

STORM RISING



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Exclusive Preview

Chapter One

Mako leaned against the bar, carefully surveying the crowd, one hand on his pint, the other mindlessly caressing the smooth mahogany. He should have been watching the street, but he was distracted and chose to admire the women instead. Exchanging glances with several, he smiled and met their eyes, challenging those with escorts, inviting those without. One woman in particular caught his attention, her large blue eyes meeting his over the shoulder of her boyfriend. Her body language gave a clear signal that she would prefer his company. A flash of chrome forced his eyes away, and with an effort he moved his gaze to the street. Smiling at his luck, he grabbed his phone from the bar. *Pulling up at Harrods*, he typed and drained the beer.

“This is our chance,” Alicia’s voice said in his ear.

“On my way,” he whispered into the flesh-colored bone induction mike and walked out the door. Fingering the GPS chip in his pocket, he scanned the street looking for the metallic cherry red “G” class Mercedes. The large city block that was Harrods department store came into view, and he saw the extended-cab SUV illegally parked at the corner. “Got it.”

Not knowing if the vehicle was driven by the owner, a high-level Iranian diplomat, or his chauffeur, Mako slowed as he approached, trying to blend in with the other tourists who gawked at the unique vehicle or took pictures of it with their

phones. He moved toward the SUV, trying to find the angle from which the sun would allow him to see inside the heavily-tinted windows. It was empty. He breathed deeply and closed the gap. With the chip in one hand, he withdrew a small ball of putty from his pocket and started working it with the fingers of his other hand. The materials combined, and when he felt the heat caused by the chemical reaction, he used his thumb to attach it to the chip. A group of teenagers were hanging around the SUV, using it as a backdrop for a picture, when he moved to the curb and ducked by the rear wheel. They struck a provocative pose, and he used the distraction to lean over and stick the chip to the inside of the wheel well.

Minutes later, he was back in the pub with another pint in front of him, his attention now entirely on the crowd. The woman he had made eye contact with before stood, and he thought for a second about following, but the voice was back in his head.

“It’s good. I have a signal,” Alicia said.

“Of course,” he muttered back.

“Really, you’re back in the pub? We have work to do.”

He really wished she had a sexier voice, but as far as partners went, she was first-class. Instead of replying, he texted her. *Just let me know when he is at the target.* With a practiced movement, he removed the earwig and placed it discreetly in his pocket, hoping he could take care of this bit of business and have a few days to enjoy the London scene. The woman’s seat was still empty, and he decided to take a chance. Leaving his half-finished pint on the bar, he made his way through the crowd, finding himself in the vestibule by the bathrooms. Disappointed

she was not there, he made a move to the men's room, when a hand reached out and pulled him close. Without a word, he felt her lips brush against his face and her tongue enter his mouth.

She broke off the kiss. "Your phone," she said with a smile. Without waiting, she brushed her hand against his pants pockets and pulled out the phone.

He leaned in close as she started to enter her phone number in a new text window. Suddenly the phone vibrated and she stopped, two digits short.

"Looks like you have something more important," she said and handed it back to him.

Still looking at her, he glanced down at the new message. *Find something better than me? He's on the move and heading in the right direction.*

"Sorry, love," Mako said and brought his face toward her, but she expertly slid under his arm and was gone. Although she might have been intriguing, he let her go and slid between the bodies layered two deep at the bar, making his way to the exit. On his way out the door, he cast a look back at her table and saw her purposefully reach for her boyfriend and kiss him. She sensed him watching and he caught her eye with a wink.

Brompton Road was wall to wall with tourists and traffic, so he cut over a block to Basil Street. Increasing his pace, he evaded the tourists exiting the Knightsbridge tube station and started walking down the escalator. A couple taking up the entire width stopped him, and he was forced to wait for the mechanized stairs to descend. His phone buzzed with another text. *I know I'm not in your head—can you fix that?* He realized he had not

replaced the earwig and dug in his pockets for the small device. When it was not in the right front, he panicked, thinking that the woman had taken it, but he patted his left pocket and felt the small lump. With the earpiece back in his ear, he adjusted the induction microphone and pressed the standby button.

“Sorry about that,” he said under his breath, knowing the small microphone under his jaw would pick up the vibrations.

“Piccadilly line to Holborn Station, then change to the Central line.”

Her response was terse, and he tried to break the tension. “It’s a bit disturbing knowing you know where I am and where I am going before I do.” There was no response. He knew he could turn off his phone, which would disable the GPS locator, but without her, he was lost. The escalator ended abruptly and he moved to the turnstiles, where he pulled his Oyster card from his back pocket. The reader accepted the payment, but he was not fast enough to see the charge and wondered how much credit was left on it. But like every other detail, he knew Alicia would take care of it. Aside from having to listen to her, she was very efficient.

The train arrived and Mako slid through the door, taking a seat when he probably should have displayed some chivalry and offered it to the harried woman dragging two kids behind her. Instead, he reached in his pocket for his phone and pulled up the Tube app. He studied the route and then opened the map app to get walking directions from Bank Station—something he should have done on an earlier scouting trip, but he had spent that time surveying the secretaries instead of the street signs.

Ten minutes later, he was shaken awake by the train stopping, and the recorded voice with a mediocre British accent reminded him to watch his step. Mako crossed to the Central line, leaned against a tiled wall and waited for the next train. Although the “G wagon” was now parked at Lloyd’s of London, he was relaxed. It was not the SUV he was worried about, but rather the data its occupant was in the process of delivering. He would make his move when the transfer was done, preferably later that afternoon, when there would be little activity in the historic insurer’s offices.

“Bank Station,” Alicia said in his ear.

“As if I forgot,” he muttered back and thought about turning her off. The hiss of the train’s brakes announced its arrival before he saw it. It was Saturday and the train was quiet. He took an open seat for the five-minute ride. The train stopped and he exited at Bank, where he took the escalator two steps at a time, arriving quickly on the quiet street. With time to kill, he took Cornhill to Bishopsgate and turned into the Leadenhall Market, hoping to find an open pub.

The covered street was deserted, the Victorian-themed stores and bars closed for the weekend, and with regret he increased his pace and found himself staring at the “Death Star.” The Lloyd’s building, although not the “Shard,” “Walkie-Talkie,” “Cheese Grater,” or “Gherkin,” deserved a nickname. Its entire infrastructure was visible on the outside of the building—from glass-enclosed elevators to ductwork and plumbing pipes.

“Where is he?” he asked Alicia.

“Just pulled away. You should be clear now.”

The connection had degraded. “What’s up with the audio? We can’t afford this now.”

“*Afford* would be the critical word. We’re out on a charter off West End in the Bahamas. Filling the tanks between dives.”

He knew their financial situation was dire. Without this contract, he wasn’t exactly sure what he would do. It wasn’t like there was a heading for “spies wanted” in the classifieds.

“See what you can do. I really need you now.” He was all business, and with all his senses alert, he entered through the front door. The back door would be saved for his exit, once he had downloaded the data. Mako removed the fake ID card from his jacket pocket and placed the lanyard around his neck. With his head down, mimicking the posture of a defeated desk jockey forced to work on the weekend, he entered the building and presented the laminated card to an equally depressed security guard. They exchanged a look of brotherhood and he was waved in.

Where the building had its guts on display outside, the interior was sleek and modern. Mako went to the elevators and pressed the up button. The street grew smaller as he looked down through the glass enclosure, turning when the bell chimed indicating his floor. He exited and quickly moved to the perimeter of the mass of cubicles spread out in front of him. His six-foot frame was a detriment here, and he slouched as he moved to the back row. The doors around the perimeter leading to the managers’ offices were closed, and he found a remote

spot where he pushed the chair aside and kneeled down to conceal his head from view.

“Ready.”

Alicia started to rattle off instructions, which he pecked onto the keyboard.

“Got it,” she said.

He watched the screen as she had him enter seemingly meaningless lines of code.

“Put the drive in the USB port,” she ordered.

“In,” he said. The screen immediately changed to a status bar, and he watched as the files transferred. She had told him it was an encryption code. Lloyd’s was always looking for new and innovative ways to stay in the spotlight of an otherwise mundane business. Over the years they had insured everything from Bruce Springsteen’s voice to David Beckham’s legs. Now they were moving to the world of data, hiring the best hackers to protect their systems. The status bar’s progress slowed to a crawl at eighty percent. “This is really slow.”

“That’s why we have to do the transfer to the thumb drive. It has to be done on the property. Otherwise I could have done it myself.”

Mako caught the barb, but ignored it. Alicia also had ties to the CIA. Once an employee, she was now working on a contract basis, as many of their old agents were. The new world of spying was now based entirely on speculation—fulfill the terms of the contract or no pay.

The elevator chimed and he glanced again at the status bar, now up to ninety-five percent. He lifted himself enough to peer

over the top of the cubicle and saw several security guards exit the elevator, one going in each direction. Behind them was a dark-skinned man in a very expensive suit.

“I gotta go. They’re on to us!” He forgot the bone mike and said the words out loud. One of the men’s heads turned, and they started to weave through the aisle in his direction. “Now!”

“Two percent more,” Alicia said calmly.

He willed the bar to one hundred percent and pulled the drive from the port. “Get me out of here.”

Chapter Two

“Cody,” Alicia called down to the deck of the fifty-two-foot sportfisher. She instructed Mako to stand by, took the headset off and handed it to Cody, her boyfriend, partner and captain, who had climbed the ladder to the flybridge. “He’s all yours,” she said calmly. It was not what she felt, but she trusted Cody’s abilities to guide Mako out of the building, and she had to work on getting him out of the country. It would take both of them to salvage the operation. “GPS and autopilot are set.” She grabbed her tablet and climbed down the stainless steel ladder to the gleaming white deck.

“Where’s our first dive?” one of the men asked.

She thought for a minute. “Let’s get you guys on the *Altar*. Nice coral heads and a ton of lobster.”

The man glanced at his dive watch. “How deep for how long?” he asked.

Alicia was getting impatient. It wasn’t the question—divers had been asking that since the birth of scuba. Their niche in a crowded market, although popular, was time-consuming, and time was one thing she didn’t have right now. They had differentiated themselves from other charters by making aspects of technical diving available to the recreational diver on a live-aboard. This brought with it complicated machinery to fill the tanks as well as extra time supervising the divers. Enriched-air diving had gained in popularity, but was seldom offered on multi-day trips. The difficulty of mixing gases with the boat-mounted compressor had been overcome with Cody’s mechanical skill and the computer interface she had designed to

safely mix in the additional oxygen while mitigating the risks of explosion. They had developed their own system for overcoming the limiting factor in mixed-gas diving—depth. The standard mixes of thirty-two and thirty-six percent oxygen offered by dive shops limited divers to one hundred twelve and ninety-five feet respectively. With her algorithm, they custom-blended the gas for each dive. This allowed for deeper dives with maximum bottom time, but required expertise in mixing the gases.

“Everyone get suited up. We’ll be on site in ten minutes.” She had the group’s attention now. “The *Altar* is in eighty-five feet of water, so we’ll use a thirty-two percent mix. That should give you plenty of bottom time. Buddy up.” The six charter customers went to their gear and started to prepare for the first dive of the day.

One of the women looked at her. “You’re not going?”

“It’s time to fly on your own. Stay with your buddies.”

Typically they waited until the final day of the charter before allowing an unsupervised dive, but this group had caught on quickly, and the dive was shallow enough to make the decompression stops minimal. She finished the briefing and watched while they checked the oxygen percentage in their tanks using the portable analyzer. She waited until they were in the water and each gave the OK sign before heading to the cabin, where she reached for the second headset. Cody, a master gamer, was in his element, guiding Mako to an air-conditioning vent to make his escape. Although Mako’s life and

their next boat payment were tied to the success of the operation, it was still a video game to Cody.

“Come on, Cody, there’s no lock.” Mako closed the door to the maintenance room and waited for his next instructions. He heard Cody humming in the background and looked around. A mop bucket and cleaning supplies were the only things present, and he doubted they would be any help. He was getting nervous, but had no choice but to trust the man on the other end.

“Look up. There should be a large vent cover. You’ll need to open it and get inside,” Cody said.

Hearing activity outside, he looked up as a last resort and saw the grille over his head. Without a choice, he grabbed the mop and smashed the handle into the grille. It didn’t move. There were several voices outside now. He aimed for what he expected was a weak spot in the corner of the grate and with all his power pushed the handle through the gap. With a jerk, he pried the grille from the ceiling, ducking as it fell.

The door opened and he jumped. With the skill of a gymnast performing a muscle-up, he pulled himself through the opening, panicking for a second in the transition from the pull to the dip. A second later he was inside the duct, his arms trembling. The men were below him now, waiting as one talked into a microphone. His lanky frame and athletic ability had allowed him to enter the duct, and looking down on the guards, he risked a brief smile for they had neither the height or ability.

They would need a ladder to follow. The Iranian came into the room, barked an order and left with one of the guards.

“You’ve got to climb the first ten feet. Then it’ll level out and we can get you out of the building,” Cody said.

Mako remembered the pipes running outside the tower and realized what Cody was up to. There was nothing to grab onto, so with his back to the duct, he pushed against the far side with his feet and inched upward. The bend that Cody told him about was visible a foot overhead, but just as he was about to enter the horizontal duct, he heard a rumble and was assaulted by a stream of air. It wasn’t the pressure of the forced air but the dust it carried which caused him to sneeze and squint into the already-dark hole.

“Can you turn the damned thing off?” he asked Cody.

“Take too long. Gotta suck it up and get to level two.”

Mako got the game reference and realized that things were not going to get any easier if he delayed. He lifted his body into the transition and crawled along the pipe. Suddenly the sound and vibration stopped and the air died, leaving his breath the only sound he could hear as it echoed off the steel duct. The pipe had transitioned from square to round, and he knew he was on the outside of the structure.

“What now?” he asked.

“Level five, dude. There’ll be a service panel, but you’ll have to slide down twenty feet. It gets easier after that. Once you’re outside I’ll send the elevator for you.”

He couldn’t help but hear the excitement in Cody’s voice. This was like candy for the gamer. “Simple as that. Just send the

elevator!” Mako reached another ninety-degree bend and braced himself for the fall. With his back to the duct, he started down. Leg shaking from the effort, he reached the next bend and looked around. “I’m not seeing it.”

“Use your phone. It’s there.”

Mako took his phone from his pocket and turned on the flashlight. The bright light illuminated the duct, and just beyond his reach, across a larger duct, he saw the service door.

“Alicia, elevator to the sixteenth floor, please,” he heard Cody say, relieved that they were both helping now.

“Just a second.”

“I’m on the eighteenth floor!” Mako reminded them.

“Trust the Force,” Cody replied.

“We have about an hour before the first diver is up,” she said.

“A little help here,” Mako responded, upset that he was not the center of their attention.

“As soon as you’re on the elevator, I’ll take you out,” Alicia said.

Mako braced himself with his legs, extended his upper body over the void and grabbed one of the nuts holding the service door in place. He tried to turn it, but his hands were covered with sweat and he lost hold, almost dropping into the darkness below.

He reached back and dried his hand on his pants before grabbing the nut again. His grip was better, but it was too tight to loosen by hand. “I need tools.” Remembering the shark-shaped key chain Alicia had given him, he withdrew it from his

pocket and looked at the tiered shapes carved out of the interior. The void in the center of the tool fit over the nut, and he twisted it, using the teeth to grab the nut. With both hands on the tool, he turned it counterclockwise. It moved easily with the additional grip and leverage provided by the tool. He moved on to the next nut and quickly had all four off.

“Okay. What now?” he asked.

“There’s a scaffolding running right outside. Push out the cover and you’re out.”

Mako turned off the light from the phone and placed it and the keychain back in his pocket. He eased himself forward and pushed against the door. It released and slammed onto the service scaffold fixed to the building. Light flooded the duct, and he breathed in the fresh air. Easing himself forward another few inches, he grabbed the edge of the opening and with a grunt pulled himself toward it. His fingers grabbed for the steel grating that made up the walkway for the scaffolding, but he didn’t have enough momentum and his legs fell into the void, slamming against the duct as they hit.

He fought to pull himself up. Facing the duct, he reached the opening and worked his fingers forward an inch at a time, grabbing for another section of the open grate with each attempt. Finally he had enough leverage to pull himself through the opening, and his stomach dropped as he looked over the narrow scaffold at the street seventeen stories below. He waited, trying to control his breath, until he heard a motorized sound. He looked across at the exposed elevator shaft and crawled toward it, trying not to look down.

“The elevator is on its way. Climb on top and I’ll take you down,” Alicia said.

Mako waited for the elevator car to stop and crawled onto the elevator. Just as he braced himself, he felt his stomach drop again as it started to descend. It felt like the free-fall part of a sky dive and took him by surprise. Just as suddenly as it had started, the elevator slowed and stopped. He looked around before vaulting off and landing onto the hard sidewalk.

They heard the first diver at the swim platform and she checked her watch, surprised to see that an hour had passed. “Can you help the divers?” she asked Cody.

“Okay. I got it. You take Mako from here,” he said.

“That’d be nice,” Mako said. “I’m starting to feel a bit second-class here.”

She ignored him and focused on her computer, logging out of the Lloyd’s building site and hoping they insured themselves against computer fraud, because hacking in to their site had been all too easy.

“I’m still here,” he said.

“Hold on.” She pulled up the British Airways site and bought a one-way ticket from Heathrow to New York. The flight was scheduled to leave in several hours, so she was able to check him in and send the boarding pass directly to his phone.

“Flight leaves in three hours. Best bet is to backtrack to the tube station and ride out to Heathrow.”

“Best check my Oyster pass too. Not sure what I’ve got on it.”

Alicia opened another tab and went to the bookmark for the London Underground, where she added another twenty pounds to Mako’s card. “Got it. You should be all set.”

“A bit to eat would be nice. I’m a little low on cash, though.”

She felt the boat shift from the weight of the divers. Ignoring the comment, she left the cabin and helped the excited divers aboard. She helped Cody release the spent tanks from the divers’ backs and took their bulging catch bags full of lobster, which she placed in the cooler. Caught up in the divers’ excitement, she forgot about Mako until she heard him in her ear.

“They’re on to me. Going to need some help.”

Chapter Three

The sidewalk was barren—no landscape, nothing to conceal him—so Mako did the only thing he could. He ran.

“I’m on the move,” he said, hoping his words were intelligible over his ragged breathing. His legs still burned from climbing through the duct, but he fought through the pain. He had always been fast, and with a conscious effort to even out his breathing, he started to pace himself. But he was not fast enough. Every few seconds he turned to check on the men pursuing him and saw they were gaining. He had a block lead, enough to hide or change routes without them seeing, and regretted spending so much time researching the bars and pubs rather than devising an escape route.

“I need a plan,” he said, gasping for air. There was nothing but static in his ear. “Come on, guys—a little help.”

“On it.” Cody’s voice was hardly reassuring.

“Get me somewhere crowded. This business district is a ghost town.” Mako backtracked to Leadenhall, doubting he could lose his pursuers there, but it was the only route he knew. “That market on the other side of the river. It’s a madhouse.”

“Got a name?”

“Borough Market,” Alicia said. “And I’m guessing he didn’t go for the food.”

“Whatever,” Mako said, struggling to talk and breathe at the same time.

“Okay. Zooming in now,” Cody said. “Take care of the divers,” Mako heard him say to Alicia. “I’ll get him to Heathrow.”

Mako looked behind him and saw the men closing. He picked up speed. When he reached the exit for the market, he took a guess and turned left, knowing the river was in that direction.

“You’re on Gracechurch. In eight hundred feet, bear right onto King William. That will take you directly to London Bridge.”

“Thank you, Siri,” Mako said, knowing he should save his breath, but unable to hold the barb. He used the reflection from one of the store windows to check his pursuit and saw the Iranian still holding his pace, but the security guards had either gone back or fallen too far behind to matter. It was a one-on-one race. Increasing his speed again, he followed the bend in the road around to King William Street. The bridge lay ahead, a product of the seventies: low and architecturally insignificant, especially compared to the Tower Bridge on his left and the Millennium Bridge, visible in the distance on his right. He was running on fumes now, regretting that most of his efforts at the gym were spent in front of a mirror, working to keep his abs flat.

“The bridge is dead ahead,” Cody said.

“Really. I hadn’t noticed.” Mako cursed under his breath and increased the length of his strides, trying to distance himself from the Iranian before he ran into the foot traffic on the bridge. The man was still behind him, but they appeared to be evenly matched. As long as he could maintain this pace until he reached the market, he knew he could lose him in its twisted alleys and throngs of shoppers. He crossed Lower Thames and in a dozen strides was on the bridge, where he was forced to slow to a fast walk as he weaved through the other pedestrians.

Thankful for the slower pace, he ignored the looks of the angry tourists he jostled as he moved by them. He chanced a second to look back. The man was still there and had somehow gained on him. Mako guessed he was leaving a path through the crowd, making it easy for the man to follow, but there was nothing he could do about it. Halfway across, he turned and saw the angry face of the Iranian only several bodies behind him. A stroller blocked Mako's path and he tried to push it out of the way until a rather large man turned and grabbed him.

The Iranian was standing right behind the irate father now, a sly grin on his face, obviously hoping he would do his work for him, but the man shoved Mako against the railing and moved away. With his back to the rail, Mako stared into the dark eyes of his pursuer. He looked right and left, realizing there was no way out. He would have to fight the man. He reached into his pocket for a pen, the closest thing to a weapon he carried. The flash of a knife blade caught his eye, and the man moved closer, the crowd parting as he stood only a foot away now.

Mako had his back against the low concrete wall that served as a railing. There was nowhere to go except over. He set his hands on the smooth top and vaulted to a catlike position on its flat surface. The hesitation cost him, allowing the man to lunge forward and catch him with the knife. Its razor-sharp blade penetrated his pants leg, tearing the fabric near the pocket and entering near his groin.

He felt the burn and knew he was bleeding but ignored the wound and looked down at the river. The water was gone, blocked by a large sightseeing barge filled with tourists all

pointing up at him. The boat was moving, but he suspected the pilot had slowed to allow his passengers a better show than the Tower Bridge ahead.

Fortunately, it was high tide. Mako took the opportunity and jumped, landing on two tourists not fast enough to move out of his way. Screams came from the crowd as the barge picked up speed, the captain unaware of his new passenger. The crowd moved back, allowing Mako enough room to stand. Blood was trickling down his leg, but he guessed it was not a fatal wound and moved to the rail, checking himself for other injuries as he went. His hand reached down to the torn pocket and he realized the drive was gone.

Before he could react, he noticed a woman brave the gap between him and the crowd and approach.

“You’re hurt,” she said, with her hands out in front of her in a nonthreatening position. “I’m a doctor. Mind if I have a look?”

He looked down at his leg and noticed a small pool of blood on the deck. Nodding for her to approach, he looked ahead to see the barge moving towards a pier. “Hurry, though, I’ll be needing to disembark.” Something felt different when he spoke and he noticed the microphone was gone. Moving toward the crowd, he pushed aside several passengers and started searching the deck where he had landed. He felt the earwig still in place, but without the microphone it was little use. The woman touched him and he turned to her.

“Lie down,” she said in an authoritative voice.

Exhausted and defeated, he sat on the deck with his legs in front of him. She knelt next to him, and he couldn’t help but

notice her scent as she leaned close and pulled the torn fabric away from the wound.

“I’d think a couple of stitches should do it,” she said with an American accent. “Stay here, I’ll see if they have a first-aid kit aboard.” She got up and moved away.

The crowd was getting braver now, and he felt cornered. The woman approached, carrying a white box with a red cross on it. He was about to say he was okay, when the barge lurched forward. His immediate reaction was to run, but he quickly realized they had hit the dock. Two crewmen were running fore and aft with lines. He watched as both jumped on the dock at the same time and skillfully tied the barge off. The passengers, just a moment ago mesmerized by him, were now excitedly moving toward the starboard rail, pressing against each other, ready for their next adventure. He looked back and saw the woman still there.

“Might as well let me bandage you. It’ll be a few minutes before they’re off.”

He nodded to her, but kept his eyes on the street above the covered walkway for any sign of police. The deck was almost clear when she finished. For the first time, he looked at her face and realized how pretty she was. He fought back against his natural reaction, knowing he had a flight to catch and no time for a dalliance. Instead of flirting, he merely thanked her.

She rejoined her friends waiting on the pier, and he followed, using them for cover as he climbed off the barge onto the dock. The women moved off to the right and he followed, staying far enough behind so they wouldn’t feel him behind them. With

every step he felt more secure, but the loss of the drive was now heavy on his mind. He left the main street and stepped into an alley, where he patted his good pocket and withdrew the phone, hoping it had not been damaged in the chase. The screen lit up, showing several text messages from Alicia. He texted his current situation, omitting the loss of the drive, and opened the map app. It showed him just a few blocks from the market. Quickly he cleaned himself off, arranging his shirttail to cover the rip in his pants. Keeping to the alleys rather than the main streets, he reached the market a few minutes later, his mouth watering at the sight of the food displays. He realized he hadn't eaten in hours and looked hungrily at the huge stacks of meat and cheeses.

His phone vibrated, distracting him from the gastronomic wonders, and he scrolled through Alicia's directions to the airport. After replying that he had received them, he checked his email, finding the receipt where she had added money to his Oyster card and another message with a PDF of his boarding pass to New York. He checked the time on the home screen and realized he had only two hours to make the flight.

Reaching into his back pocket, he was relieved to find his wallet still intact and withdrew a few notes. From the first stand he came across, he grabbed a few samples of cheese and waited for the man behind the table stacked high with food to acknowledge him. With a small loaf of bread and hunk of cheese in hand, he scanned the crowd for any sign of recognition. Finding none, he backtracked to the London Bridge.

An hour later, his stomach was full, but the desperate feeling of failure dominated his thoughts. He felt almost naked standing in front of the security guard at Heathrow. But with no baggage, he was quickly through security, and found his zone boarding when he reached the gate. After a quick moment of anxiety, he held his phone to the scanner. Relieved when it beeped and showed a green light, he walked down the jetway and smiled at the flight attendant who stood in the doorway directing passengers to their seats. He showed her his phone and she directed him to the far aisle, not failing to notice the smile and her touch as she directed him to his seat.

Settled back in the faux leather seat, his knees bumping the back of the seat in front, he stared at the screen of his phone and started typing the bad news. He reread the message several times before hitting the send button just as the plane was pushed back from the gate. Without waiting for the reply, he shut the power off and closed his eyes, wondering how he would overcome the setback. The loss of the drive and the bounty from the CIA would cost them, especially when Alicia saw the expenses he had incurred. With five hours to think about it, he tried to shut off his mind as the plane taxied. Half an hour later, they were still sitting on the runway, and he felt a hand on his arm. Opening his eyes, about to get angry with whoever was disturbing him, he quickly changed his attitude when he saw the flight attendant smiling at him.

“It’s your leg, sir,” she said. “Maybe we should have a look when we get airborne.”

Mako looked down at the soaked bandage and up at the smile on her face, wondering if that was all she wanted a look at.

KEEP READING

