

# **Conspire**

**By**

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## Foreword

The Bilderberg Group is real, named after the location of its first meeting in 1954 at the Bilderberg Hotel, in the Netherlands. Originally formed to support Atlanticism (a stronger relationship between Western Europe and the USA after World War II), the group promotes cooperation in political, economic and defence issues. With around 130 members invited each year from government, commerce and media, the group was largely kept from the public eye until recent years, when the digital age made secrecy on this scale impossible.

Although the media now know of the existence of the group and the identity of most of the recent attendees, little is known about what is actually discussed at the meetings. Members are completely barred from revealing anything about their involvement. This has led to many conspiracy theories about what the group does, including accusations that they aim to form a New World Order, or a world government controlled by the elite of the western world.

With past members alleged to include Hilary Clinton, Tony Blair, Angela Merkel, Bill Gates, Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands and David Rockefeller, it is unsurprisingly that many eyebrows are raised about the continued secrecy surrounding these annual meetings.

You can find out more about the Bilderberg Group by Googling 'Bilderberg Group'.

**Conspiracy, Conspire:** make secret plans jointly to commit a harmful act; working together to bring about a particular result, typically to someone's detriment. ORIGIN late Middle English: from Old French *conspirer*, from Latin *conspirare* agree, plot, from *con-* together with *spirare* breathe.

Definition borrowed from the *Wikileaks Manifesto* by Julian Assange.

## Prologue:

*Local time – 4:10pm, Friday 15th June, 2011.  
New York, USA.*

‘How many died in Hiroshima sir?’ the man’s assistant asked, carefully.

‘About 160 thousand. Another 80 in Nagasaki.’

‘And you said the weapons are bigger these days?’

‘Are you starting to lose your nerve? I can smell chicken shit.’

‘I’m not scared. I just want to know what’s going to happen.’

‘A lot of shit is going to happen. I don’t think you really want to know.’ The tall, thin man stood up from his chair and lit a cigarette. He opened the window above his desk so that some of the smoke could escape. His wife hated it when he smoked in the house. The desk in front of him was covered with a large paper map. His assistant had just used an old metal compass to draw a red line around the circumference of the blast zone and was now peering at the blocks of streets within the circle.

‘I know why you think I’m scared. It’s because I ask so many questions. Worried people ask questions. But I’m not worried. I just like to know things. We’re not going to be there to see it. I doubt the TV crews will want to get too close either.’

‘Right you are.’

‘So when the bomb goes off, what will these streets look like?’

‘They’ll look like a nuclear bomb has exploded.’ The older man chuckled.

‘Quite an imagination you have there, sir.’

‘I’ll paint you a picture. Everyone inside that line will be burnt to death before they have time to think about it. Their internal organs will disintegrate. Their skin will melt against their bones. They’ll be charcoal, or burnt black corpses if they’re lucky. The fireball will destroy all the buildings. A few concrete structures might still be standing but there’ll be nothing worth keeping. The blast zone will literally be wiped off the face of the earth. Many in the city outside of your circle will be injured. You know, flash burns, thousands will be blinded, all that shit. The radiation will eventually get to most of them. It’s a densely populated city. I’d guess we’ll kill somewhere between 700 thousand and a mill.’

‘That’s sure to get some attention.’

‘I should bloody well hope so. We’re not doing this for kicks. It’s how we won the war you know. You don’t get that from textbooks. It was the only way. And it’s the only way this time too.’ The man stubbed out his cigarette on the windowsill and flicked the butt into the garden below. ‘Call the car around, I need to get going.’ His assistant stood up and shuffled through papers in his briefcase.

‘Here’s your itinerary sir. I’ve set your watch to Prague time. Your flight leaves in an hour.’

‘Put the map away. I’ll see you when this is done.’ The younger man went to shake his boss’s hand, but he was already gone.

## Chapter 1:

*Local time – 9:30am, Saturday 16th June, 2011.  
Prague, Czechoslovakia.*

Alex North felt ruffled. With little time to pack, she'd forgotten her professional suit jacket. So she was wearing flat black boots, dark denim jeans, a long sleeve white t-shirt and fawn shawl; she looked more like a protestor than a journalist. A fuzzy hangover added to her misery. Drinking her eighth beer last night, she had expected to be enjoying a Saturday morning sleep in. But after a panicky 2:00am phone call from her editor, a tense cab ride to the hospital and then a 6:30am plane from Heathrow to Prague, her day was far off course. She'd had little rest on the plane; after embarrassing herself by flinging out an arm in her sleep and hitting the crew cut young American sitting next to her, she sat awake and rigid for the rest of the flight.

Bernie was meant to be in Prague covering this story. 'It all boils down to this, my dear,' he had said last night during their first beer at the local. 'If I can get a scoop at Bilderberg, I might actually retire. Job done. Go home. It's that important.'

Bernie left earlier than Alex, keen to go over his notes and finish packing. Alex stayed out with the rest of her colleagues, and she'd barely made it into bed when Gerome had called to pass on the terrible news. Bernie was in hospital. His wife said he collapsed when he got home. The doctors diagnosed a stroke. Alex was so horrified that Bilderberg was the last thing on her mind. But Gerome insisted she go in Bernie's place. He told her to get a good night's sleep, knowing she would get dressed and rush to visit Bernie.

Bernie Cook and his wife Laura had been like parents to Alex since she arrived in London four years ago. 'Aren't you a bit old to be an intern?' was the first of many questions Bernie asked. Alex explained that journalism wasn't her first career choice. She tried her hand at accounting, but found her office job was torture. Her three-year communications degree was far more satisfying, but left her jobless and penniless at age 28. So off to London it was, with an internship at the UK's best investigative daily newspaper, *The Contingent*, living in the city's smallest, cheapest flat and sustained by a weekly roast dinner at Bernie and Laura's.

Anyone overhearing Alex and Bernie talking would never think there was a 30 year age difference. Bernie's passion for political debate – and conspiracy theories – kept Alex enthralled for hours. And his talent for journalism had rubbed off. Seeing him lying there unconscious, so still and frail, was a shock to Alex. Laura looked visibly withered, leaning over Bernie's face as if frightened she might miss something if she glanced away. She barely looked up long enough to give Alex Bernie's iPad so she could study his notes for the assignment.

Alex pretended to feel confident as she hurried across Charles Bridge towards the conference venue – Prague Castle. She was staying near the Old Town Square, in the predictably modest hotel booked by Bernie. Alex had politely endured the hotelier's gossip; Bernie always said the people were the best thing about Prague. But Alex loved the pastel feel of the city, the swans on the river and the winding cobbled streets. She knew her way around, having visited once before with a forgettable ex-boyfriend. She recalled being more impressed with Prague than with him. It was no wonder the relationship petered out like all the others.

The castle was the most splendid sight in the city. Nestled in front of the cathedral and bordered by the Vltava River, Alex thought it looked like Cinderella's palace. But today the whole area was off limits to tourists, secured behind a newly erected mesh fence with razor wire along the top. The castle grounds were already surrounded by a wall, but the Prague police must have decided they needed to erect a second barrier to keep people like her from getting anywhere near the invited guests.

She approached the security checkpoint; the only road to the castle took cars straight through this gate. Bernie had given the impression there would be quite a crowd at the event's perimeter, so Alex was surprised to find only security staff milling around. The conference didn't start until that afternoon, but Alex assumed there would be plenty of protesters hustling for front position. Bilderberg had grown in reputation over the last few years, much to the angst of the organisers. It now attracted the same anti-globalisation protests as those at meetings of the IMF or G8 summits. The Prague branch of the Occupy Movement had also planned to sit down outside the conference, and had branded the Bilderbergers 'the one percent of the one percent' across social media networks.

Alex recalled Bernie saying it was the first time the Bilderberg conference was not being held at a luxury hotel. There were so many problems with press leaks from hotel staff at past conferences that the Bilderbergers took up the offer from one of their members, Czech President, Václav Klaus, to have the conference in his castle. In return, the Bilderbergers gave the entire complex a makeover, ensuring it was fit for the prestigious guests, spending a sum of money Bernie described as offensive.

'Klaus is rubbing his hands together with glee,' Bernie had said. 'Once they're all gone he'll have a palace he will finally be happy to call home.' All the staff, from the chefs to the cleaners, were chosen by the conference organisers to ensure no mole could infiltrate the shroud of secrecy enveloping the event.

There was very little activity outside the gate, and the men in dark suits ignored her, so Alex sat on a low stone wall by the side of the road and took Bernie's iPad out of her leather satchel. She knew the password, since she was the one to show Bernie how to set it up. He didn't use it for typing, nor did he play games or surf the internet. He just liked to have his notes with him, or what he called his 'Conspiracy Bible.' This was a word document, over 1,000 pages long. Originally it had been a stack of notebooks; Laura had patiently typed it out one summer, word for word, onto Bernie's old laptop. He continued updating it, had learned to type and recently transferred it to his new toy.

Alex knew the file well. There was a comprehensive section on the Bilderberg Group, including the various wild allegations that they were a potential world government. Other headings for some of Bernie's favourite conspiracies included 'Mossad planned September 11 attacks', 'China faked the Lop Nur Incident', 'iPhone collects users' DNA onto central government database' and 'CIA bombed the Lockerbie plane.' Alex understood Bernie knew most of his research related to nut jobs and their paranoid delusions. 'It was really just a hobby,' he had said, a lifelong fascination. But the Bilderberg Group was different. He was positive it was more than a networking group. And it was his dream to reveal their activities to the public.

The last time they spoke about it, Alex reiterated her unwavering argument. 'If they really are planning a world government like your conspiracy says, someone would have spilled the beans.' Bernie loved it when Alex challenged him. It just fired him up more.

'Give them a chance,' he'd say. 'It will happen. And when it does, I'll be there.'

As Alex flicked through Bernie's notes, she wondered what his scoop was going to be.

## Chapter 2:

*Local time – 10:15am, Saturday 16th June, 2011.  
Prague, Czechoslovakia.*

Though each inevitably knew of the other's progress in the world, it was the first time Douglas Johnson and Leo Freeman had seen each other since their Yale 10 year reunion. They shook hands eagerly in the grand entrance hall of Prague Castle. It was a satisfying moment for the men who first met as freshman roommates.

'Bilderberg! It's great to be here. I gather you were responsible for my invitation,' Douglas said.

'I may have mentioned something, but of course you were recommended by other members as well.' Leo winked. It was the same wink Douglas used to get when Leo asked him to do his economics essays for him.

'Doesn't it seem like a lifetime ago we were students? All these years later I'm still at Yale. How's your father? Still paying your way?'

'Of course not Douglas, he finally let me

have the media arm of the company when stocks were almost worthless.'

'I keep an eye on the market. Your company has made an incredible come-back.'

'No one thought I could do it. Though people were only comparing me to my genius roommate and it's hard to measure up to that. I see you're tipped to be the next Chairman of the Fed. Well done my friend. Well done indeed.' Leo slapped Douglas on the back and then directed the bellboys to carry their bags to their rooms.

'We're next to each other,' Leo explained. 'It's the one downside of this conference – you can't bring your staff. But it's a small price to pay.' Douglas nodded, wondering if Leo really thought Yale provided staff for their travelling professors.

'I would have liked to bring Georgia. But I read the rules and they were...'

'Of course the rules have to be quite strict. No contact outside the conference, no mobile phones, no wives...'

'I heard Spelman usually brings his wife.' Douglas said.

'Yes, well Spelman earns that benefit through his generous support of the conference. Isn't the castle's refurbishment splendid?'

'Yes, it's wonderful.'

'Fancy a drink in the bar?' Leo asked. Douglas agreed, and tried not to look shocked at the handful of notes Leo gave the bellboy as a tip. The halls were mostly empty, with just a few staff scuttling back and forth. Douglas assumed most of the members were already in the castle. Surprisingly, none of them was in the bar. It was a tasteful, simple space, with modern chrome and leather fittings that somehow managed not to look incongruous in the ancient building. The men took their seats and the barman served two whiskies, avoiding eye contact. He was well trained in discretion and Leo seemed comfortable talking openly.

'Did you see the protestors in the square?' Douglas shook his head.

'I flew in this morning and I haven't had a chance to look around.'

‘I should have stopped over in Connecticut yesterday and given you a lift in my jet, to make some time for sightseeing.’

‘I didn’t realise the public knew enough about this conference to protest.’

‘Quite the opposite. We’ve had real problems with them in previous years. It’s become a bit of a circus. And the journalists are an even bigger nuisance. Thankfully it won’t be a concern this year.’

‘Oh? Why’s that?’

‘They’ve already arrested anyone who looks like getting too close to the castle. And they’ve been told to deal with them. It’s a relief.’ Douglas nodded, not wanting to ask who “they” were and how they would “deal” with them. He had decided that if he was going to attend this conference he knew so little about, it was best to stand out because of his intelligence and contribution to discussions, not through wide eyed wonder at the lives and ethics of the mega rich members. A silence settled over them. Then Leo looked him straight in the eye.

‘This is the most important conference since 1999. That’s why I wanted friends like you here.’

‘Important how?’ Douglas could feel an excited apprehension in Leo’s mood.

Before Leo could answer, his attention was caught by a man crossing the bar to join them. From his smile, it was obvious this was a close friend.

‘Adam, why don’t you join us for a drink?’ Leo called out. The man continued towards them but Douglas could tell by his furrowed brow that he wasn’t there for a sociable chat. He was a short man, with sharp blue eyes, thick white hair and a military bearing. He came to a stop directly next to Leo’s bar stool.

‘Is everything OK? You look worried,’ asked Leo.

‘Hello Leo. Hello, I’m Adam Edelstein.’ The anxious man was supremely polite for someone completely distracted. He held out his hand to Douglas.

‘Douglas Johnson.’

Douglas stood up to shake the man’s hand and then offered him a stool to join them at the bar. The man sat down and smoothed his hands down the front of his pants. Having introduced himself to Douglas, he now appeared to forget he was there.

‘Leo, I need to have a quick word. We have to call an emergency meeting of the nuclear committee.’

‘Why? What’s happened?’ Leo’s relaxed mood instantly disappeared.

‘I’ve just had Thames House on the phone. It appears they haven’t been completely truthful with us.’

‘I’m assuming this has something to do with nuclear weapons?’

‘Yes. One particular weapon. A weapon we heard whisperings of, but never anything confirmed. Now it has been confirmed.’

‘Where is it?’

‘Pakistan’. Leo dropped his glass onto the bar. The crash made Douglas jump. Leo now spoke quietly, but with an intense anger.

‘How could this happen Adam? Why didn’t they tell you sooner?’

‘They did tell us sooner. They’ve known about this weapon for years. They’re the ones who found out it had been hidden by some anti-American fanatics within the Pakistan nuclear community. Apparently they made a pact with the ISI to leave it where it is. We’ve been working with them to make sure it was dealt with.’

‘Should we tell the others?’

‘That’s why I want to have a meeting of the committee. I think we keep them updated, but no one else. Unless it’s absolutely imperative that the others find out, there’s no point ruining everyone’s optimism. Pakistan was one of our hardest tasks and people have been so pleased to hear that we finally had agreement from them. Unless we fix it, this could destroy that agreement.’

‘Then we should keep this information within the small group as long as we can.’

‘I hope we can sort it out fairly quickly. The journalist hasn’t made it to Prague. But I’ve just found out that a female colleague has been sent in his place. We need to find out where the iPad is. Apparently it’s important but we don’t know why.’

‘I assume your men are looking for her now?’

‘Of course, I have my best Metsada operative working to contain the situation.’ Adam now looked past Leo to Douglas, as if he had been speaking to him all along.

‘Douglas, Leo tells me you are an old friend. You haven’t been assigned a committee yet. I would like to invite you to join the nuclear group. We need as many bright minds as we can get.’

Douglas nodded, feeling a little overwhelmed.

‘Of course, I would be honoured.’ He got up from his stool. ‘Who was that man?’ he asked, staring at Edelstein’s retreating back.

‘His title is General Edelstein. He’s a general in the Israeli army and he’s the head of Mossad. We better hope he’s up to this.’

### Chapter 3:

*Local time – 10:20am, Saturday 16th June, 2011.  
Prague, Czechoslovakia.*

‘You’ll be arrested if you stay there.’ Alex jumped. Immersed in Bernie’s notes, she hadn’t noticed anyone approaching her. Sliding the iPad into her bag, she stood up.

‘Arrested? What for?’

‘This is a no go zone during the conference. I’m surprised you made it this far.’

The man took a step towards her, and as he moved out of the glare of the sun she saw his features clearly. He wore casual jeans and a light blue jumper, with a white shirt collar peaking out the top.

‘So what are you doing here? Are you police? I mean, security?’

‘No, I’m just a tourist. How about you?’

‘Journalist.’ Alex felt round in the front pocket of her satchel for a business card, eventually handing him a creased one. He glanced at it, holding out his hand.

‘Henry Bradford. Pleased to meet you, Alex.’ She shook his outstretched hand.

‘So why would I be arrested?’ Alex realised she was following Henry as he walked slowly back down the road.

‘About thirty protesters and journalists have already been arrested in the Old Town Square this morning. They were at the gate earlier and got turned away. So they set up under the tower and were rounded up by the cops.’

‘What were they arrested for?’

‘I don’t know. The police are jumpy today, even worse than last year in Spain. They won’t charge them, they just want them out the way so they’ll keep them in the courthouse cells for the weekend.’

‘That’s a bit heavy handed isn’t it?’

‘They don’t want them to draw too much attention to Bilderberg.’

Alex thought this seemed outrageous behaviour, counter-productive even, but not wanting to appear naive, she changed the subject.

‘Are people arriving at the conference now?’

‘You’re the journalist! Shouldn’t you have noticed?’ he asked with a grin, pointing at a black sedan with tinted windows that drove past close enough to touch. Alex tried not to peer in, but she couldn’t resist a quick look.

‘You won’t see them in their cars,’ he explained. ‘But I saw one of them this morning at a restaurant.’

He was still walking and Alex quickly caught up.

‘Who was it?’

‘Duncan Brookfield...’ Alex looked at him blankly. ‘Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. He attended last year too.’

Alex felt chastened.

‘For a tourist, you know a lot about the Bilderbergers.’

‘It’s a hobby,’ he replied. ‘So what’s an Aussie doing working at *The Contingent*?’

‘Is my accent still that obvious?’

‘I could tell you’re Australian before you spoke. Beautiful women, each and every one of you. At least you’re getting the chance to cover Bilderberg from London. Australian press have never shown any interest. Murdoch’s doing no doubt.’

‘Yeah, but it was a last minute assignment and I’m not really prepared...’

‘What angle are you going for?’

‘The arrests in the square, that’s a good start.’

‘No, that’s old news. Journalists were arrested last year and the year before. They just got angry and nowhere fast.’

‘So, if you weren’t just a tourist who happened to know a lot about Bilderberg, and you were looking for a scoop, without getting arrested, where would you go?’ Alex asked. Henry stopped and smiled.

‘Let me buy you brunch and I’ll give you some ideas.’

‘I’ll have brunch with you, but I’m buying. I’ll expense it as an interview.’

## Chapter 4:

*Local time – 1:45pm, Saturday 16th June, 2011.  
Islamabad, Pakistan.*

General Abdullah Wasti asked his driver to pull over. He needed a moment to think before entering the University grounds. In his 40 year career with the Pakistani military, he couldn't recall a more momentous occasion than the one before him today. His son had no idea why his father was visiting, and had sounded excited when told his father needed to speak to him urgently. Ahmed was a brilliant student, Abdullah thought, and a dedicated son. Studying at the National Defence University in Islamabad was a natural step in preparing him for a military career. It was good that he wanted to follow in his father's footsteps. But it would mean giving up family life, as he had done, well before the boy was born. Abdullah rarely visited Ahmed, and since becoming Foreign Minister two years ago, he hadn't seen him at all.

Abdullah motioned for his driver to enter the grounds, where a security guard ushered the car through to a small car park at the rear of the student accommodation block. Usually a visit from a government minister would be greeted by a procession of University dignitaries, but Abdullah had insisted this visit be kept private.

His personal security protection officer accompanied him inside the students' wing and stood guard outside the formal sitting room where Ahmed was waiting. At 25 years of age, he still managed to look to his father like a wide eyed ten year old, hoping from one foot to the other in excitement at the Eid ul Fitr feast. Ahmed shook his father's hand.

'Father, peace be to you. I am so grateful for your visit.' Ahmed invited his father to sit down in one of the twin armchairs and poured a tea for them both.

'And to you be peace together with God's mercy, my son. How are your studies Ahmed? Your mother tells me you are doing well.'

'Yes, I am currently enjoying National Security Studies very much. This is the field I am hoping to pursue.' Polite, stilted conversation could not quite obscure the pride they took in each other.

'Very wise, my son. You will have every opportunity with this subject.' Ahmed stared at his feet.

'My son, I want to speak to you about something very important. You have always been patient and dutiful in your relationship with me. I did not want to show you disrespect by withholding information that will affect not just your life, but the lives of every man in this country.' Ahmed did not quite manage to hide his consternation. His father did not bring good news.

'Of course, father. I am honoured you have taken the time to meet with me.' Abdullah did not have to explain the strict confidence of their discussions, or the consequences if his son were to break the promise of secrecy he made as a child never to talk about his father's activities.

'You are going to be told your father is a coward and it is possible you will have to leave Pakistan, if our plans are not accepted.'

Ahmed looked stunned. 'Are you leaving, father?'

‘I hope I won’t have to. But when you hear what we have chosen to do, and you understand how close we are to achievement, you may feel it’s safest I do.’ Ahmed would not meet his father’s eye. Abdullah did not mind, he was grateful to be able to speak without his son seeing his sudden apprehension.

‘We are selling our nuclear arsenal and dismantling our facilities.’

‘What? Selling?’ Ahmed stood up in agitation.

‘I can’t explain the details of the sale, not even to you. But you have to trust me that this is for the good of our country. We hope that one day it will be seen as the turning point in Pakistan’s history.’

‘But why father? We base our security on those weapons. What price could possibly be enough?’

‘Please my son, do not burden me with questions I can’t answer. You will find the truth in good time, but I did not want you learning of this through the eyes of a sceptical media. I beg you to trust me. We have not done this without genuine argument and consideration. But eventually the decision was unanimous amongst the cabinet and we have been privately arranging the details for months.’

‘But father, you are putting this country at incredible risk. Whoever can afford these weapons, whoever can afford to convince our government to endanger the security of its citizens, how do you know they won’t use the weapons themselves? How do you know they won’t use them to strike us?’ Abdullah would have been disappointed if his son hadn’t reacted this way. Ahmed loved Pakistan as much as he did, and he was perfectly correct to be so concerned.

‘Trust, my son, is a very important thing. Our country will not move forward by accusing, hating and turning other nations against us. We have made this decision for the people of Pakistan.’ Ahmed sat back down and now looked his father straight in the eyes, seeking to make sense of this news. But he knew his father was not going to say any more. Abdullah got up and hugged his son.

‘Please put your faith in me, your father, if you can’t put your faith elsewhere. I have not told you this to frighten you. I hope you will find yourself, not long from now, proud you are my son and proud you are from Pakistan.’ Ahmed watched his father walk out. He waited until the door was shut before he put his head in his hands and wept.

## Chapter 5:

*Local time – 10:30am, Saturday 16th June, 2011.  
Prague, Czechoslovakia.*

Daniel Klein twisted his pint glass between his hands and peered out at the quiet street. His seat by the window at Sherlock's Bar gave him the perfect, inconspicuous view of the entrance to the Městská police station. His glass was half full, and although he sipped at it regularly, the volume of beer wasn't changing.

He had been in the bar for two hours and couldn't afford to drink like a real tourist. Luckily, there were enough English bucks' weekend drinkers starting their party early to ensure he drew little attention to himself. After receiving his orders that morning at Prague Castle, he came straight to the bar, waiting for his target to arrive across the street. Now he just hoped the Prague police would hold up their side of the bargain. Rounding up protestors was the easy part; almost like rounding up sheep. With their predilection for travelling in packs, their bleating chorus and their ridiculous hippy outfits, they were quite like sheep.

Daniel grinned to himself, imagining a more exciting project – popping off sniper rounds into the protestors' pathetic sit-downs at G8 conferences. Of course, he would never be allowed to do that. But it was a nice daydream. He imagined them scattering like pigeons, tripping over their do-gooder placards in their terror to get away. Their Bohemian wraps flying everywhere, like broken wings. They wouldn't be so Kumbaya with a couple of bullets in their backsides. The journalists, on the other hand, were a different problem. They weren't nearly as easy to arrest, especially if they weren't pestering around the castle like maggots on a corpse. He gently rubbed the knife concealed under his shirt. He was lost again in his daydream, imagining what he would do with it if he found himself in a dark ally with most of the journalists he knew. Gutter scum. Stalking the dark corners, looking for ways to undo anything optimistic in the world. The fact that he was waiting for one particular rodent journalist to enter the police station in Prague made him smile. This was a fitting reversal of roles.

Daniel's mind may have been preoccupied, but his eyes were not. And, being well trained in surveillance, he didn't miss the change in scenery outside. He was expecting a police car to pull up in the only space left on the narrow street. But instead a small white Fiat parked there. He watched as a guy with a crew cut, light blonde hair and a sandy tan got out. Daniel had worked with enough intelligence staff to know American military when he saw one. This guy made far too much effort to move slowly. Daniel knew that look too. This bozo was trying way too hard. Must be a newbie. Daniel laughed to himself. He took out his phone and glanced around to make sure no one was watching him, and then fired off a couple of photos of the vehicle and the driver, who, having locked the car, was now strolling all too relaxedly down the street.

Once the guy had disappeared, Daniel scanned the photos and then texted them back to base. They would work out who he was within the hour. Their face recognition software was far better than the Americans', not that they would be sharing this information. Daniel bristled at the thought of there being someone else on his turf. His mission wasn't exactly thrilling, but it was important. As important as any other he had done of late. He liked to work alone, and if he

wasn't working alone, he wanted to know about it. Cooperation was often forced on him, under the guise of neighbourly friendship. But to Daniel, it was all bullshit. All he needed was a name, a face and a gun to get his job done. And he had two of these things today. If the face would just turn up, he could finish the job and go home.

He stared out at the street for a while longer, conscious that he hadn't received a message back confirming receipt of his images. But when the message did come, it wasn't what he was expecting. His boss, with his usual directness, was changing the mission.

*'Target prematurely taken out of game. Track down replacement pawn. Name: Alex North, journalist for The Contingent. Face on its way.'*

## Chapter 6:

*Local time – 10:55am, Saturday 16th June, 2011.  
Prague, Czechoslovakia.*

When they got to the Old Town Square, there was no sign of protesters, or police, just the normal crowd of tourists eating ice-creams and waiting for the famous clock tower cuckoo to appear. Henry chose the restaurant and an alfresco table. He pulled out Alex's chair before sitting down himself.

'I can tell this is your first Bilderberg,' he said.

'How?'

'Where's your camera?'

'I'm a journalist, not a photojournalist.'

'I know, but your paper didn't send a photojournalist, so you have to be prepared to take photos too. Your story will be better with photographic evidence.'

'If you'd seen my shocking photography skills, you wouldn't say that.' She laughed nervously.

'No doubt your writing skills are pretty good though. *The Contingent* wouldn't hire an amateur. I read one of their articles a while back, it was a great piece comparing the world's weak response to the refugee crisis caused by the Pakistan floods with the outpouring of support for countries affected by the Boxing Day Tsunami. I found it on the net.'

'That was mine!' Alex failed to hide her excitement, but Henry didn't laugh at her. He looked impressed.

'That was you? Really? Nice work.'

'I'm flattered anyone read it! It wasn't exactly front-page news.'

'No, the front page is reserved for sound bite journalism. You're obviously far too analytical for mass media.' Alex didn't know what to say. This was exactly how she felt about her career – she was good at writing stories she thought needed to be written, but not necessarily good at finding her by line in the popular sections of the news. She had never delivered a juicy scoop to her editor. This conference was her first chance to do just that.

She put down the menu and admired the stranger sitting across from her. She wasn't the sort to judge a man wholly on his looks and often found herself attracted to a man's laugh or personality. But Henry was something different. He had magnetism in his features and his manner. The way he looked at her so intently, she couldn't help but feel he did already know her. Her mother used to always say "beware of handsome men". And Henry sure fit that type.

'Before we order, I need to admit something...'

Before he could go on, the expectant pause between them was obliterated by an earth shattering boom. The blast of noise echoed in the air for the briefest of seconds, and was replaced by a silence so complete it had to be caused by a momentary deafness. Alex instinctively scrambled under the table, which shook with the blast's after shock. Henry slid in behind and huddled close, with a protective arm across her.

'Holy shit,' he said. 'That was a bomb.' Alex's hearing returned in time to hear 'bomb' and

then uproar. People were running through the square.

‘Was it the castle?’ Alex asked. She peered out.

The castle, high on the hill, could be seen from anywhere in the city. There were no signs of an explosion. But people were pointing south and a huge plume of dark grey smoke was rising there in the distance. Someone was shouting in English and one word stood out like the smoke in the sky. Alex’s blood ran cold. ‘Terrorist.’

‘Let’s get out of here.’ Henry grabbed her hand and pulled her towards a laneway. The usually dawdling foot traffic was fleeing in all directions and Alex completely lost her bearings. Henry ran steadily, steering away from the chaos whilst dragging her to keep up with him. As they rounded a corner, Alex’s foot slipped on a loose stone and Henry’s grip tightened to stop her falling.

‘It’s OK,’ he kept saying. ‘It’s just down here.’ As they ran down one side of Wenceslas Square, the sound of sirens attached itself to the panic. Henry veered abruptly left into the Hotel Evropa. He was barely puffing, but Alex was exhausted. A worried looking man stood behind the reception desk, speaking tensely in Czech into a mobile phone. He caught Henry’s eye and said in perfect English:

‘A bomb has exploded at the police station.’

‘Police station?’ Alex gasped, acutely aware of the stitch in her side. When she stepped into the lift she noticed she was still holding Henry’s hand.

‘What the hell is going on?’ she asked. Henry looked resolute.

‘I knew something like this would happen.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘They weren’t going to put up with this for long.’

‘Put up with what?’

‘The interference.’

The lift stopped and Henry hurried her across the corridor and into his room. The quiet calmed Alex immediately. She sat on the bed, still catching her breath.

‘Look, I don’t mean I knew they were going to bomb the police station. But I knew they would do something to lay down their rules.’

‘You mean the Bilderbergers? I can’t believe...’

‘Well start believing it. Because it’s real.’ Henry sounded angry, catching Alex by surprise.

‘How do you know it was them? Why on earth would they blow people up?’ Henry sat down next to her and she could feel he was rigid with outrage.

‘They’ve been losing control of their secrecy. It used to be much easier for them to get away with total anonymity, but that’s changed. There are some journalists out there who want to expose what’s going on in these meetings. It was only a matter of time before the Bilderbergers made their position clear.’

‘You mean this was a warning?’

‘Not just a warning. They’ve likely killed most of those journalists today. Who’s going to go after the story now?’

‘Us. We should go to the bomb site. That’s what I should be reporting.’ As if on cue, her mobile rang. It was Gerome.

‘Alex, where are you?’

‘There was a bomb.’

‘I know. I just saw a Twitter feed. It said car bomb at Prague police station and now there’s a hole in the ground where the main cell block used to be...’

‘There were at least 30 protesters and journalists in there.’

‘Bilderberg protesters?’

‘Yes.’ Alex waited for the news to sink in. Gerome didn’t seem to be saying anything, but she knew he would be swearing under his breath.

‘Alex, as much as I’d love to send you in there to cover this, I’m not putting you in harm’s way. It’s not worth it. I want you out of there.’

‘I’ll stay away from the scene of the bomb, but I’m not coming home yet. There’s at least one story here, even if you have to publish it without my name.’ Gerome considered this for a moment, and his sharp intake of breath suggested to Alex he needed more persuading.

‘Bernie wouldn’t have come home so I’m not either.’ Gerome again said nothing and Alex suddenly realised there was another reason for his call.

‘Bernie didn’t make it Alex. I think you should come home.’ Alex’s phone fell out of her hand. The thud made Henry jump.

‘Alex, Alex, are you there?’ Gerome’s voice echoed from the speaker.

She picked up her phone and managed to say, ‘I’ll call you later,’ before bursting into tears. Henry handed her a tissue and silently waited.

‘A friend, in England, he had a stroke. I thought he would be OK.’ She broke down again and Henry sat down next to her while she cried, his hand resting on her back.

After a while he said quietly,

‘Alex, if you do plan to stay, and you’re looking for a story, come with me to Estonia. I’ll prove to you there’s more to this Bilderberg group.’

‘Estonia? Why on earth would I go there? The story is here.’

‘All the other journalists will be covering the bombing, but the real story is in Tallinn.’

‘Why? What’s there?’

‘Evidence of their power. Evidence of their ultimate goal.’

‘Which is?’

‘Look, I’m not just an innocent bystander. You’ve probably guessed by now.’

‘What are you then?’

‘Let’s just say I’m a researcher. And I’m willing to help you get the biggest scoop of your career. I just want the story out there. We only need to go to Estonia for a few hours. It’s not that far. You’ll be back here before you know it.’

Alex sat looking at Henry, wondering if this was the fork in the road she’d been waiting for. She’d spent the last two years desperately looking for an angle that would launch her onto centre stage, but she had never come across an offer like this.

‘Ok, I’ll come with you,’ Alex said, conscious she was agreeing not just from her own hope of glory but because that’s what Bernie would have done.

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