

Opening extract from
Chasing Stone

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postcode into the Sat Nav so I could get home as soon as possible.

“Keep a good distance, the client doesn’t want this to be too public and if he sees us then we don’t get paid,” Echo 1 said into the com’s set, as he watched the BMW drive past, “We take him once he stops for the night or gets to wherever he is going” Echo 1 added, seeing his men pull out and start tailing the target.

Meanwhile in the other BMW...

Sara Sasco looked at the laptop screen wondering why her men were not following her to the hotel. The screen showed the other car heading towards the motorway in a northerly direction. She flicked her phone open and tried to call the men she had left back at the hangar, but none of her calls were answered. She leant forward saying softly, “Head back to the hangar. It seems we have a problem.”

‘Back into Puerto Rico...

Tony Weister couldn’t believe his luck. The way he had recruited the people to deliver the device had even surprised him. His boss had given him a budget of twenty million dollars to buy their loyalty and to make sure the money was only transferred once a successful detonation had been achieved, but at the sight of all that money, Weister had made alternate plans for the majority of it. He had only offered each man a maximum of one million with a threat that their families would suffer if they refused to collaborate with him; knowing that with the Sasco name behind him, they would just follow like sheep.

Weister was sick of been Karl Sasco’s puppet. Karl Sasco was head of Sascorp International and the worlds most feared drug/arms-dealer. The Sasco family owned casinos, racecourses, and small airfreight companies all over the world. If Karl Sasco wanted you dead, the only safe place to hide would be deep space. His reputation preceded him wherever he went, and Tony Weister had seen his boss deal with people who crossed him at first hand, so he was taking no chances. The money had already been transferred to an overseas account, and his wife and daughter would be leaving for New Zealand in five days time, where he was having a new house built on the coast. He’d even arranged brand new identities for all of them. Nothing could possibly stop him

now. The smile on his face turned to laughter. It was like a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders at last. After ten years of bullying and abuse he would be rid of that bastard once and for all.

The air conditioning kept the white marble clad room cool from the intense midday sun outside as Karl looked at his computer screen studying the money transfer Tony Weister had made only that morning to a Swiss bank account, and the house he'd purchased in New Zealand. He gently typed away at the keyboard bringing all of Tony Weister's details on screen, his savings accounts, investments, and all transactions over the last six months. He studied them slowly, made a print out of all the details, and then pressed delete. After a short phone call to the managing director of the Swiss bank Tony had used, all the money had been transferred back into one of Karl's offshore accounts. Opposite him sat a smartly dressed man. His deep blue suit, shirt, and tie all looked and were very expensive. His blue tinted rectangular glasses only added to the coldness he projected. Baldman was his name. He dealt with people in a severe way, and never had he let anyone down. He disposed of people. That was his specialty. Nobody knew his background or anything about him and many had tried, even Karl's contacts in the FBI, DEA, and MI6 had no details on him, nobody even knew where he lived, he spent most of his time living on board his converted Boeing 747, it never landed at any of the main airports and with his three super yachts many wondered why he did the kind of work he did. Yet here he was; some Government agencies had even used him when their politicians had ruled against using such harsh methods to remove a rogue leader.

"We have an agreement then," Baldman said, getting to his feet.

Karl smiled. He liked Baldman, because with him, there was no hidden agenda, no lies or deceit. He came when called and carried out the necessary work to make sure everything was clean and deniable. Karl also knew it was a foolish and a dead man who didn't pay the Baldman.

"The money will be transferred into your account today," Karl said, spinning the ice cube around in his glass.

“We will talk later, Karl,” Baldman said. He turned and walked towards the large oak doors that led back out into the large white marble reception area. Karl knew how honoured he was to have him actually come to his office in person, he didn’t know of any other crime syndicate who Baldman met in person. This special relationship he had with him gave Karl Sasco an edge over all his rivals.

The screen sank back slowly into the black marble of his desk leaving only a trace outline as to its existence. He took a cigar from the small red leather box sitting on his desk; the bodyguard standing just behind him flicked open the gold lighter in response. He warmed the end of the cigar gently letting his boss enjoy the freshness and taste before fully lighting the hand rolled Cuban cigar.

BACK IN ENGLAND

The mist had gone and the clear November sky was on its way out as dusk started to form, ensuring a frosty night. It had taken me just over 6 hours to get to my cottage on the outskirts of Gargrave, a small village in the middle of the Yorkshire Dales not far from Skipton. I just needed somewhere I could relax away from everyone. Its location was perfect. There was only one-way in and one-way out, down a half-mile long dirt track that ran down the side of the local farmers’ fields. I could see most of the track from my front window, but the last 100 yards was hidden because of the lie of the land. The gentle slope of the field took the track down a steady decline until it met up with the main road at the far end.

The cottage was old, and in need of quiet a lot of T.L.C., but it was home, and it was the only place I knew I could be safe. I also knew just how bloody cold it would be until the boiler had warmed through. I had spent the last six weeks in South America working (the last two weeks had been in Columbia) ending a five year dispute between a couple of drug barons. Now there was only one. I had received a phone call shortly after the hit asking for a meeting in Puerto Rico. I agreed and the rest is history as they say.

It made me think about the device in the boot of the car again, best not to, then again if it did go off I wouldn't know about it anyway.

Driving down the lane, my thoughts turned to getting a plan together. I couldn't just chuck them off a bridge or bury them in a wood somewhere. I had to find a place where they would never be found or damaged. The tyres crunched over the gravel drive that the previous owners had laid. From a distance, it looked quite good, but close up, you could see the patches where oil had leaked out staining the gravel and large sections where just the bare earth was starting to creep back through to the surface. It didn't bother me though. I wasn't any good at D.I.Y., and I had no plans to start chucking bags of gravel around just to make the place look pretty.

The area immediately in front of the cottage had just enough room to turn a decent sized car around in it, which made life a lot easier. I reversed down the side of the gable end and under the carport. Grabbing the brief case next to me, I slowly made my way round the back of the cottage trying my best not to put too much weight on my bad leg. It felt a bit better, but it was far from perfect. The back door was solid oak and didn't fit too well, it had the biggest lock and key I'd ever seen. I pulled the key out from under a stone opposite the back door. It was a good six inches long, covered in rust and dull black paint, but it did the job.

I decided to give John a ring once I was inside. He was a good friend, and although he knew what I did as a living, he never asked too many questions. I'd known him for ten years now, and I could trust him. We'd met in the gym squash courts. His mate hadn't turned up, so he'd suggested having a game, and that was that. His job took him all over the world buying and selling contracts for freight companies. I just said I was in construction. I didn't tell him what I really did for a living for another three years and that was only because I had to. I had been out of the country working, and the whole thing had gone tits up. Police were everywhere and someone had ID'd me. Back then, I had long hair and a beard, but nowadays, a short trim did the job and a clean shave. Things had changed a lot over the years, and having a friend like John made my life a lot easier. I needed an alibi as to my whereabouts at the

time of the hit. He really put his neck on the block by giving me one. Since then, we had been best of mates.

As time had progressed, my ability to hit a long distance target grew. I practiced every day, by taking long walks right up into the middle of nowhere which isn't too hard in the Dales.

Then at the grand old age of 31 I did my first 1.1 kilometre shot and blew the target to bits. Everything comes into account when taking such a shot, wind, the spin of the bullet through the air, humidity and even the curvature and rotation of the planet. Many people think a bullet travels in a straight line when fired; it doesn't. In fact the second it leaves the end of the barrel it starts to drop. A shot fired from just under a kilometre will follow a long arc and literally drop onto the target, like a small high powered bomb, anything above that distance is a science, and it takes a shed load of working out to get it right, and in a lot of cases it just cannot be done due to turbulence or terrain. The shot I had fired, had taken over a month of legwork to figure out the precise angle, location the target was going to be in and that alone defined where I could take the shot from. Because my target lived on an island in the middle of a huge inland lake he thought he was safe. I had made sure the people I was working for knew exactly what to expect, but like all these types they thought they knew best and the guy in question was standing less than three feet from my target. I am just thankful I took payment in advance because bloodstains like that don't wash out. It still made me smile now seeing this guy explode like a bursting balloon full of ketchup. Don't get me wrong, it wasn't the guy exploding it was the guy standing a couple of feet away that did it.

Flicking the kitchen light on as I went through the door, it flickered a couple times before finally staying on. There was a smell of damp in the air coming from the large stain on the ceiling reminding me to mend the shower before using it again. Placing the brief case on the small wooden table in the centre of the room I gently pressed the small silver flap on the brief case lid. With a soft hiss, it flipped open. The tiny screen read, "PLEASE ENTER LOCKOUT CODE."

That got me thinking. Was the code already intact, or was it

asking me to enter one? I decided to make a cuppa while I thought about it. Most of the cupboards were empty, but I found some dried milk and tea bags so I was sorted.

While the kettle boiled, I eventually got the boiler going after three attempts then my phone rang, which was odd, but what the hell, I answered it.

“Hello.” I said.

“It’s John” he said.

“Whatcha, dickhead,” I replied.

“My god,” he said. “You’re not dead yet then?”

“Are you in the country?” he asked.

“Yes, just got in a few hours ago. Why?” I said.

“Do you fancy a meet up sometime soon? No pressure,” he said.

The phone went quiet for a second while I thought about what had been going on and if he could help. “Ok, meet me in Harrogate tomorrow. There’s a small café just opposite the bus station on the corner of the shopping centre. I’ll meet you inside.” I said. “What time?”

“Three o’clock, and don’t be late, Tom,” he said, before ending the call.

He’d sounded a bit off with me, but then again trying to get a smile out of John could be classed as hard labour sometimes.

He listened to the other phone he was holding to his ear, “Did you get a lock? John said.

The voice on the other end said, “Yes, we can track him now, and John, keep him at the bar until we get there.”

“You’re coming over?” John said surprised.

“Yes, we’re coming over. Sara’s looking forward to meeting you.” The call ended. John sat down not believing what he’d just heard,

“What have I done?” he said to himself. “What have I done?”

I poured the hot water over the tea bag, stirring the white milky powder in as I did.

Just then, a pinging sound came from the brief case. I looked at the tiny screen. The display had changed. It now read, “GPS

SOURCED AND LOCKED,” with a load of numbers and letters following it. “What the hell did sourced and locked mean?” I thought; as I sat down to rest my leg. My eyes were tired after the long drive. They seemed to ache from the inside, making me frown. I scratched my head and yawned. The idea was to have a shower and get to bed, but six hours later, I awoke with a start still sitting at the kitchen table with the empty cup in my hand. My body was trembling from the cold. I stumbled through the door that led to the bottom of the stairs. Climbing them half asleep, I wandered into the front bedroom and crawled under the covers not bothering to get undressed.

The black M5 pulled up in front of the hotel foyer, but its occupant didn't get out. She was talking to her father on the phone and her bodyguards knew better than to interrupt her at any time especially if Karl Sasco was on the other end. She placed the phone back in her small Gucci bag. The car door opened. A young man in a porter's outfit came towards her. He was about to ask if she had any luggage when without any warning a large hand grabbed his neck yanking him sideways throwing him to the ground. The young man cowered on the ground not wanting to get involved while the three men in black suits walked past him. Sara stopped and looked down at the young man. Her face showed no emotions whatsoever.

“Wha, what's wrong?” he said, looking up at the slim attractive woman staring down at him.

She said nothing then carried on towards the hotel entrance, leaving the young man lying on the stone steps.

“Malk, bring the laptop to my room. It's time we found out what Mr. Lee has done with our package,” Sara said, as they waited for the lift.

He'd worked for the family Sasco for over twenty years now, and in all those years, he'd never let his boss down. Karl Sasco had personally asked him to be his eldest daughter's bodyguard. She had only been twelve at the time, but Sara was still a target for Karl's competitors. Over the next 15 years, Malk had put his life on the line twice for her. He'd been stabbed and shot, but his

loyalty to the family always came first. Now in his late forties, Malk ran all the security for the Sasco Corporation with Sara, but his first duty would always be to protect her.

“Any news from ‘Product’ Sara asked. Malk wanted to tell her everything was going to plan, but he hadn’t heard any news yet. ‘Product’ was a very exclusive mercenary company who dealt with anything from corporate crime to hunting murderers down from the Special Forces if a politically sensitive situation had occurred.

Based in New York, they had offices in many countries, most of the men working for ‘Product’ were ex- Delta Force and on the payroll of Sascorp Securities International.

The back door creaked open as the first two men entered the old cottage looking for their target. They were both wearing body armour, having heard who they were dealing with.

“Echo 2, that’s the kitchen clear” the voice said over the com’s.

“Echo 4, that’s the front room clear, repeat front room” the second man replied as they went from room to room in a standard search pattern.

They both stood at the bottom of the stairs, it was a bottleneck and an easy place to be picked off.

Using hand signals to keep everything quiet the lead man threw a flash-bang up onto the small landing. Both counted down from 4, 3, 2, something moved.

I sat listening to the sound of footsteps moving around below me. Both my guns were fitted with silencers and contained a full clip. In my mind I was moving around with them tracing their every move. I could have slotted one of them through the kitchen ceiling, because the bathroom sat directly above it, the exposed beams and timber ceiling below had quite a few holes in it making it quite easy to spot anyone moving around down below.

I had my head to the floor following the guy dressed in black beneath me whilst listening to the other guy making an entry through the front door.

I moved to the landing but out of view from the stairwell and flicked both guns to full auto. Then the small tin-can object landed right next to me, I recognised it immediately as a ‘flash-bang’ used

by the Special Forces to scare the crap out of anyone in a room they were about to enter. I grabbed it and slung it straight back down, knowing what they were capable of.

‘Echo 4’ saw it first “MOVE” he shouted, diving through into the kitchen, but ‘Echo 2’ took it as the command to head up the stairs, the ‘flash-bang’ bounced off his head exploding within a second of doing so. The detonator may be small but when it goes off right next to your head you’re going to go down. I had a quick look through my hole in the bathroom floor. I saw one guy standing by the table with his gun up pointing directly at the door. I took aim making slight adjustments just in case I was wrong, my eyes darting from the gun back to my target, I pulled the trigger. ‘PHHPHPHTTDDT’, the gun fired twenty shots of which at least thirteen drilled into his head. He wobbled around a bit then dropped to the floor just as the smoke drifted into the room from the hall and stairs after the explosion.

“Your dead mate” I said to myself, the smoke was creeping around the corner of the landing and into the tiny bathroom. I went forward; releasing the clip letting it drop into my hand then slid another one in. I couldn’t hear any sounds of movement. That didn’t mean they were ‘static’ though, one of them could be making their way up the stairs. I sat and waited. Echo 2 shook his head after the flash-bang going off just behind him; he waited a few seconds for the smoke to clear then went forwards up the stairs.

‘Creek’ ‘I bet he hated that’, because he would know I would know exactly where he was; third step down from the top. My guess was he would either rush me or freeze and think it out.

Echo 2 flew up onto the landing then around the corner into the bedroom spraying it with bullets in a long low swoop, hoping to blow me to bits if I was hidden behind the bed or door. I watched the large figure silhouetted in the doorway as he scanned the room for his target, I took aim and fired a single shot at the rear of his knee; from that distance it would blow his kneecap off. “AARRGH,” he screamed dropping to the floor whilst letting a few rounds off as his muscles contracted. I went forward kicking the gun away. I pushed him down from his part kneeling position.

He fell forward as I grabbed his wrist pushing the thumb inwards to inflict a pressure hold. He went very quiet for a guy with his knee blown off. "Who are you?" I asked in a calm voice... pausing then slowly applying more pressure.

He was good; I had to give him credit he didn't say a thing.

I knelt down on the wound, knowing the kind of pain it releases to the victim, still no words, "You can actually come out of this alive my friend, all I ask is you have any kids and want to see them again I suggest you start giving me a little co-operation" I said, pressing his thumb in by the nail. If he didn't speak soon the second joint in his thumb would pop.

He didn't even whisper, it was then I heard a soft sound from somewhere behind me. Instantly I grabbed my gun and 'PHFT' he joined his mate.

Knowing how much the floor creaked in the bedroom I chose my next movements cautiously. The sun was streaming in through the bedroom window casting a shadow against the wall opposite me.

Outside, 'Echo 3' placed the ladder against the wall just below the window-sill, while 'Echo 1' moved up the smoke filled staircase that had cleared just enough to make it passable. He had seen 'Echo 4' lying in a heap on the kitchen floor and had no intentions of ending up the same way. "Keep this channel open and give me a running commentary of what you see" Echo 2 said. Making his way up the stairs whilst keeping his gun trained on the right-hand side of the aperture at the top of the stairs. The view through his scope gave everything a red tinge but he knew the approximate location of the target from the last communication from Echo 1.

Meanwhile Echo 3 made his way up the short ladder towards the window, noticing the dark blue flaking paintwork reminded him he needed to sort out his own when he eventually got home. Using a small telescope about 300 millimetres long he extended it up and over the frame to see into the room on the other side.

Placing my head against the wall I could just about hear the wood taking the pressure of each step the guy on the other side took. I guessed he was two thirds up making his head and

shoulders at floor level. “The old plaster walls made from thin laths of wood and horse hair plaster would need some tidying after this I thought.

Taking a step back I pulled both triggers releasing a barrage of bullets that thundered through the thin wall, sending an explosion of plaster and bullets into the narrow stair well. Echo 1 heard a sound then took another step, it was to be his last; a second later his body and the opposite wall were peppered with bullet holes. He stood for a second having taken twenty shots in his upper body. “Get... out” he rasped then fell backwards down the stairs taking the banister with him as he fell.

Outside, Echo 3 heard “Out...” then nothing. He tapped away at his headset trying to make it work. “Echo 1, come in” he said, pulling the small mouth-piece off and blowing into it.

I made my way around the door surround of the bedroom trying to use the picture of the cottage hanging on the wall opposite the top step of the stairs to get a view down the stairs; the glass had about two years of dust covering it. It seemed the last owners felt the same way about cleaning as I did. I squinted my eyes trying to build a picture up, ‘there he was’. I moved with more confidence now, reloading the guns as I went. Taking the com’s set off the guy in the bedroom I made my way downstairs. Then “Echo 1, 2, 4 come in, I think he is upstairs repeat, I think he is upstairs” a voice said. I froze one up, one in the kitchen, one in front. “Where are you my friend” I mouthed, I pressed the small button on the headset, “What’s your location Echo 3” I said.

Outside Echo 3 suddenly heard a voice in his ear, “I am about to make entry through the bedroom window, the room looks clear where are you?” he said knowing Echo 1 should be on the landing by now.

I looked up at the guy slowly opening my window, raised my gun and smiled – then fired. He took it straight up the arse, then waved his arms around like he was trying to fly whilst grabbing at his backside – he fell sideways to the ground, a fall of about three metres. It may sound funny shooting someone like that but it’s a slow and painful death for the victim.

Standing next to him I looked around trying to see any

vehicles, nothing they must have walked in leaving their transport by the main road. He looked up at me, then towards his gun that lay a couple of feet from his hand. "You can try and die or leave it and we can talk" I said, slipping a new clip into my gun. Having left my other gun tucked behind the front door. "You can't win Stone" he said looking up at me.

"Two questions then you can go back to your mates" I said, he looked at me in a quizzical way, "Go on" he said. I squatted down next to him. "Who are you working for and how do you know my name?" I said.

"I don't know the money behind the operation, all work is on a need to know basis..." he said then paused and added "The lead 'Echo 1' has all the information on the contract, I know your name because Echo 1 told the team your name" he said, as a sudden bolt of burning pain shot through his guts and lower intestine.

Mercenaries are bad news, they don't usually care who gets killed just as long as they get their target. 'What the hell was Weister playing at? Unless it was the blond who had sent them. My real concern was how they had found this location unless they had followed me all the way from London? That wasn't impossible but highly unlikely.

After dumping the bodies outback I decided to deal with them later, dragging a full-grown man takes some doing when you have a dodgy leg.

I started to go through in mind how I was going to explain to John about the device and what it was capable of. I was sure he'd know someone somewhere who could do something with it. I sat on the bottom step while I pulled my trainers on, my brain still going at six hundred miles an hour trying to work out the ifs, buts, and maybes.

I definitely wasn't going to tell him about what had just happened. He understood what I did but it didn't mean he liked it.

It was no good. I needed a cup of tea and something to eat. While the kettle boiled, I searched the kitchen cupboards for something to eat, but I was out of luck. That had always been my

problem, never having enough food in. It just never occurred to me to go shopping or call in to a shop and pick some food up.

My leg seemed to be working better now, because a bad limp beats a hop any day in my book and dragging it around the kitchen like a dead weight was just hard bloody work.

Behind the cottage and running along its entire length was an old dry stonewall. It was a good six feet tall and connected up with the outhouse that in turn was attached to the cottage. Behind the wall the field was a good three feet higher than on this side, the only down side being my back courtyard always seemed to be damp and the wall was covered in a thick layer of dark green moss. I'd fallen a couple of times on the stone flags since the sun never reached round here, so it never dried out. The cold freezing air seeped into my bones again, standing in the open doorway. My breath made plumes of white clouds in front of me. I walked gingerly across the ice covered flagstones towards the frost covered BMW. The boot popped open when I pressed the key fob. Inside lay the other four silver coloured briefcases. They were identical to mine in most ways apart from the built in key pad on "Case 5." Reaching into the boot, I pulled two of them out and placed them on the flagstones. I leant in to pull the other two out and nearly went head first into the boot space since my feet lost their grip. I grabbed hold of the car's rear wing to stop myself from falling over. "For fuck's sake," I growled, steadying myself. I yanked them out and made my way back across the yard placing them down just next to the outhouse and then returned for the other two. I rubbed my hands together trying to keep them warm, but the frost-covered stone just crept deeper and deeper into my bones while I worked away at the stonewall.

After ten minutes I had all four bodies piled up by the back wall. Using a sheet of tarpaulin, I covered them up placing some stones around the edges to stop the wind from blowing it off.

Just after moving in here, I had dug out a section of wall to create a secret store for my guns and other equipment. It was only a metre square, but it was dry, and if you didn't know it was there, you wouldn't have a chance of finding it. I removed each stone slowly until I revealed a metal door about two feet square painted

dull black with a sliding bolt to the left hand side. Gently sliding it back, I opened the door just enough to slip my hand in and release the trigger mechanism. If I hadn't done this, the wire would have pulled six pins out of the grenades hidden just out of sight above the door and that would not be a good day out. I took a pair of 9mm handguns out, six mags, and a pair of knives.