

Death is part of the  
process



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The room was small and filthy. Neglected. Long abandoned. It smelled bad. Beyond the grimy window, the rooftops of nearby buildings gleamed black from the rain. The roads and pavements were shiny and wet and empty.

The room was in darkness. There was one chair. One small, broken table. Nothing else.

A figure sat hunched over a laptop computer. The weak, greenish light from the screen glowed on a pale face with feverish eyes. A dry tongue licked dry lips.

Fingers tapped at the keyboard and words scrolled out on the screen.

Shadow: I hear you are good at what you do. Is that true?

The poised hands trembled. Cold sweat ran. A heart was beating fast and hard.

Words began to appear on the screen.

Spider: What service do you require?

Shadow: I want you to hurt someone. What kind of things do you do?

Spider: I work to order. What are your requirements?

Shadow: I want him to suffer.

Spider: Do you want elimination?

Shadow stared at that last line of type. Uneasy. Hesitant.

## Elimination

Sweat dripped on to the keyboard. Breath came rapidly in small hard gasps. A fist clenched in a tight chest.

Spider: Do you want this person dead?

The hunched figure was shaken from its stupor. Fingers began to type, slowly, deliberately.

Shadow: I want him humiliated. I want him crushed. I want him finished.

There was a short pause. Then:

Spider: Understood. We need to agree the fee and the method of payment. And I will need full details of the target.

Shadow: Not yet. We can discuss all these things when the time comes. I just need to know I can rely on you if are needed.

Shadow did not see the need to tell Spider everything at this stage. If Shadow's plans worked out, then Spider would not be needed. Spider was just a fall-back position, in case something went wrong.

Words scrolled rapidly across the screen.

Spider: Unauthorised user detected. Disconnecting now.

Shadow stared at the screen. Eyes blank.

Shadow: What do you mean? Are you still there?

There was no response.

“ Damn!” Shadow’s face contorted with anger. “ Damn you!” Then the urgency of the situation seemed to hit. Someone was monitoring their conversation. Breath hissed. The head turned sharply and the eyes stared back at the open doorway.

Someone was out there.

Someone was coming.

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Danny Bell crouched low over a bank of electronic equipment in the back of the Mobile Surveillance Unit. He was wearing a lightweight headset. He glanced up at monitor screens and digital displays. His fingers moved rapidly over the keyboard of a laptop computer. He was absolutely concentrated on the task in hand. The e-conversation between Spider and Shadow was on-screen.

A man and a woman sat with him in the back of the van. Another man was driving them through the rain-wet streets of South London. The two officers that sat in the back of the van with Danny were trainee police officers just like Danny. The officer driving in the front was older and more experienced than the three in the back, but on a job like this, they waited on Danny’s instructions.

“ OK. I’ve still got them,” he said. “ It’s fine. It’s cool.” He grinned. “ Keep talking, my friends, just keep talking.” He glanced around at his companions.

“ We’re close.” He held up a hand; finger and thumb a fraction apart. “ We’re this close. Hold on to your hats. Jack! Sharp right here.”

The driver responded instantly and the MSU cornered at speed. Bracing themselves against the side of the van, the two officers in the back looked at one another. Being told what to do by a fellow trainee was a new experience for both of them, but they understood that the young black American knew his stuff when it came to the expensive technology that filled the van. As far as this high-speed car chase through the night was concerned, Danny was in control.

Danny was from Chicago. He had come to London with his father under an FBI Witness Protection Scheme. Hiding from the Mob. Scary stuff. But right now, Danny had other things to think about. Right now he was working for the British police.

Police Investigation Command had been tracking the hit man called Spider for months. A lethal assassin, he was famous for killing his victims with a single, clean shot and disappearing instantly without a trace. Tonight’s mission was the closest they had come to nailing him.

In the tangle of streets, Danny’s electronic map was proving difficult to follow.

“ Is there a right turn coming up?” he asked Jack.

“ Yes,” came the reply through his headset. “ It’s coming up now.”

“ Take it. What does it look like out there?”

“ We’re in an estate of some kind. A housing estate. It looks pretty grim. I don’t think anyone lives here. I think it’s being knocked down.”

One of the officers leaned over Danny’s shoulder. “ Are you sure this is right?”

Danny tapped keys and watched green and red lights flickering on the digital map. “ Yes.”

The MSU cruised slowly through the semi-derelict housing estate.

The hairs stood up on the back of Danny’s neck. “ We’re right on top of him,” he whispered. His eyes still fixed on the monitors, he reached out and picked up two oblong signalling bugs. The devices were made of metal, which gleamed dully in the dim light inside the van.

“ Alex, Maddie- take these. I need you outside so I can pinpoint the location of our friend.” Danny activated the devices. Red lights began to pulse on and off.

The two officers grabbed the bugs and opened the back door of the van. It was no longer raining, but their feet splashed on the wet road as they stepped down. They walked in opposite directions, spreading the signal. The van crawled on, its engine barely turning over.

Danny heard Jack’s voice in his headset. “ How accurately can you pinpoint him with this gear?”

Danny grinned. “ I can tell you what room he’s in. I can tell you which way he’s facing and what colour shirt he’s got on. OK, stop the van.”

Danny took the headset off. He carried the laptop to the open back of the van. He pointed to the long dark bulk of the nearest building. Brick-built. Five storeys high, its front striped by grey balconies.

“ He’s in there,” Danny called to the two officers.

Jack appeared around the side of the van. “ And the colour of his shirt?”

Danny smiled. “ Give me five minutes.” He looked again at the display screen. “ Uh-oh!”

Jack’s voice was sharp. “ What?”

“ The signal’s gone. They’ve disconnected.”

Detective Inspector Jack Cooper took command. There were only two possible exits from the long block of flats. Both needed to be covered. Thirty seconds after the electronic signal had vanished, Danny and Jack were at the left-hand exit. Alex and Maddie were racing towards the other.

“ I’ll take the first floor,” Jack ordered. “ You take the second. Yell if you find anyone. Don’t take chances.”

Danny nodded. He ran up the dark zigzag of concrete stairs. The electricity in the block of flats had been switched off long ago, and the only light came from the orange gleam of street lamps on the road outside. The whole place smelled of damp and decay. Graffiti trailed across the plaster walls in incongruously bright colours.

He came to the long, narrow balcony. There were five doors. He unhooked the torch from his belt and sent a cone of white light along the rubbish-strewn walkway.

He wasn't armed. PIC officers seldom carried weapons. Besides, it wasn't Spider they were expecting to find. It was his latest client. Somewhere in this block, was a man who knew how to get in contact with the hit man. If they could lay their hands on him, they'd be one step nearer to closing Spider down for good.

Danny stepped cautiously along the hallway. He came in to a small, filthy room. There was one chair. One small broken table. Nothing else. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled again. His skin crawled. There was something about this room. Something bad. He could sense it. His torch beam crept across the bare floor and up the wall.

Someone had pinned photographs to the wall. Lots of photographs. Danny swallowed. There was something wrong about this. Something sick. He turned a full circle of light from his torch raking the walls. Every centimetre of space had been covered in photographs of the same young man. His face stared out from the walls over and over and over again.

Most of the pictures were like surveillance shots- long-distance zoom-lens stuff- but there were also a few that seemed to have been cut from magazines or from newspapers.



Danny swallowed hard. A sick mind had been at work here. In every single one of those dozens and dozens of photographs, the young man's eyes had been sliced out.

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A few days later.

Morning.

PIC Headquarters. London.

Maddie Cooper sat down at her desk reading the morning newspaper.

Maddie was seventeen years old, and Jack Cooper's daughter. She had short, blonde hair. She had originally wanted to become a ballet dancer but one night eleven months ago, Maddie's whole life changed when a gunman tried to kill her father but instead had hit her. She was distraught to find out she could never dance again so she decided to follow in her father's footsteps and become a police trainee. She turned over to read the sports section at the back of the newspaper. A young man with short, light-brown hair and a pleasant, boyish face stared back at her smiling. Above the photograph was a headline. She read it out loud.

“ Will Anderson. Tomorrow's champion or yesterday's news? What does that mean?”

And then right on cue her friend and fellow police trainee Alex Cox appeared.

Alex was nineteen years old, a trainee cherry-picked by Maddie's father.

Light-brown hair hung over his piercing hazel eyes. His body was fit and

powerful. Alex was a good colleague and an invaluable friend- as Maddie had already learned in their few months working together.

“ Don’t you know? It’s the Wimbledon Tennis Final in a few days time. Will Anderson, he’s that English seventeen year-old that everyone wants to win.”

“ Oh, I didn’t know. I don’t follow tennis that much anyway,” replied Maddie.

A voice came over the intercom cutting their conversation short. “ Alpha Watch Personnel to the briefing room immediately, please.”

Maddie and Alex made their way to the briefing room where they found a few policemen sitting including Danny Bell and Jack Cooper. Jack, who was the boss and was leading the operation to capture Spider, stood up.

“ Last night Alex, Maddie, Danny and I got lucky. We managed to monitor a cyber-conversation between a contract killer who goes by the name of Spider and a potential client. The client calls himself Shadow. We have been trying to track Spider for three months now but until last night we hadn’t got very close to him. Last night was the closest we’ve ever come to him. We unfortunately missed the client called Shadow by about five minutes,” he said.

He handed over to Danny who described the events of that night. He then started to show some pictures that were taken of the small, dirty room that was covered, chaotically, with photographs.

“ I’ve seen some creepy stuff before,” said Danny, “ but this is something else. Take a look at this.”

He produced another picture showing a close-up of one wall.

A murmur ran around the room.

There were maybe ten photographs in the picture. Ten photographs of a handsome young man. In six of the photographs, the eyes had been neatly sliced out as if with a sharp knife. In the other four, it looked as though a cigarette had been applied to the paper, completely burning out the eye sockets.

Danny flicked through a couple more photos.

As before- scores of photographs of a young man with his eyes missing.

Danny took a deep breath. " I guess we can assume we're looking at Spider's next victim."

Maddie was staring at the screen in amazement. The sight of all of those mutilated photographs was horrible enough- but there was worse.

" I know who he is," Maddie said.

All eyes turned on her.

She swallowed, looking away from the screen. " He's a tennis player. His name is Will Anderson."

The burned-out eye sockets of Will Anderson stared out from the monitor screens in the hushed PIC briefing room. There had been nods of recognition from some of the other officers following Maddie's announcement. But all eyes were focused on Maddie.

“ Go on Maddie.” Jack Cooper’s voice was a low growl in this tense silence.

“ I don’t know much about him,” Maddie said. “ There was an article on him in today’s newspaper. He’s English; seventeen years old. He is expected to do well at Wimbledon this year. That’s about it.”

“ Thank you, Maddie,” Jack Cooper said. He made a note on the pad in front of him and looked up at Danny again. “ Danny- finish your report please.”

“ I’m just about done,” said Danny. He flashed a series of similar photographs up on the monitor. An obsessive repetition of the same handsome, boyish face, each and every one blinded by knife or fire.

“ We got forensic in, but they came up empty,” Danny explained. “ There’s no water or electricity in the flat, so I don’t think that Shadow lives there. He’s just been using it as a safe house- a place for his picture gallery, and somewhere private to make contact with Spider.”

He tapped the keyboard again and the disfigured faces on the monitors faded to grey.

The lights came up.

“ OK,” said Jack. “ I think that as the Wimbledon final is coming up soon, we need to be there to make sure that nothing harms Will Anderson. Alex, I am going to ask you to meet Will Anderson and his trainer and keep watch on them and make sure nothing hurts him beforehand. The rest of us will start planning where we will be positioned at Centre Court for the final.”

“ I’ve compiled some detailed notes on Will Anderson,” said Maddie. “ This is his background story. Listen. It says that Will Anderson lost his parents a few years ago because they died in a car crash and his older brother James took over as his coach and has been looking after Will ever since. You must not be too hard on them when you tell them what has happened Alex because of that and because it says here that James lost his eye in an accident when he and Will were younger.”

Alex read the sheet Maddie had just given him and he looked at the face of James Anderson. It was hard to tell that he was blind in one eye because an artificial eye had replaced it.

“ Thanks for the help Maddie,” said Alex.

“ OK guys let’s go,” said Jack Cooper as he stood up and left the room.

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A private tennis club in Roehampton.

Two days before the Wimbledon final.

Alex watched Will Anderson through a mesh of wire fencing. He wasn’t a big tennis fan, but he knew enough to admire the range of shots Will used, and the speed with which the ball was fired back over the net by the young tennis star. He could see why the newspapers were hyping Will as the next big thing.

After a while, Will spotted Alex and raised his racket to call a break. He trotted to the side of the court with his coach and brother, James Anderson.

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James was taller and thinner than his brother. He was good-looking, with the same dark-brown eyes, but his angular face lacked the boyish quality that made Will's face so universally popular, and so instantly recognisable, Alex thought. It was also hard to tell that James was blind in one eye.

“ Hello,” said Will approaching Alex. “ Who are you?”

“ Hi, I'm Alex Cox and I work for the police,” replied Alex.

“ Is there something wrong?” asked James sharply.

“ Well, sort of. Look, we need to talk privately,” said Alex.

Will and James led Alex to the back of the courts and into a small hut where players got changed. There Alex told James and Will everything about Shadow and Spider. Everything except the sliced out eyes. At the end of it there was a long silence. Will's face was ashen. Stunned. James's face showed only anger.

“ How do you know this?” asked Will breaking the silence.

“ We managed to monitor a conversation between Shadow and Spider a week ago. I'm not sure if they've been in contact with each other since. The point is that I just want you to be more alert but not to worry because this might ruin your preparation for the final,” said Alex.

“ OK. I'll keep look out more often just in case someone does try to harm my brother,” said James.

“ Thanks for that James,” said Alex. “ I need to go now so I’ll leave you two to practise and I’ll see you at Centre Court for the final.” He stood up and left the room.

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Centre Court.

The day of the Wimbledon final.

Maddie and Danny were sitting in the front row, directly behind the umpire’s tower. Alex was on the far side of the court, in a block of seats alongside the scoreboard reserved for the players’ families and teams. Sitting with him were Will’s aunt and uncle. James’s seat was still empty.

Danny was monitoring the TV coverage live on his laptop.

“ Can you see us?” Maddie asked, leaning over his shoulder. She knew they were here for a serious purpose, but it was hard not to get caught up in the celebratory mood of the crowd. The TV shot changed to the green doors behind the scoreboard.

“ Here we go,” said Danny. Maddie looked down at the laptop. Someone was holding the doors open.

A white-clad figure emerged. The crowd erupted.

Will Anderson and Craig Tanner walked onto Centre Court with their holdalls slung over their shoulders. Australian Tanner was the number two seed. He had thrashed the number one in the semi-finals. Will was unseeded. This was

the first time the two men had clashed, but with Will's current blazing form, the bookies were divided about the outcome of the match.

Maddie heard a tinny voice above the applause. It was Alex speaking to her via an earpiece plugged into her mobile phone.

"Maddie? Have you seen James?"

"No," she replied, dropping her head to speak into the earpiece's built-in mike. "He should be with you."

"He isn't," Alex said.

"What's up?" Danny asked, looking up from the laptop.

"James is missing," Maddie told him.

"Maybe he was in the changing room with Will," Danny suggested.

Maddie relayed this to Alex. "I'll check it out," Alex said. "Jack is down there- he'll know."

The two players began to warm up, hitting easy balls across the net to one another.

The umpire's voice rang out. "Two minutes, please, gentlemen."

Will pulled his sweatshirt over his head and draped it over the back of his chair. He saw Maddie and Danny, who he had met both the previous day, and gave them a wave. He seemed relaxed and full of energy.



The Australian took his position at one end of the court and waited. Will rotated his shoulders, picked up his racket, and walked steadily to his place.

The crowd became quiet.

Will was first to serve. He bounced the ball. Arched his back. With his racket poised he threw the ball high. It spun for a moment. His arm swung. The head of his racket hit the ball squarely. The ball zipped across the net.

The Championship final had begun.

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A buzz of different voices sounded in Danny's ear. He had linked his laptop into the PIC security network. He rolled the mouse-ball, changing from channel to channel. He listened to his colleagues one by one.

Nothing to report.

“ Good,” Danny murmured to himself. “ Nothing to report is good.”

There was a roar of applause. He looked up. The umpire's voice rang out.

“ Game and first set Anderson.”

Maddie scanned the crowds with her miniature binoculars. She scanned back to James's empty seat. Maddie pressed a preset button on her mobile and opened a channel to Alex.

“ Any sign of James?” she asked.

“ I don’t think so. I spoke to Jack. He hasn’t seen him. We’ve got someone at their apartment- he’s not there either.”

“ Do you think something’s happened to him?” Maddie asked. Her stomach clenched with fear. Might Shadow have fooled them all? While their attention was fixed on Will, Shadow could have taken James instead. If someone wanted to hurt Will, they could guarantee he would be devastated if anything happened to his brother.

“ I spoke to the boss,” Alex said. “ He’s alerted everyone, but he says we should stick to our posts. If James has been abducted, it might be a deliberate move to draw us away from Will.”

The end of the first set. After a hard-won victory, Will was sitting in his chair with his back to Alex. He was having a drink from a bottle of fruit squash.

The angle of Will’s head changed. Danny guessed he was looking up to where James should have been sitting. Will turned in his seat, looking at Maddie and Danny. His eyes were questioning. He had seen that James was still not there.

“ Don’t worry,” Maddie mouthed to him. She didn’t know if it would do any good.

“ Time, please,” came the umpire’s voice.

The two players got up.

Maddie felt her nails dig into her palms. How would Will cope with his brother's absence? Would it affect his game?

Maddie looked at Danny. He was intent on his laptop. "I'm going to look for James," she said. "I can't just sit here and do nothing."

Danny glanced at her. "You be careful," he said. "Keep in touch. Your dad will go ballistic if anything happens to you."

Maddie nodded. She made her way along the aisle. She climbed the steps and left the court. She knew that other PIC officers would already be looking for James, but she just couldn't sit there and watch Will's chance of winning ebb away. She had to do something.

Meanwhile Will was playing very badly. He missed easy shots and fumbled the ball. Craig Tanner simply powered through and took the next two sets. However, in the fourth set his luck changed and Will managed to capitalise on several uncharacteristic errors by the Australian and take the set. Nevertheless, if Will kept playing in this way, he would be in for an unpleasant fifth, and final, set.

Maddie had been over the entire Wimbledon complex, searching for any sign of James. She asked everyone she met but they hadn't seen him until one person told her that he had seen someone look like James walking into the restaurant on the Competitors' Terrace. Maddie made her way there. She opened the door. James was sitting at a table. Hunched over. His head supported in his hands. The table was strewn with newspapers and magazines. Maddie moved closer to him and when she saw the magazines

she let out a gasp of horror. All the newspapers and magazines had Will's face on them except for one thing. All the eyes were missing. Cut out with a sharp knife or a cigarette had been applied to them. This meant only one thing. James was Shadow.

" Hello Maddie," James said softly. He had also met her and Danny with Will the previous day. " Is he winning?"

" No," replied Maddie. " Look, you need to be out there supporting him. He needs you."

" It's too late," said James letting out an insane laugh. " I've already told Spider to get the job done." He lost control of himself and fell on his knees laughing insanely. Maddie stared at him. She was suddenly very afraid of him. James was insane.

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Somewhere in the middle of the crowd sat an unremarkable man. He wore smart, casual clothes- an open-necked polo shirt and well-cut cream trousers. His light-brown hair was short and neat. He had a soft, smooth face. He was wearing round, wire-rimmed shades. Blacked out.

He looked like a perfectly ordinary member of the Centre Court crowd- except for one thing. While the eyes of everyone around him swivelled back and forth with the yellow tennis ball, his eyes were fixed permanently on Will Anderson.

There was a silver case by his feet.

A series of chiming tones sounded from his pocket. His mobile phone. Programmed to play a refrain from Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony.

"I'm so sorry," he murmured to his immediate neighbours. His voice was equally unremarkable, middle class and well-educated. "I'm really so sorry about this."

He took the phone out and pressed the OK button to stop the ringing. A text message appeared on the screen.

#### EYES WIDE OPEN

He put the phone away. He gripped the handle of the silver case.

The crowd roared as Will won his service game. Now all he had to do was break Tanner's serve to take the Championship.

The man took no notice.

"Excuse me," he said, smiling apologetically as he stepped over his neighbours, bent double, heading for the end of the aisle. "I'm sorry. Excuse me. Sorry. So sorry."

He made his way up the steps towards the exit.

He went into an empty radio booth and using a diamond glass cutter, he cut a small hole through the window. He then assembled a deadly sniper rifle with complete swiftness and ease. He stood up. He was ready. The man smiled as he looked at Will Anderson through the scope. Spider loved his gun.

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Maddie was still with James in the restaurant. His laughter had turned into tears and emotion and dark memories seemed to have short-circuited his mind. Foam flecked the corners of James's mouth. He was babbling now. Maddie could hardly understand a word that he was saying. He was talking about the accident that had cost him his right eye and his tennis career. About how Will climbed a tree and could not get down so he had to go a get him down but had fallen and cut his eye on a thorn. He was pouring ten years' worth of pent-up anger and bitterness, harboured resentments that had festered and gone rotten inside him.

“ You see Maddie, I should be the champion right now getting all the glory and attention,” cried James. His face turned back to a smile. “ I've given Spider some specific instructions. To shoot Will through his right eye. An eye for an eye. Isn't that perfect?”

“ Come on James,” begged Maddie. “ You can't do this to your brother. Isn't there a way to call Spider off?”

And right then there was a loud cheer and somebody yelled, “ Yes! He's won. Will's won.”

“ He's won. He's won,” said James slowly in disbelief. “ He won without me.” He crumpled to his knees and started crying.

“ It's OK James,” said Maddie. “ Please call Spider off.”

And James pulled out his mobile phone reluctantly and punched in a text.

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Will had somehow, without James, dredged up the spirit to fight back and beat Craig Tanner. Just when he had three Championship points against him, he miraculously turned the game around and finally knocking the spirit out of Tanner and winning Wimbledon. However, no-one noticed the tiny red dot pinpointed on the back of Will's shirt.

Spider was ready. All he had do was wait for Will to turn around. He had been given specific instructions to shoot through the right eye. Tricky at a distance but not so tricky for a professional. Suddenly his mobile phone went off. He had received a text message. Still with his head cocked and one eye on Will Anderson, he opened it.

#### EYES TIGHT SHUT

Spider smiled ruefully and clucked his tongue. Slowly and methodically he took apart the sniper rifle and assembled them back in the silver case. He shut he door and left quietly.

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New orders were coming in. Two security guards had been knocked out with blows to the head. A car had been hijacked. The man had made his escape. No PIC officer had even known that Spider had made his way into the building and left it until then.

In the canteen room three exhausted PIC trainee officers sat down to drink coffee.

“ James was taken off in an ambulance,” explained Maddie to Alex and Danny. “ I’m not sure if Will even knows yet.”

“ That guy is sure going to be in hospital for a very long time,” remarked Danny.

Just then Jack Cooper came over.

“ Well done guys. You did really well out there and I want to congratulate you all,” he said.

They all smiled.

“ You too Dad,” said Maddie. “ In fact we all did our bit today. It was teamwork. That’s how we won- game, set and match.”