it silently and checked the magazine, before slightly straining and flexing his neck causing a bone or two to crack, ready for the journey. Asamoah, now holding the door for Bradlock, waited at the exit of the trailer, and Bradlock quick-stepped towards him, not wanting to keep his clearly impatient boss waiting. They both descended the five steps to find the rest of their crew waiting to enter their assigned cars. One a Mercedes, and the other two dirty, but solid and sturdy, Jeeps.

One after the other, the six car doors closed, echoing into the empty compound as the convoy prepared to depart, waiting for Bradlock to lead them out. As he inserted the key into the ignition, he hoped that Bria was watching and ready to signal Sterling. He knew she was vigilant, but now would be a bad time for her to have fallen asleep and missed their departure. He put the handbrake down, and the vehicle began to creep forward as the convoy headed towards the two metal double doors that were the entrance and exit to the mine. The sun had only just begun to set, and there was still a fair amount of sunlight spilling across the terrain, but Bradlock made sure to turn the headlights of the car on, bright, but not so bright that Asamoah would have cause to say something about it. As he reached the exit and prepared to turn right into the deserted area leading through the village they would pass through, he flicked the lights as though he had trouble working the indicator, but this was all for Bria's benefit, letting her know that everything was going according to plan, and that it was time for her to enact the next part of the scheme on her end.

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Chapter 6

Bria's heart began to race, as through her binoculars she saw that all three of the cars that had entered the mine hours before were leaving in unison. As the first car – a Mercedes that she could see was being driven by Bradlock – started to pull out of the compound and indicate that it was turning right, the headlights flashed, and she knew that was her signal to set the rest of the plan in motion. Placing the binoculars down on the dashboard, she took a deep, steadying breath, held it for a moment, and then exhaled. As she reached for the walkie-talkie, her right hand trembled slightly, so she took her left and clasped them both together to try and keep herself together, still taking deep breaths in and out, eyes firmly closed. When she reopened them she had gained some calm, so she pressed the talk button, and after one last, calming breath, she spoke,

“Jack? Jack, we're on,” she said, doing her absolute best to not convey any of the nerves she was feeling in her message.

On the other side of the plains, a much less nervous Sterling heard her message crackling through his walkie-talkie, and the news was met with a more relieved feeling than the one his partner was currently experiencing. As the last words fizzed through the miniature speaker, Sterling's hands flew from his jacket pockets in a flash, pockets that were providing him with some semblance of warmth, and he picked up the walkie-talkie with both hands, almost fumbling it as he tried to press the talk button and respond.

“We're on? Like *on* on?” he asked, wanting to be absolutely sure that the moment was indeed at hand, and he could be done with the infernal tent that he now wished he had not been so frugal with.

“Yeah, we're on. B and the convoy are on the move, and it looks like they're heading where we want them,” Bria responded through Sterling's speaker, words he was more than glad to be hearing.

“OK. I'm on the move. And Bria?”

“Yeah, Jack?”

“Keep your distance, you can't be spotted by those guys, OK?” Sterling told her, the little worry in his voice travelling through the walkie-talkie and settling on Bria's shoulders like a ton of bricks.

“A little late is better than early, I know, I remember what Chris told me,” she responded, still trying to stay calm, but tensing up in a way that she had never before.

“OK. Good luck,” Sterling said reassuringly, knowing that he'd need a little more of that luck than she would, but wanting to alleviate her worries.

“You too,” she replied, barely taking her finger off of the talk button before almost dropping the walkie-talkie back on the dashboard and exhaling deeply, as if

she had been holding her breath for the entirety of their brief conversation. With both hands now gripping the steering wheel of the caravan, Bria once again closed her eyes and took deep breaths in and out, trying to muster up some composure. With her breathing now under control, her eyes reopened with a new focus, and in one fluid motion, she turned the key in the ignition, dropped the parking brake, and put the caravan in gear, edging forward slowly, ready to tail Bradlock and his convoy of armed men. She was a fair few miles away from them in the camouflaged mountain area in front of the mine, but Bradlock's words of advice rang through her mind over and over again. She knew what speed to drive at to keep her distance, and she knew that, for now at least, the rest of the plan was out of her hands, so she need only focus on what she could control – herself.

Back at the tent, Sterling was glad to finally be rid of the constricted confines of the tent. Rather than unzip it and exit, he simply threw it off him like a child would throw off a blanket, tearing the stakes from the ground and letting the wind take the tent with it. Luckily, it had somewhat subsided in the time Sterling had been waiting, but what had taken its place was the impending cold that would follow the setting of the sun. Rather than focus on the plummeting temperature, Sterling trained his attention on the lights in the near distance; the village that he was now heading towards, and the village that Asamoah, Bradlock, and most importantly the diamond, were going to be passing through. With every step he took towards the village, the anticipation almost caused him to break into a run, and he had to restrain himself from bursting out into a full sprint, knowing that he must conserve his energy and not let his adrenaline get the better of him.

To keep his mind focused, he rummaged through the pockets of his cargo trousers as he walked, making sure that he had not left anything he was going to need behind. In his front right pocket was a torch, and in his front left pocket was the screwdriver. In a holster secured to his belt and behind his back was something he hoped he wasn't going to need, but was absolutely prepared to wield if necessary, his trusty Glock 9mm. As he continued, getting closer and closer to the village, he removed the magazine from the Glock and checked the bullet at the top of it, a shiny gold-coloured cylinder with a green tip. While in the tent he had checked it close to a dozen times, making sure the first bullet was the correct one, and even though it was the same every time he checked, he could never be too sure of himself.

The wind had now almost completely subsided, but as the sun continued to set, rapidly, the freezing cold that served as its replacement left Sterling longing for the moments prior when he was inhaling sand at an unhealthy rate. He was right outside the village, but the last hundred metres or so he had left to travel felt more like tens of miles. The cold had slowed his pace to a crawl, and he felt his legs getting heavier and heavier. However, every moment stopping came to his mind, the image of Boothe added a new vigour to his steps, and the small adrenaline increase

made the next ten to twenty steps more bearable. He was almost within touching distance of a small clay house at the outer edge of the village, and with his last few steps, he stumbled forward, reaching out with both hands to steady himself, before falling to the ground, turning around, and catching his breath for a few moments, his back to the house, scarf pulled almost to his eyes, hands firmly entrenched in his jacket pockets. He only had a moment or two to rest before it was time to set into motion one of the most important parts of the plan.

Somewhere just a few miles away, Bradlock drove cautiously, probably slower than he should have been, knowing that even if Sterling had already made it to the village, he wanted to buy him as much time as he could. The windows of Asamoah's Mercedes were up and the heat was already on, but the frost that was starting to creep from the bottom of the windshield let Bradlock know that the cold of the night was here, and every second he could give Sterling would give them a better chance of success.

"Speed up! Why so slow, eh?" a clearly frustrated Asamoah barked. He was already an impatient man, but the thought of the money that was waiting for him at the end of this mission was beginning to make his already antsy disposition even more irritable.

"Right," Bradlock muttered nonchalantly, stepping on the gas briefly to pick up speed, but quickly returning to his original speed, still thinking of the time he was buying for his partner. In his rear view mirror, he could see that the other two cars in the convoy were keeping pace, and the dust they were kicking up in their wake served as a smokescreen for what he hoped was Bria, a mile or two behind, following their tracks.

Having caught his breath a little, and feeling the cold increasing all around him, Sterling knew it was now or never to get the ball rolling. Slowly climbing to his feet, using the wall behind him as a support, he rose and began to walk towards the outer edges of the village. The entire village consisted of around fifteen small houses dotted around, and served mostly as a place for the locals who worked in the nearby town to rest their heads. Many of the lights in the homes were on, and as they had expected, the streets were completely deserted. By this point, Sterling had reached the end of the village perimeter, the opposite side that Asamoah's convoy would be entering through, and there he spotted what he had left there three days prior; a barely functioning, early nineties saloon car with a crushed bonnet. At first glance, you would assume that the car was completely out of commission, but as Sterling approached it and began to rummage in his pocket for the screwdriver, it was clear that he had a plan.

The doors were unlocked, and in the days that it had been left there, the only signs that it had been inspected or noticed by the locals were what looked like children's handprints and words in a foreign language Sterling could not understand

scribbled on the side of the door, cutting through the dirt that covered the car. Sterling opened the passenger side door, and jumped in quickly. When he closed the door he couldn't help but feel disappointed that the interior of the car was somehow colder than outside. He managed to wrestle the screwdriver from his pocket, and proceeded to stab the ignition of the car with it, twisting it ever so slightly, causing the dashboard lights to light up, although the car didn't start. He contemplated turning on the heat just for a moment to gain some reprieve from the cold, but he thought better of it, and continued with the rest of the plan.

Sterling hopped out of the car almost as quickly as he had hopped in, and immediately took the few steps down the side of the car to open the fuel cap, where he saw a rag stuffed in. He removed the rag slightly, allowing it to dangle on the side of the car, went back to the open passenger side door, leaned inside and released the parking brake. Closing the door, he looked around into what was quickly becoming the dark of the surrounding area, and familiarised himself with the terrain, before spotting and remembering where he needed to push the car. Picking up his pace, he jogged to the driver's side, opened the door. Holding on to the steering wheel with his left hand, he slowly and steadily started to push the car towards the most central part of the sleepy village. He didn't have any more time to contemplate the cold engulfing him, and his mind had switched to the singular thought of getting the car to its destination as quickly as possible. The only sound that could be heard was the tyres picking up and dropping debris as they travelled across the pebble and stone ridden ground. As he got closer and closer to the central part of the village, the gritty sounds of the tyres were joined by his grunts as he pushed. Once he was as close to the centre as possible, he allowed the momentum the car had picked up to do the rest of the work, and when he had travelled as far as his waning energy could take him, he once again dove head first into the car to pull the parking brake up, stopping the car in its tracks.

Exiting the vehicle and very quietly closing the door, he stood up straight and let out a breath that surrounded him with condensation that soon dissipated. Then he looked around to double check if his activities had raised any suspicions, which of course they had not. At the moment, it seemed that he was the only person dumb enough to be outside as the weather turned, but that was all going to change shortly, if he timed things just right. He checked his watch and saw that it had been roughly forty minutes since he was alerted to the impending arrival of the convoy by Bria, so he knew it was now or never. Walking to the front of the vehicle, he took one last look over his shoulder before opening the nearly completely crumpled bonnet, unscrewing the cap to the water tank for the radiator, where a small book of matches was taped. By this point his fingers were almost completely numb, but he managed to remove the matchbook from the cap, which he tossed to the side without a care. Then, as slowly and silently as possible, he closed

the bonnet. His hands were now shaking, not out of fear, but what he was sure would be frostbite if he didn't get them back into his pockets sooner rather than later.

He returned to the fuel cap at the back of the passenger's side of the car, and before flicking his wrist and lighting the dangling rag, stared over in the direction he believed Bradlock and the convoy to be coming from, listening for a moment. He couldn't hear anything but the sound of his own breathing, and once the few lights of the village stopped, he could barely see anything, as the sun had almost finished setting. But as he squinted, he saw what he thought – or at least what he hoped – was the dust of three cars being kicked up in the distance.

“Now or never,” he said for nobody's benefit but his own, as he struck the match, only taking one try to light it, before tentatively placing it just underneath the hanging rag, which immediately caught fire. Thanks to the now dried but still effective amount of gasoline it had been doused in days earlier, it started to burn towards the fuel tank. Sterling dropped the match and retreated a few steps before turning around and sprinting back behind the houses. He placed his back against the wall and slid down, hands thrust into his jacket pockets, scarf still up around his mouth and nose, breathing hard. He waited for what felt like an eternity, but was only ten seconds or so, before the dark behind him began to glow, and a sudden burst of light cut through the night and a deafening boom shook the ground. It was go time.

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Chapter 7

They were only a few feet from the entrance of the village when the ground shook, causing the steering wheel in Bradlock's hands to jerk left and right a little. Asamoah, thinking they were only a few minutes from their destination after the village was admiring the diamond in between his thumb and index finger, and the explosion almost caused him to drop it in his lap. Out of the corner of his eye, Bradlock saw that he had managed to catch it and quickly place it back in its pouch and into his front shirt pocket.

"What in the hell?" Asamoah muttered to himself quietly.

Bradlock hit the brakes slowly, not wanting to cause a panic in the car, and with the cars behind him. They were just about to cross the threshold of the village and it was time to put their plan in action.

"Why are you stopping, eh? Why?" Asamoah exclaimed loudly, slapping the dashboard, sensing the end in sight and wanting to get on with things, even with what looked like a raging fire a few feet from them.

"It's alright, things happen, I'm just stopping to give time for the guys to follow us on the alternate route," Bradlock answered, trying to give off an air of calm confidence to put Asamoah at ease.

"Alternate route? You have one?" Asamoah asked, a little panicked, which Bradlock could hear and was happy with. Asamoah wasn't one to let his real feelings out, and knowing that he was slightly rattled worked in their favour.

"Of course, boss. It was outlined on the map. The boys know it too," Bradlock said, avoiding eye contact with Asamoah who he could feel was staring daggers into the side of his head, but instead choosing to apply pressure to the accelerator and get ready to enter the village.

The car began to pick up speed, and as they got closer they saw what had caused the explosion – a car, engulfed in flames, surrounded by three or four of the inhabitants of the village, two with fire extinguishers, barely managing to keep the flames at bay. The third villager, a man who was almost in as much of a panic as Asamoah, turned to see the headlights of the convoy coming their way, then raised and waved his arms signalling that they couldn't pass, something Bradlock had no intention of doing.

"Ignore him, we're turning. There are more than a few ways out of here," Bradlock calmly reassured his boss, turning right into a side street instead of heading straight as Asamoah had hoped this journey would go.

"Crazy. These poor fools and their cheap things," Asamoah said, practically looking down his nose at the sight ahead of him, "these are the kinds of people I stay away from. Their lives are filled with nothing but disappointment and one moment after the other of useless pain and silly things like this. Psh! A car on fire! Poor idiots."

Bradlock had to muster all the power he had in his body to not turn and punch Asamoah squarely in the face. For months he had listened to some of the

most ignorant and inconsiderate things he had ever heard, but Asamoah's lack of empathy or sympathy for any other human being other than himself made what was coming to him shortly something Bradlock was looking forward to immensely. All he could manage was a forced grumble that would make it sound like agreed with what Asamoah was saying. He chose to focus on the journey ahead, and turned the headlights up to maximum, as the tiny makeshift street they had turned on to had no streetlights.

"Just a couple of turns up ahead and we'll be out of this place with a straight shot to the town," Bradlock said, looking into the rear view mirror to see that the other two cars were a little further behind than they had been for the rest of the journey, and that is exactly how he wanted it. He had lied to Asamoah earlier; the rest of the team had no idea of an alternate route, and he knew that they were following him blindly, not knowing that he was driving Asamoah into an ambush.

On the other side of the small houses they were passing, all with their lights on and heads peering of the windows at the fire caused by the explosion, Sterling was tracking the movements of the convoy carefully, knowing that he was soon about to jump out and surprise them. He was about twenty feet ahead of the convoy, and he could hear the cars getting closer and closer to what was a dead end; a solid brick wall, shoddily put together by the town members to give their kids a safe place to play football, complete with goalposts painted on the bricks. Sterling crept, gun in hand, closer and closer to the edge of a house, until he was almost flush with the dead end brick wall, but still out of sight. He watched as Asamoah's Mercedes got closer, and soon the full-beam headlights were illuminating the wall, exposing the dead end Asamoah didn't see coming.

"Shit! Shit!"

The exclamations brought a smile to Sterling's face underneath his scarf. Even masked and muffled by the sound of three car engines, Sterling could hear an almost livid Asamoah yell from inside the car. The Mercedes came to a stop, and a car door opened – the driver's side door. Sterling, peering around the corner, barely staying out of the light reflecting off of the wall, watched as Bradlock exited the car and turned to the two Jeeps that were behind him.

"Back! Back! Dead end!" Sterling could hear Bradlock yelling, waving his arms and signalling for them to reverse, pointing to let them know to turn left onto another street when they could. Sterling continued to watch as Bradlock motioned his arms and forced the two Jeeps back, but instead of getting back in the car and following suit, he watched them reverse until they hit the end of the street, then turned left onto another side street, probably waiting for Bradlock and Asamoah to follow and continue to lead them. As the backlights of the last Jeep faded out of view, Sterling knew that now was the time to move. Crouched down and moving slowly towards the Mercedes, he could see that Asamoah had completely turned around and was watching Bradlock usher their backup away,

and before he could turn back around to see the approaching figure, Sterling had opened the car door and placed the barrel of his Glock to the back of Asamoah's head.

"Shh! Don't say anything," he hissed through his scarf. He was crouched down slightly so that he could clearly see into the car, but was still able to see Bradlock on the other side, who was subtly rubbing his chest, letting Sterling know where Asamoah was holding the diamond; his front shirt pocket.

"What the hell is this, eh?" Asamoah shouted, completely ignoring Sterling's demand of quiet, before getting even louder, yelling for Bradlock, "Hey! Get him, eh! Christopher!"

Before Bradlock could even pretend to reach for his gun, Sterling, quicker than he had ever moved in his life, took the gun from Asamoah's head, reached across the car, and shot Bradlock in the chest, throwing him to the ground. And before Asamoah had even begun to fumble for his own gun, the now hot barrel of Sterling's Glock was once again pressed up against the back of his head, causing him to wince in pain. On the dirt floor outside the car, Bradlock lay motionless, watched by a seething Asamoah, who knew his only defence could no longer come to his aid.

"Goddamn it! What the hell is this, eh? Eh? Who are you?" Asamoah spat. The venom in his voice was palpable. Sterling could tell just through the Asamoah's tone that if he managed to get his hands on him, he'd suffocate the life out of him in a fit of rage, without hesitation.

"No time for any of that," Sterling replied, putting on a slightly Eastern European accent to throw Asamoah off the scent. As he did so, he used his left hand to pat Asamoah's shirt pocket, feeling for the pouch that contained the diamond. Asamoah wriggled slightly, but the force that Sterling reapplied to the back of this head with the barrel of the gun made him rethink his urge to move.

"I'd think twice if I were you," Sterling said, as menacingly as he could, while still rooting around Asamoah's shirt for the pouch.

"Do you have any idea who I am?" Asamoah asked, taking his voice down a few decibels but still as aggressive as ever.

"No idea, but I see you come from the diamond mine all the time. I figured you must have something worth taking at least one of those times, and it looks like I was right!"

Sterling had slipped the pouch out of Asamoah's pocket, and as he pocketed it, Asamoah's eyes dilated, pure rage almost visibly pouring from him through every orifice.

"Pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Whoever," Sterling sneered.

"Asamoah Za – " he began, but before he could continue, Sterling, with a vicious blow, pistol-whipped Asamoah, not quite knocking

him out, but leaving a pouring gash on the back of his head and causing him to almost spill from the car. As his body slid out, the gun in his belt loop fell to the ground. Sterling kicked it under the vehicle and to the opposite side, where Bradlock's body lay, still motionless. Then he pulled Asamoah the rest of the way out of the car, dumping him to the ground. As the almost unconscious Asamoah writhed in pain on the ground, Sterling scrambled into the car, across the passenger's side and into the driver's seat. But before he could get his bearings, Asamoah attempted to climb back in. Sterling had no idea what to do now. He had no intention of killing the other man, but he couldn't let him get into the car. Reaching across to the passenger door, he slammed it shut, causing Asamoah's head to ricochet between the door and the body of the car, knocking him out completely. With the speed of a Formula 1 professional, Sterling threw the car into reverse, and screeched backwards away from Bradlock and Asamoah's bodies, both doors still wide open. He continued to reverse until he reached the intersection where, to his left, the two Jeeps were around twenty feet away, waiting for Asamoah and Bradlock to lead them to their planned destination. Clearly they hadn't heard any of what had just happened, but now he was in their view, he knew he had to move quickly.

Throwing the car into drive, Sterling peeled off in the opposite direction, tyres kicking up gravel as he drove, and before the two Jeeps even had a chance to follow, he had hit close to fifty miles an hour and was heading towards the entrance of the village.

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Chapter 8

Driving as slowly as she could, headlights off, Bria approached the entrance of the village before coming to a complete stop. She honestly didn't know what to expect, and with what looked like the dying embers of a raging fire ahead of her, she truly had no idea what situation she was driving into. The caravan was still on, engine chugging, and the only sounds she could hear were the voices of the villagers surrounding the car Sterling had set ablaze, until suddenly the sound of tyres began to get louder and louder. She waited, hands gripping the steering wheel, not knowing if the approaching sound was friend or foe, and as a car skid into view from the right hand side in front of her, she saw one of the faces she'd been waiting for.

Sterling turned the steering wheel of the Mercedes feverishly, drifting the car on ground not made for that type of driving, before stepping on the accelerator and speeding out of the village, blazing past Bria and the caravan in the direction she had just come from. Relief swept across her mind, but only for a second, as she knew that Sterling was only one of two people she was hoping were still alive. As she watched in her rear view mirror, Sterling disappeared into the distance, driving faster than anything she had ever seen in her life. She quickly snapped back to reality, remembering that her job wasn't complete. She slowly drove the caravan closer to the village entrance, but didn't enter. Just as she came to a stop, the two Jeeps containing the rest of Asamoah's henchmen hurtled round the corner from the same direction Sterling had just come from, both hitting their brakes and sliding forward, almost colliding with the caravan.

They blared their horns and tried their best to squeeze past, and as the first Jeep did, one of the henchmen leaned out of driver's side window, almost completely exiting the vehicle.

"Hey! You! English? Do you speak English?" he screamed.

Bria wound the electric window on the passenger's side of the caravan down. "Sorry?" she asked, playing dumb as best she could.

"Car! Did you see a car?" the impatient henchman yelled, using both hands to imitate the motion of driving a car, not even looking at Bria, but looking around for any signs of Asamoah's Mercedes.

"Yes! Car!" Bria yelled back in an accent not from any region, but different enough to sound as though it belonged where she was. The look on her face matched the exaggerated tone of her voice, but instead of pointing backwards in the direction Sterling was headed, she pointed to her left, his right, off into the darkness.

"Car! That way?" the henchmen asked hurriedly.

"Car! Nice car! Over there!" Bria responded, still pointing into the distance, and as she did, the henchman climbed back into the car, still looking at her, and screamed one last order.

“Back! Move back!”

Bria, continuing to play ignorant, fumbled with the gearshift, and then slowly reversed the caravan, allowing both Jeeps to exit the village and tear off in the direction she had pointed them in. An involuntary giggle started to escape her, adrenaline leaving her body in the form of a nervous laugh, but again she remembered that she wasn't done. She let both cars drive further into the distance a little more, before creeping slowly into the village and turning right, headed towards what she hoped was Bradlock waiting for her. As the few streetlights that illuminated the village became fewer and fewer the deeper in she got, the slower she drove, relying only on the headlights of the caravan to guide her, barely able to see anything beyond a few feet in front of her.

Turning the corner into what she hoped was the dead end street Bradlock and Sterling had outlined for her, she slowed her driving to a snail's pace and her body leaned so far forward that her nose was virtually pressed to the windshield. It was because of this that what she saw next almost caused the slowest car accident in recorded history. Directly in front of her, illuminated only by the headlights of the caravan, was the body of what she recognised as Asamoah, completely unconscious. Her foot hit the brake so hard that her already too far forward body jerked and she nearly made contact with the windshield. The caravan sat for a moment, engine chugging, as she looked around in the darkness, desperately trying to find Bradlock. Squinting, she peered through the driver's side window, and as she did, a pair of knuckles rapped against the glass.

“Oh my god!” Bria shrieked, almost loudly enough to wake Asamoah from his temporary slumber.

Bradlock, placing his face closer to the window, was visibly amused, even though by the look of him, covered in dirt and grabbing hold of his torso, he was a little worse for wear.

“Other side?” he asked, as a nearly hyperventilating Bria was doing her best to compose herself. He slowly made his way across the front of the caravan and gingerly entered, slamming the door shut behind him. “How about we get out of here?” he asked.

On seeing what looked like an impact mark on Bradlock's shirt, her eyes widened, but he answered her question before she could even find the words.

“Sterling's blanks. Still hurt like hell though.” He said calmly, but still wincing with each inhale, “Shall we?” he reiterated once more, a little more pressingly this time, which snapped Bria out of her slight daze and refocused her.

She began to back the caravan away, and as the headlights retreated, Asamoah's unconscious body faded from view. In his mind, Bradlock could think nothing except that Asamoah was where he belonged; a man who appeared to despise the dirt he walked on, left there to find his own way home.

Chapter 9

Sterling had maintained a steady, breakneck speed from the moment he was able to leave the village and drive straight in the opposite direction. Every few seconds he checked the rear view mirror, but for almost forty-five minutes of pedal to the metal driving he hadn't seen anything behind him, and finally he came to the realisation that he may have made it out unscathed. All he could hope was that Bria and Bradlock had too. It was at this moment that serendipity struck, and a hiss came through the walkie-talkie he had sitting on the passenger's side seat.

"Sterling? Sterling? You there, mate?" a crackling Bradlock could be heard coming through the speaker, to which Sterling beamed. With one hand on the steering wheel, he used the other to scoop up the walkie-talkie and hit the talk button.

"I'm here, Chris. I'm here. Good to hear your voice. Bria? Is Bria with you?" he asked.

"She's here mate. A little shaken, but we're good, and on our way to the rendezvous," Bradlock answered, to which Sterling laughed to himself, happy that everyone had escaped intact.

"Hope that bullet didn't hurt too much?" Sterling enquired, smiling as he waited for the answer.

"I owe you a shot to the arm with a blank, mate. You know how it goes. Even Stevens," Bradlock replied laughing, although Sterling knew he was dead serious.

"I know, I know. It's good to hear your voice though, mate. Bria, I'll see you later!"

"10-4 Jack. 10-4," she answered, the sound of her voice relieving Sterling of any apprehension he had been feeling. One last time, he clicked the talk button twice, signalling that all was well, and he threw the walkie-talkie back onto the seat, maintained his speed, and headed to the designated rendezvous. The idea of checking and re-checking the rear view mirror had now escaped him, and he was almost entirely focused on the fact that they had managed to achieve the seemingly impossible with only a few scratches and bruises between them, exclusively reserved for Bradlock; a thought which kept the smile that was already plastered on his face firmly in place.

His leaden foot began to ease off the accelerator, and he now kept a decent speed instead of the breakneck one he had maintained for most of his escape. With the end squarely in sight, he remembered the reason they had gone to all of this trouble, and he began to fumble in his jacket pocket for the coin. As he drove with one hand, he admired the coin in the other, a seemingly innocuous bit with its dent, carvings and inscriptions. He thought for a second as he admired it, what would happen if he were to place the diamond in the coin. Would it do something? Could it do anything? Why was Boothe so sure that a combination of the two would bring him untold power? As he thought, he subconsciously slowed down, and by the time he noticed, a glance at the speedometer showed that he had gone from a

steady sixty miles per hour down to ten, and he watched it still dropping until he reached a complete stop.

Still staring at the coin in one hand, he used the other to remove the pouch containing the diamond from his jacket pocket. He carefully placed the coin on the dashboard, freeing his hand and allowing it to plunge into the pouch and come back out with the small pink diamond. Now with the diamond in one hand, and the coin in the other, Sterling contemplated the idea of putting the two together. Only the low hum of the car's engine could be heard, and he was completely surrounded by darkness. The dent in the coin was calling to him, and as he admired the ridges of the uncut diamond, he couldn't help but feel as though that dent was handmade for this specific jewel. Throwing caution to the wind, he carefully placed the diamond into the dent, shaking the coin slightly to allow the shape of the diamond to find the right grooves and settle into place. He waited with bated breath, wondering what, if anything, would happen. His attention was so fixed on the coin, he barely noticed that the interior lights of the car were flickering along with the car's headlights, and that the engine was beginning to rumble, causing the car to shake. When he finally looked up and noticed what was happening around him, the sense of sudden unease he felt caused him to instinctively turn the coin upside down, letting the diamond fall into his palm.

Even for a diamond as small as it was, he could feel heat coming from it. The coin was as cold as ever, but the diamond was alive in some way. The lights had stopped flickering and the car stopped shaking, but the unease he felt was as palpable as ever. Carefully placing the diamond back in the pouch, and putting the coin and pouch in separate pockets of his jacket, he had already made his mind up; he wasn't going to tell Bria and Bradlock what had happened, nor was he going to entertain the idea that they put the diamond in the coin, even though it would be a logical request they'd make. Three words circled through his mind on a loop: 'Boothe was right', and until he knew exactly what the combination of the coin and the diamond could do, he wasn't going to put them together, even in his own well-intentioned hands.

With one last glance in the rear view, he pressed his foot on the accelerator once more and headed towards the meeting point. The elation and adrenaline he had felt just minutes before were now just a distant memory, and the realisation that, once again, he had stepped up to a mantle that he may not be ready to face weighed heavy on him. As crazy as he seemed, as unhinged as he could be at times, and as maniacal about accruing artefacts as he was, those three words grew louder and louder in Sterling's mind – 'Boothe was right'.