

A JACK ROGAN MYSTERY

THE **CURIOUS**

Florence
CASE OF THE

**MISSING
HEAD**



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THE CURIOUS CASE of
the MISSING HEAD

Jack Rogan Mysteries Book 5

Gabriel Farago

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‘Life would be tragic if it weren’t funny.’

Stephen Hawking

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Introduction

Westminster Abbey. Iconic final resting place of kings and queens, composers, statesmen, explorers and scientists, where every stone has a story to tell about the journey of man. Not only is it a spectacular reminder of extraordinary people and great achievements, but at the same time, every stone whispers of mortality and the certainty of death. As a repository of history, Westminster Abbey is unparalleled.

I will never forget 15 June 2018. On that day, one of the greatest minds of our time, Stephen Hawking – who died in March that year after decades suffering from motor neurone disease – had his ashes interred close to the graves of Newton and Darwin in the Scientists' Corner of the Abbey.

And how appropriate it was, I thought. Hawking was born exactly three hundred years after Newton. It was Newton who formulated the laws of motion and universal gravitation, and it was Hawking's genius that took astrophysics to new heights. The inscription on his memorial stone is a translation of the Latin text on Newton's gravestone: 'Here lies what was mortal of Stephen Hawking 1942–2018'. In addition, the stone is inscribed with one of Hawking's most famous equations:

$$T = \frac{hc^3}{8\pi G M k}$$

But that wasn't all. The Greek composer Vangelis set Hawking's inspirational message to the world, to music, which according to Hawking's daughter was beamed into space that day from a European Space Agency satellite dish, aimed at the nearest black hole, 1A 0620-00.

I have followed Hawking and his inspired, groundbreaking ideas for over thirty years. A keen interest in mathematics and physics inspired me to read all his books, especially *A Brief History of Time* (1988 Bantam London), which explains complex, revolutionary ideas in ways a layman like me can relate to and understand.

The service was attended by luminaries from around the world. Martin Rees, the

Astronomer Royal, made a moving speech; actor Benedict Cumberbatch, who played Hawking in a BBC drama, delivered a reading; and Nobel laureate Kip Thorne paid tribute to his remarkable colleague and friend.

As the sound of Richard Wagner's stirring 'Ride of the Valkyries' rose, heralding the end of the service, and the bells of the Abbey began to toll, conjuring up images of man's futile quest for immortality, my mind began to wander ...

How tragic, I thought, that such a gifted mind capable of solving some of the greatest and most challenging mysteries of the cosmos, was cut down by a terrible disease in the middle, if not at the very beginning, of what he might have been capable of, thereby preventing him from reaching his full potential, and depriving mankind of precious knowledge.

However, was this any more regrettable than Beethoven going deaf and unable to hear some of his greatest works, or Mozart dying as a young man of only thirty-five? One can only speculate what might have been possible if these gifted minds could have stayed around for longer, allowing their creative genius to blossom and reach new heights.

And then something occurred to me. What if we could somehow change all that and *make* it possible? Turn a vision into reality today, right now? Recent groundbreaking advances in medical research and technology – especially in surgery and surgical techniques and procedures – have led to some breathtaking discoveries and results, placing some concepts that only a few short years ago would have been considered science fiction, into the realm of realistic possibilities. What if a gifted mind like that of Stephen Hawking's could somehow be liberated from a terribly disabled body, and manage to live on for some more time, allowing it to continue its groundbreaking work and reach for the stars, literally? What if ...?

That was the thought I took away with me from this moving service. It was a thought inspired by optimism and hope for the future that stayed with me and became the inspiration for this book.

Gabriel Farago

Leura, Blue Mountains, Australia

November 2019

Part I
Operation Libertad

Prologue

Arizona State Prison Complex, Florence, Arizona:

Friday 13 July 2018, 9:00 am

Alonso Cordoba was preparing himself to die. The son of Hernando Cordoba – the notorious Colombian drug lord and head of the Huitzilopochtli, or H Cartel as it was generally known – he was by far the most famous prisoner in Arizona State Prison Complex, Florence.

Convicted of the murder of two undercover police officers while resisting arrest in Tombstone during a major drug deal, he had been languishing on death row for more than two years. After his conviction, a lengthy appeals process had slowly dragged itself through the court system until, with the final appeal dismissed and nowhere else to go, an execution date was set. Not even the ingenuity of the expensive New York legal team engaged by his father to delay the execution could stop the relentless progress of the death penalty juggernaut hurtling towards him.

Arizona was determined to execute the drug baron responsible for importing tonnes of cocaine from Colombia via the ‘Aztec Highway’ through Mexico into the United States, and killing two of their finest law enforcement officers in the process. Death by lethal injection seemed only fair, and a proper punishment for such heinous crimes. And besides, the governor was under enormous pressure from Washington to expedite the execution as a clear signal that America meant business and was determined to do something about the huge drug problem plaguing the country. If nothing was done, voter backlash was predicted to be swift and brutal. The slippery bribery tentacles greased by a seemingly inexhaustible money supply controlled by South American drug lords reached into the highest places and had spread scandal and corruption not only throughout Mexico, but in the United States as well.

Not being a religious man, Alonso had refused to see the priest who had tried to visit him in his cell that morning. Instead, arrogant and defiant to the end, he ate his final meal – a huge steak – with gusto under the watchful eyes of the prison guards, who must have

wondered how a man about to die a horrible death could devour such a meal.

At nine am sharp, Alonso was taken from his cell to Housing Unit 9, a small, freestanding building with a gruesome reputation. This was the place where all the executions in the Arizona Prison Complex – Florence were carried out.

Separated by a large window from the stark lethal-injection chamber, spectators who were about to witness the execution in the small viewing room had a clear view of the gurney. Apart from prison officials and several journalists, family members of the two murdered police officers were already seated, their eyes fixed in morbid fascination on the operating table-like gurney with leather straps that would shortly be used to restrain the condemned prisoner, to allow the lethal injection to take its course. The spectators watched in silence as the prisoner entered the tiny room.

Dressed in an orange jumpsuit, Alonso – a short, stocky man in his mid-forties – was escorted to the gurney where prison medical staff were preparing the intravenous lines about to be inserted into his arms. Remembering the botched execution of Joseph Wood, who took almost two hours to die – his repulsive convulsions on the table causing horror and panic among the spectators – the medical officer in charge of the lines was determined to get it right this time. The drugs – a combination of midazolam and hydromorphone – had been improved since that execution fiasco, but they were difficult to obtain, as reputable drug companies refused to sell the drugs to the United States knowing that they would be used for executions. Alternative sources were notoriously unreliable, and the drug quality questionable.

As soon as Alonso set eyes on the gurney with the leather straps, a wave of uncertainty and fear washed over him. For the first time that day, his unwavering belief that he would somehow be spared at the last minute began to fade. Raul Rodrigo, his father's personal lawyer who had handled all legal matters since his arrest, had visited him just two days earlier, assuring him that all would be fine. He had told Alonso that a last-minute application to have the execution stayed was about to be heard by the US Supreme Court. He had also told Alonso that he was very confident it would succeed because it was based on solid constitutional arguments. When questioned further by Alonso about what would happen if it didn't, a smiling Raul had sidestepped the question and refused to provide further details. Instead, he had urged Alonso to have faith, trust his

father, and be strong.

As Alonso lay down on the gurney, he glanced at the clock above the door. *I hope Raul knows what he's doing*, he thought. *Because very soon, it will be too late.*

Bogota, Colombia

Rodrigo looked at his client, who was staring out of one of the bulletproof windows. Ignoring the armed guards patrolling the grounds and the tall razor-wire fences behind the exotic, manicured gardens surrounding the compound, it was a beautiful, peaceful view down to Bogota, covered in morning mist. Protected by thick concrete walls, state-of-the-art security systems and massive steel gates, most of the large fortified building was underground. The Cordoba compound on the outskirts of Bogota was more like a fortress than a villa. In Colombia this wasn't unusual, but to be expected of the headquarters of the notorious H Cartel, one of the most powerful and ruthless cartels in the country.

Named after Huitzilopochtli, the bloody Aztec god of war, sun and human sacrifice, the Cartel had the Xiuhcoatl, the fire serpent that the god wielded as a weapon, as its emblem. With influence, money and power came powerful enemies. As head of the H Cartel, Hernando Cordoba was still alive only because he understood that very well.

Cordoba rarely left the compound and conducted most of his business from his 'observation room' as he liked to call it, overlooking his beloved garden and the city in the distance below. When he did leave – usually to inspect secret drug manufacturing sites hidden deep in the jungle – he did so by helicopter, which was more like a gunship than a civilian aircraft. Sourced from the Venezuelan Air Force and modified to suit his needs, it was equipped with the latest weapons systems, which gave it awesome firepower. Cordoba lived in a constant state of war and he liked it that way. It kept him sharp and alert, and a step or two ahead of his enemies and competitors.

'We are cutting it fine,' said Cordoba, turning to face his lawyer sitting at a desk behind him. 'If the execution goes to plan, the boy will be dead in less than forty-five minutes.'

For some reason that hadn't been explained, the Arizona authorities had suddenly

accelerated the execution and set a date. This had caught the Cordoba legal team by surprise, and an appeal had been lodged immediately to have the execution stayed on constitutional grounds.

Rodrigo glanced at his watch. 'I know,' he said. 'But we should hear any—' He was interrupted by his mobile ringing in his breast pocket. Rodrigo sat up straight as if poked by a hot needle, bit his lip, and answered the call he had so anxiously been waiting for. 'I see; thank you,' he said after a while, and slipped the phone back into his pocket.

Cordoba watched his lawyer carefully. The look on Rodrigo's face told him all he had to know.

Rodrigo shook his head and stood up. 'Only one dissenting judge agreed with our arguments. It's a disgrace. Constitutional matters no longer seem to count. The execution is to go ahead. The US Government has the court in its pocket.'

Cordoba stood up as well. Feeling relieved because the excruciating waiting was over, he was ready to act. And that was what he liked most of all and was good at. 'Then you better hurry; the chopper is standing by and the ambassador is waiting. It's all arranged.'

Rodrigo picked up the briefcase on the table in front of him and hurried to the door. He was used to working under pressure, but the pressure at that moment was about as much as a man could take. He realised what he and Cordoba had been feverishly working on for several months to save Alonso, was hanging in the balance. The next forty minutes were crucial.

Rodrigo stopped at the door and turned around. 'We'll make it, you'll see,' he said.

'I hope so,' replied Cordoba, staring out of the window. 'If not, it will destroy Rahima,' he added quietly to himself. 'She already lost a son; losing another would be unthinkable.'

The chopper landed in a deserted car park close to the US embassy. This was of course totally illegal, but in Bogota, Cordoba made his own rules. A black Land Rover was standing by and took Rodrigo to the front gate of the embassy a few hundred metres away.

The US ambassador was waiting in his office with his aide. An urgent appointment

had been arranged the day before by Cordoba himself. He had advised the ambassador that he had vital information concerning US national security, and that his lawyer would come to see him and explain everything the next day. He had also asked the ambassador to arrange a direct line of communication with the White House, as matters of great importance and urgency were likely to arise. Having dealt with Cordoba before, the ambassador knew better than to refuse or ask for an explanation or, God forbid, dismiss the entire matter as a meaningless nuisance. In Bogota you did what Cordoba asked, or you left the country – if you could.

‘I’m intrigued, Mr Rodrigo,’ said the ambassador, extending his hand. ‘I was told that the timing of our meeting had something to do with Alonso Cordoba’s execution scheduled for, well, just about now.’

‘Correct, Mr Ambassador,’ said Rodrigo. ‘There isn’t much time, so let me cut to the chase if I may.’

‘Please do.’

‘Everything I’ve been instructed to say is in this short video, Mr Ambassador. It will explain everything.’

Rodrigo placed a DVD on the table in front of him. The ambassador motioned towards his aide. The aide walked over to the table, picked up the DVD and slipped it into a hard drive connected to a large monitor behind the ambassador’s desk.

For the next five minutes, the three men in the room watched the video in stunned silence, the atmosphere in the room electric.

After the video stopped, the ambassador was the first to speak. ‘Are you suggesting, Mr Rodrigo, that all of this is *real*?’

‘I am; very real.’

‘In that case, I must make an urgent phone call,’ said the ambassador and stood up.

‘I was hoping you would say that, Mr Ambassador,’ said Rodrigo and stood up as well.

‘Please wait outside, Mr Rodrigo. My aide will show you ...’

The ambassador waited until Rodrigo and his aide had left the room, before unlocking one of the drawers of his desk. He took out an encrypted satellite phone and speed-dialled a number at the White House.

Arizona State Prison Complex, lethal-injection chamber: 10:15 am

Alonso was lying on the gurney with his eyes closed, unable to move, the tight leather restraining straps cutting into his chest, arms and legs. Because the medical officer couldn't find any veins he considered suitable, he had to – much to the horror of the spectators – surgically insert a catheter into Alonso's groin to allow the lethal drugs to enter his bloodstream. This had delayed the execution by a few minutes, but the medical officer wasn't prepared to take any chances. The humiliating Wood fiasco would not be repeated on his watch! The prisoner would die, and quickly.

The medical officer stepped away from the gurney and looked at the governor standing in the corner, watching. 'Ready, sir,' he said.

The governor nodded.

The medical officer was about to turn on the lethal drip, when the door opened and a young woman holding a mobile phone burst into the chamber. The governor turned and gave her a withering look. '*Not now*, for heaven's sake!' he hissed.

Looking embarrassed, the young woman hurried over to the governor. 'It's the president ... for you, sir,' she stammered and handed the phone to the governor, her hand shaking.

The medical officer, and the spectators on the other side of the window, stared at the governor, stunned. After what seemed like an eternity, the governor handed the phone back to the young woman and turned to face the window.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' he began, speaking softly. 'I just spoke with the President of the United States. The execution has been stayed indefinitely.'

Kosovo, near the Albanian border: 25 October 1999

The vicious, bloody war may have been finally over, but the suffering and atrocities continued underground. When the rule of law disintegrates and is replaced by the arbitrary rule of violence and the gun, old feuds and grudges come out of the shadows and rub shoulders with more sinister urges that are allowed to run riot, leaving the

vulnerable and weak exposed and at the mercy of the ruthless.

Two dark-green, mud-covered, military-style vehicles turned off the road and followed a rutted dirt track into the forest. ‘How much further?’ asked the man sitting next to the driver of the first vehicle.

‘A few kilometres; it’s quite remote,’ replied the man sitting behind him.

‘Good. A couple with two girls, you say?’

‘Yes.’

‘Just what we want. Mirko will be pleased!’

‘Mirko?’

‘The man who owns the place where we do all the ... you know.’

‘He likes young girls?’

‘Oh yes, he does!’

After the armed conflict had ended, many Kosovo Albanians hadn’t laid down their arms, but had melted into the forests and continued their dirty work – aimed mainly at ethnic Serbs. Old grudges rarely die. They just go to ground and simmer – often for years – until, suddenly liberated, they erupt more violently than ever, spreading their poison and terror.

Bogodan Petrovic looked affectionately at his twins, Nadia and Teodora, sitting opposite him at the kitchen table. At fourteen, they were almost impossible to tell apart and it took a mother’s love and intuition to do so. His wife, Anya, busied herself at the stove, preparing dinner. Bogodan, a strong man in his late thirties, had lived on the land all his life, eking out a modest living on the small family farm, just like his father before him. A simple life of hard, honest work. The dreadful war had taken its toll, but Bogodan had somehow managed to stay out of the conflict and protect his family and his property, and most important of all, keep them all alive. This had a lot to do with the remote location of the farm near the Albanian border, and the fact that he kept to himself and got on with his neighbours. Or so he thought. But no-one can hide from the world around them forever.

For years, one of his neighbours – a wealthy landowner with influence in the village – had tried to buy Bogodan’s farm, claiming an agreement had been reached a long time ago between their grandfathers. Bogodan had laughed this off as nonsense, as there was

no evidence to support this, and he refused to sell. This had created serious bad blood between them, which had turned increasingly acrimonious and bitter over the years.

‘There it is,’ said the man in the back seat and pointed to a small house at the end of the track.

‘You stay here and leave the rest to us,’ replied the man in the front.

The man in the back tapped him on the shoulder and handed him a large bundle of bank notes. ‘As agreed,’ he said. ‘What will you do with the family?’

‘Not your concern,’ replied the man and slipped the notes into his pocket. ‘But I can tell you, Mirko will have fun with the girls, that’s for sure,’ he added, laughing. ‘Enjoy your new farm. We’ll drop you off on our way back.’ Then he pulled a black balaclava over his head and reached for his gun.

Anya had just put a pot of soup on the table and was about to fill the bowls, when she heard a vehicle pull up in the yard outside. This was most unusual because they rarely had visitors, and almost never after dark. ‘Who could that be?’ she said looking at Bogodan, a flash of uncertainty and fear in her eyes.

Bogodan stood up and walked to the front door to have a look. That’s when he heard a second vehicle approach, its bright headlights shining through the window. Then someone started banging on the door. As soon as Bogodan opened the door, four men – their faces hidden behind balaclavas – burst into the room, guns drawn and shouting.

Sitting awkwardly on the floor in the back of a small van with their hands tied behind their backs and duct tape covering their mouths, Bogodan, Anya and the two girls lurched from side to side every time the van took a turn. Terrified, bruised and finding it difficult to breathe, they could only communicate with their eyes. The terrified look in Anya’s eyes said it all.

The two vehicles crossed the border, drove through the sleeping Albanian town of Burrel and then turned off the road. ‘Here we are,’ said the man in the front seat and pointed to a dilapidated farmhouse with stables at the back. Several cars were parked in front of the house, and two armed men sat on a wooden bench by the front door, smoking. They stood up as the vehicles approached.

As soon as his car stopped, the man in the front seat got out, walked to the back of the van stopped behind him and opened the door. ‘Get out; you two first,’ he barked, pointing to the girls. Then he turned towards the two armed men watching him.

‘Where’s Mirko?’ he asked, obviously used to being in command.

‘In the stables, getting drunk as usual,’ replied one of the men, a former KLA fighter called Janko.

‘Tell him I’ve a present for him.’

‘Oh?’

‘These two here. Take them to him. Tell him it’s rent for two weeks. But first, take off the tape and handcuffs. We want them to look pretty.’

‘Will do. Girls this time? Lucky bastard,’ said Janko, laughing. He had taken women to Mirko before but never girls this young.

‘Is everything ready?’

‘Yes. They are all waiting inside.’

‘Good. The other two here are a present for the doctor; take them inside. I need a drink!’

Janko pushed the stable door open with his shoulder and looked inside.

Mirko, a man in his fifties, was lying on a bale of hay clutching a half-empty bottle of vodka to his chest. His eyes were closed and he appeared to be asleep.

‘You,’ said Janko, pointing to Teodora standing next to him, ‘go inside, take off your clothes and wait for me; understood?’ Teodora nodded – her eyes wide with terror – and stumbled inside, shaking. ‘While your sister and I are having a little fun right here,’ continued Janko, smacking his lips. He turned around, pulled Nadia roughly towards him, undid his belt and then put his sweaty hand up her skirt.

Dr Dritan Shehu, a former KLA commander, was carefully laying out his instruments on a makeshift operating table set up in another of the stables behind the house. The conditions were primitive, but adequate as long as certain procedures were followed meticulously. And Dr Shehu was a meticulous man, bordering on pedantic when it came to his work.

The only child of a prominent doctor from Pec, Shehu had been exposed to things

medical from an early age, and it soon became apparent to his doting parents that young Dritan would follow in his father's footsteps. Inquisitive and exceptionally bright, he had devoured books on medical subjects in his father's extensive library even before he had left primary school, and he had often sat in on consultations and small procedures performed in his father's surgery. By the time he was eighteen he spoke fluent English and German, and his parents sent him to England to study medicine.

An incredibly gifted student, he soon came to the attention of professors, who took a special interest in him and encouraged his fascination with surgery. After his graduation, he returned to Pec to begin an internship. That was just before the brutal Kosovo war broke out in 1998, and then everything changed.

As Kosovar Albanians, the Shehu family became embroiled in the bitter conflict between the KLA – the Kosovo Liberation Army – and Yugoslav forces targeting KLA sympathisers and political opponents. Shehu's father – thought to be a sympathiser because he often treated wounded KLA fighters – was detained for questioning by Serb paramilitary forces, who broke into his house one night looking for KLA fighters. He was executed in the kitchen in front of his wife and son. The next day, Shehu joined the KLA.

'So, what have we got here?' asked Shehu, looking at Bogodan and his wife – both handcuffed – standing in a circle of light next to the operating table. 'Take off his shirt.'

The armed man standing behind Bogodan undid the handcuffs and ordered Bogodan to take off his shirt. Shehu nodded appreciatively. *A strong healthy male, late thirties, obviously used to hard work; excellent*, he thought and turned to Anya. 'His wife?' he asked.

The armed man nodded.

'Good. We'll begin with him. Take them outside. You know what to do; back of the head as I showed you. Then bring him in here and put him on the table.'

Ignoring Bogodan's and Anya's shrill questions and protests as they were being dragged outside, Shehu put on a pair of plastic gloves and checked his scalpels.

In the stable next to the makeshift surgery, Mirko had woken up after Janko had kicked him in the shins. He stared at the two naked girls standing in front of him, shaking.

‘Present from the commander,’ said Janko, pushing the girls towards Mirko, who was rubbing his eyes in disbelief. That’s when two shots shattered the stillness of the night.

‘Ah,’ said Janko, ‘I’m needed outside. I’m sure you can think of something to do with these two cuties for a while,’ he added, pinching Teodora on her bottom.

Aroused, Mirko sat up, took another swig of vodka, burped and then pulled Nadia roughly towards him.

‘Careful,’ said Shehu, as two men lifted the green plastic sheet with Bogodan’s body onto the operating table. The entry wound at the back of the head was neat, but the face had almost entirely been blown away and was still bleeding.

‘Perfect,’ continued Shehu. He reached for his scalpel and made the first long incision, opening the chest as he had done many times before. He knew he would reach the heart within a few minutes, extract it and then place it into the state-of-the art storage container with inflatable cushions and eutectoid cooling. The container would provide the precisely controlled environmental temperature needed to ensure safe transport of the harvested organ to its destination in the Middle East. But first, it would be driven to a nearby airport and flown to Istanbul. The small plane was standing by, but as always time was of the essence.

The sophisticated organ-harvesting operation consisted of many complex stages but it had been perfected by Shehu, who was known as ‘Dr Death’. Healthy organs fetched huge amounts of money on the black market, and ready cash was in short supply after the war. Run with military precision, what had begun as an experiment had soon turned into a thriving business.

Teodora watched her struggling sister being savagely raped by Mirko, who was clearly enjoying himself. Unable to watch any longer, she let her eyes wander until they came to rest on something leaning against the wooden wall in a corner. A pitchfork. Teodora had always been the more strong-willed and impulsive of the twins. She was also the more adventurous and courageous, prepared to reach out and have a go, however dangerous or foolhardy it may at first appear.

When Mirko turned Nadia around and began to do something unthinkable to her,

Teodora made a spontaneous decision. Slowly, she began to move towards the pitchfork in the corner without taking her eyes off Mirko. He seemed to be having some difficulty controlling Nadia, who was crying hysterically and struggling violently in a desperate attempt to resist. When Nadia lashed out and scratched Mirko's face, drawing blood, and Mirko responded by hitting her hard with a fist clenched in anger, Teodora knew it was time.

She made a dash for the pitchfork, picked it up and holding it firmly with both hands, she ran towards Mirko, who had his back turned towards her. Fear and loathing gave her strength. She lifted the fork and plunged it deep into Mirko's back, piercing his heart. She pulled out the fork and stabbed him again until Mirko let go of Nadia and, pressing his hands against his chest, he fell forward and died, blood gushing from the deep wounds and turning the straw crimson.

'Get dressed quickly!' hissed Teodora, picking up her own clothes. 'We have to get out of here *now!*'

As they ran towards the door, Teodora stopped. She could hear animated voices coming from the stable next door. For some reason she couldn't explain, she walked over to a large crack in one of the rough wooden planks forming part of the wall separating the two stables, pressed her cheek against the plank, and looked into the brightly lit chamber. What she saw made her gasp and tremble with revulsion and fear.

At first, she didn't recognise the mutilated corpse on a blood-covered green plastic sheet lying on the ground a couple of metres from the wall. But when she saw the trousers and the shoes, recognition dawned and a wave of nausea overcame her, making her retch. But worse was to come. Lying on a table next to her father's body was a woman. Her face was unrecognisable, and her chest had been opened wide. A man was cutting something inside the chest cavity with what looked like a pair of large scissors. The face of the man was illuminated by a strong light from above, accentuating his features. His image was etched into Teodora's memory, never to be erased.

'M-mother!' stammered Teodora, as tears began to stream down her wan cheeks, her lips trembling.

'What is it?' asked Nadia, standing next to her. She was about to take a look through another crack in the wall when Teodora grabbed her from behind.

'No!' she cried, pulling her sister away. *'You mustn't! Let's get out of here!'*

Teodora opened the stable door and looked outside. The yard looked deserted. Everyone appeared to be inside. *'Come, quickly!'* she said, taking Nadia by the hand, and began to walk slowly along the wall of the stable, trying to stay in the shadows. They had almost reached the corner when they heard voices. Teodora froze and pressed herself against the wall. Nadia did the same. Two men came out of the adjoining stable. Each one was carrying what looked like a large, shiny box. They hurried over to one of the cars, opened the boot and carefully placed the boxes inside. Then they got into the car, reversed and drove away.

'Over there,' said Teodora, pointing to the dark forest behind some rusty farm machinery. *'Now! Let's run!'*

The girls ran across the deserted yard and reached the forest without being seen, and then disappeared into the night.

International Space Station: 14 March 2018

Orbiting earth at an altitude of four hundred and five kilometres and at a speed of 27,600 km/h, the International Space Station had just passed over the Pacific and was approaching Australia. Launched into orbit in 1998 and inhabited without interruption since that date, it was the largest man-made object in low earth orbit visible with the naked eye from our planet. A marvel of cutting-edge technology, it was a symbol of human ingenuity and international cooperation. During the next twenty-four hours, it would complete 15.54 orbits and send valuable data back to the Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland. As a microgravity and space environment research laboratory, it had no equal. In a way, it was an outpost of humankind, preparing to leave earth and explore space.

In a state of near-weightlessness, Professor Zachariah Stolfus rested on his back in the cupola, a unique seven-window observatory, and stared down at the blue planet as it slowly drifted past the eighty-centimetre round window, the largest on the space station. This was his favourite place on the station; the place where he did his best thinking. The planet looked so peaceful, so serene, so timeless from above, yet this marvellous view could not calm the emotional turmoil boiling within him. Stolfus had just received news that Steven Hawking, his hero and idol, had passed away in Cambridge.

In a way, Stolfus owed everything to Hawking. It was Hawking's groundbreaking work back in the 1980s that had ignited the spark of curiosity about the universe and its origin in the young man working on the family farm with his father and brothers in Pennsylvania. Growing up in a strict Amish home without electricity or any kind of modern appliance or convenience – not even a motor car; transport was by horse and buggy – had been stifling, and it was by sheer accident that he had come across Hawking's book *A Brief History of Time* in 1988. It was an event that changed his life.

An accident during a barn raising – he slipped and fell from a roof – had left Stolfus with a permanent injury to his spine. He spent several months in a Philadelphia hospital under the care of an eminent orthopaedic surgeon. The surgeon and his young patient

struck up a friendship and it was during his lengthy, painful rehabilitation that Stolzhus's extraordinary, inquisitive mind attracted attention. As the surgeon got to know his young patient better, he realised he was dealing with an exceptionally gifted human being with an insatiable hunger for knowledge.

He lent the boy books on history, mathematics and philosophy, and they spent hours discussing Nietzsche, Aristotle and Hume. However, it soon became apparent that young Zachariah's real interest was the cosmos and how it worked, but most of all, how it began. He devoured books about Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler and Newton, and it was then that Zachariah came across Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, which changed everything.

A crooked little smile creased the corners of Stolzhus's mouth as he remembered the first time he read about the Big Bang and black holes, general relativity and quantum mechanics, all subjects that would fascinate him later and dominate his life. After that, there was no going back. He realised then exactly what he wanted to do, and why. And he was still doing it as he tried to come to terms with the fact that Hawking, his inspiration, was no more.

'You look troubled, my friend,' said Sergei, a fellow physicist from Russia, as he settled into the seat next to Zachariah. 'Hawking?'

Stolzhus nodded. 'You know me too well. His death is affecting me more than I thought possible.'

'Understandable.'

Living in the tight confines of the space station for months with little or no privacy had brought the tightly knit group of four scientists closer together. So much so, they could not only read each other's moods, but intuitively know their thoughts as well.

'For the first time, I wish I was down there and not up here. I feel so confined, so helpless. *So alone*. For some reason, I want to reach out, talk about him and his work. Tell the world what he ... I want *to do* something!'

Sergei put his hand on his friend's arm. 'Then why don't you?' he asked quietly.

'What do you mean?'

'Talk about him. From up here, right now. Send a message to the world down there, from up here. Can you think of a more fitting place for a tribute? After all, that's what

you have in mind, don't you?

'Do it from here? That hadn't occurred to me. What a great idea! Do you think they'll go for this?'

Sergei floated out of his seat and turned to face his friend. 'I'll contact the control centre right now. Leave it to me.'

Feeling better, Stolfus stared out the window as the familiar shapes of the continents drifted past, and contemplated what he would say about Hawking should NASA agree to such a broadcast.

The idea of a tribute to Hawking made from space, expressed by the very man who had for some time been considered his most likely successor, was a publicist's dream. It raced from Maryland to Washington, right up to the president himself, who thought it was an excellent suggestion. Not only would it be a fitting tribute to a genius, it would also create huge publicity and awareness of the United States space program, and enhance the reputation and prestige of the International Space Station and the scientists working there. Permission for a short video broadcast by Stolfus was given within the hour.

Stolfus settled back in his seat in the cupola and then turned to face the camera. *Three minutes are better than nothing*, he thought, and cleared his throat.

'I am Professor Zachariah Stolfus, talking to you from the International Space Station high above our wonderful blue planet,' he began slowly. 'Today, one of the most remarkable minds of our time has faded into eternity, leaving behind some extraordinary insights and challenges. Professor Stephen Hawking has taken his place next to Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler and Einstein, who paved the way. Yet it was his genius as a theoretical physicist and cosmologist that gave us the second law of black hole dynamics, and the prediction that black holes emit radiation – now called Hawking radiation – that will change the way we look at how the universe works, how it began, and where it is heading.

'But it wasn't only the big scientific questions that occupied his exceptional mind. He looked closely at the future of the human race and pointed out the great dangers of climate change and how artificial intelligence could help us deal with the challenges that

lie ahead. He was convinced, as I am, that our planet cannot indefinitely support the human race, and that to survive we would have to travel into space and find new places to colonise,' Stolfus paused and pointed to the window above him, 'out there.

'Professor Hawking wasn't just a theoretical physicist; he was also a philosopher. One particular sentence taken from his book *A Brief History of Time* has stayed with me all these years: "If we discover a complete theory, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason – for then we should know the mind of God." I believe that this is the challenge Professor Hawking has left behind for us to take up. The laws of physics are eternal, and so are the ideas that help us discover them. Professor Hawking had many such ideas and they are out there, somewhere, forever. And that is as close as we can get to immortality. I will miss you, Stephen, but every time I look up at the stars, I can see you, and I can hear you.'

Sitting in his office in New York, Raul Rodrigo watched Stolfus's extraordinary tribute to the late Professor Hawking from space with great interest. As he listened to these stirring words, an idea began to take shape in his mind. At first he almost dismissed it as ridiculous and absurd, but it wouldn't go away. In fact, it became even stronger and clearer when the NASA commentator spoke about Professor Zachariah Stolfus and explained who he was, what he did, and what his work meant to the international space program, science, the United States, and the world.

At the end of the broadcast, which had been watched by millions and went viral on social media later that day, Professor Stolfus, who until then had only been known in science circles, became an overnight celebrity as one of the leading theoretical physicists and cosmologists on the planet, and Stephen Hawking's most likely successor.

Rodrigo turned off the television and walked over to the large window overlooking Central Park. Holding his hands behind his back, he stared out the window and began formulating a plan so daring, it made him smile and tremble with excitement. It was the kind of plan he thrived on because he knew there were perhaps only a handful of people who could come up with something like this, and fewer still who could even think of implementing it. However, he did know of one man who would not only embrace the idea, he would love it.

Rodrigo turned around, walked over to his desk and called his client in Bogota.

Cordoba compound, Bogota: 30 March

Rahima knelt in front of the altar of the small chapel in the garden, praying. Built by Jesuit missionaries in the early eighteenth century, the chapel had survived the destruction of the monastery that had stood next to it. It was also the reason Hernando Cordoba had purchased the dilapidated property on the outskirts of Bogota in the nineties and built his home there, which later became the fortified headquarters of the notorious H Cartel. He considered the presence of the little chapel a good omen. Having grown up in the slums of Bogota, the church had always played an important part in his life.

Rahima had been praying in the chapel since early that morning. She had to find a way to come to terms with the devastating news that her son's final appeal had been dismissed, and he was now on death row in Arizona, awaiting execution. The only way she knew she could do that, was to go into the little chapel and pray. It was her place of solace and comfort. It was the only place in the fortified compound full of armed men where she could go in private to cry, and to find some peace.

The man who had rescued her all those years ago and with whom she had fallen in love, was a different man today. Hernando, the carefree, loving father of her beloved son, had turned into a feared, ruthless, all-powerful billionaire, head of the notorious H Cartel. Over the years he had become increasingly distant and withdrawn, obsessed with only two things: his empire, and his wars. He thrived on danger and taking risks. Alonso adored his father and wanted to be just like him. What Rahima had dreaded most, had just happened. Despite all her efforts and pleading, Alonso had followed his father into the Cartel, taking on more and more responsibilities for the running of the complex and dangerous drug business, with investments all over the globe.

All the riches came from cocaine, and keeping competitors out of the market. The craving for cocaine, especially in the United States and Europe, had grown exponentially over the years, consuming everyone and everything standing in its path, and delivering rivers of gold to the suppliers who found more and more ingenious ways to smuggle the addictive poison into the country and build sophisticated distribution networks.

Alonso was the reason Rahima had stayed with Hernando all these years. She adored her son, and to lose him now in such a brutal way was unthinkable. All the money and power in the world came to nothing if she couldn't somehow save him. Rahima, an incredibly strong-willed and resourceful woman, was determined to do just that, whatever it took. She crossed herself, leant forward and kissed the Russian icon on the altar in front of her. Then she stood up resolutely, wiped away the tears and hurried back to the compound to find her husband.

Hernando was sitting on a couch in his observation room overlooking the garden, as usual. He appeared locked deep in conversation with Raul Rodrigo, his lawyer and right-hand man, when the door opened. Hernando looked up, surprised. His wife rarely entered his inner sanctum, and never unannounced. Rahima walked over to her husband, sat down next to him, and took his hands in hers. She knew that the terrible news had hit him hard as well, but Hernando rarely showed his emotions.

'I'm sure you will agree with me that I haven't asked for much over the years,' began Rahima softly.

Hernando wondered where this was heading.

Rodrigo, always tactful and polite, stood up. 'I will wait outside if you like,' he said, sensing that something very personal and private was about to take place.

'No, please stay,' said Rahima. 'I would like you to hear this.'

'As you wish,' said Rodrigo, his curiosity aroused, and sat down again.

For a while Rahima just looked at her husband, collecting her thoughts. 'This morning, I have been mortally wounded. I think both of us have been mortally wounded. Our son is on death row awaiting execution in the US. Hernando, how could we have let it come to this?'

Hernando squeezed his wife's hands in silent reply and looked at her sadly.

'I would like you to promise me something; here, right now,' continued Rahima, tears glistening in her eyes. Even now, in her seventies, she was a beautiful woman, radiating intelligence and grace. Her short, silver-grey hair accentuated her prominent cheekbones and large, cornflower-blue eyes, just as her lush, curly, white-blonde hair had done in her youth. Her bearing was almost regal and her movements athletic and full of purpose,

hinting at a life lived mainly outdoors and close to nature.

‘What’s on your mind?’ asked Hernando, his voice sounding hoarse.

‘I want your promise that you will do everything in your power, leave no stone unturned, use everything we have to save our son, regardless of the consequences. I don’t care how you do it, as long as you do. I need this promise, Hernando, because I cannot go on without it. It would give me something to hold onto. I know how strong and resourceful you are once you set your mind to something. You and Raul are a formidable team. I have seen you two in action many times. I’ve seen you turn the impossible into possible and make it work. I believe that together you can do it. What do you say?’

Hernando turned to Rodrigo sitting opposite. ‘Would you please tell Rahima what we’ve been discussing just before she came in?’

‘Certainly.’

Rahima looked expectantly at Rodrigo.

‘We’ve been exploring possible avenues to get Alonso out of jail.’

‘*You have?*’ said Rahima, surprised. ‘Tell me!’

Rodrigo looked at Cordoba, the question on his face obvious.

‘Please tell Rahima,’ said Cordoba. ‘There are no secrets between us.’ Cordoba turned to face his wife. ‘We’ve been discussing one particular possibility, quite a daring and ingenious one Raul has just come up with,’ he continued. ‘Go on Raul, please ...’

‘Before you do,’ interrupted Rahima, looking intently at her husband, ‘*the promise?*’

‘I promise,’ replied Hernando, squeezing Rahima’s hands again. ‘On our son’s life.’

‘And you?’ said Rahima, turning to Rodrigo. ‘Are you prepared to promise as well? Because Hernando can only do this with your help, of that I’m sure.’

Rodrigo nodded. ‘I promise; on our friendship.’

Feeling better, a hesitant little smile crept across Rahima’s troubled face, as the heavy hand pressing against her heart began to loosen its grip.

‘Thank you. Thank you both. I can’t tell you what this means to me,’ whispered Rahima, close to tears. ‘Now, please tell me. What is this plan of yours?’

For the next hour, Rahima listened in silence as Cordoba took her step by step through a plan so daring that she had to bite her bottom lip several times until it almost bled, to make sure she wasn’t dreaming. It began with the recent death of a great man in

Cambridge ...

‘But we’ve been talking about London just now. I don’t understand ...’ said Rahima.

‘Tell her,’ said Cordoba.

Rodrigo held up his hand. ‘That’s the best bit, and it only happened just recently,’ he said, smiling.

Rahima looked at him and frowned.

‘A couple of days ago – on the twenty-eighth, to be precise – it was announced that a memorial service will be held in Westminster Abbey on June fifteen to honour and lay to rest—’

‘But how is this connected to this genius scientist?’ interrupted Rahima, frustrated.

‘Because it has also been announced,’ continued Rodrigo calmly, ‘that the “genius scientist” as you call him, is due to return from space in two weeks and will therefore be able to attend the memorial service to which he has been specifically invited.’

‘And this is good news because ...?’ asked Rahima.

‘Because the memorial service that will be held in Westminster Abbey in London is the perfect occasion for what we have in mind ...’

3

Amsterdam: 3 April

Rodrigo knew Amsterdam very well. He always stayed at the exclusive Hotel De L'Europe near Munttoren. It was his preferred hotel in Amsterdam and he had even secured his favourite room overlooking the Amstel River. Rodrigo had reserved a table in the Hoofdstad Brasserie that evening and had requested a table well away from prying eyes and curious ears. The person he was about to meet, and the reason behind the meeting, definitely warranted such caution.

A veteran of countless bruising legal battles – many of them fought for notorious, high-profile clients – Rodrigo had acquired an almost uncanny ability to read people and situations. His stellar rise during a highly successful twenty-year legal career in New York had come to a sudden, embarrassing end the day he brought his partner – a young man – to the firm Christmas party. That's when the whispers and sideways looks had started, the office staff had begun to gossip and giggle when he walked past, and the partners had begun to snub him during meetings. Discreetly gay, and a flamboyant dresser with flair and style, he had always moved in the right circles, or so he thought, until it became clear that being openly gay in the conservative New York legal establishment was definitely a disadvantage as far as career advancement and client relations were concerned.

Disillusioned and disappointed, Rodrigo had left the prestigious law firm he had been with for years and set up his own practice. This was when he came to Cordoba's notice. That had been ten years ago. Cordoba had been embroiled in a bitter commercial dispute involving a hotel he owned with a partner in Brooklyn. A last-minute change of legal representation had left Cordoba vulnerable and exposed. Someone referred him to Rodrigo, who stepped in and won the case in a dramatic showdown in court. Impressed, Cordoba continued to engage Rodrigo until a friendship had developed between two outcasts who understood what it meant to be different. Rodrigo rearranged his practice in New York and began to work exclusively for Cordoba on a multimillion-dollar retainer that would have been the envy of his former senior partners. He divided his time between

New York and Bogota, and any other place his instructions demanded.

Rodrigo looked at his watch and frowned; his guest was late. The meeting with Alessandro Giordano, second son of Riccardo Giordano, the notorious head of a powerful Mafia family in Florence, had been arranged quite recently by Cordoba himself.

Since the assassination of his main rival Salvatore Gambio in 2016, Riccardo Giordano had attempted to expand his drug distribution network in Italy and beyond. What was holding him back was a reliable drug supplier he could count on. It was for that reason Giordano had reached out to Cordoba on several occasions in the hope of establishing a new business relationship he could trust. The bloody Mafia turf wars in Florence during 2016 were well known, which had begun with the assassination of Giordano's eldest son, Mario. It was rumoured that Gambio was behind the hit and that this was the reason for Gambio's own very public assassination during Mario's funeral, which had dominated the headlines all over Europe for weeks. As a result, the lucrative business interests of the two remaining Mafia families – the Giordanos and the Lombardos – were rearranged and 'Gambio turf' was divided between them during an uneasy truce.

Riccardo Giordano had been delighted when Cordoba had contacted him unexpectedly a few days earlier, suggesting a meeting in Amsterdam. What Giordano didn't know was that the proposed meeting had nothing whatsoever to do with drug distribution, but an entirely different purpose altogether.

In fact, Rodrigo had suggested contacting Giordano as the first step in implementing the daring plan to free Alonso. Cordoba had even given it a name: 'Operation Libertad'. It was the first move in a risky chess-like game where the stakes were about as high as they came – and losing wasn't an option.

Rodrigo, a master tactician, always tried to be a step ahead of the game. Just like a champion chess player, he carefully planned his moves well in advance, and his opponents rarely knew where he was coming from, or why, until it was too late.

Rodrigo was about to order his second martini when his guest walked into the brasserie. Apologising profusely, he sat down facing Rodrigo. Shortish, in his early thirties with classic Italian good looks, Alessandro was exactly as Rodrigo had imagined. He was a messenger, a trusted representative of his powerful father who made all the

decisions. Like Cordoba, Alessandro's father rarely travelled, preferring the familiarity and safety of Florence. And like all traditional Mafia families, Riccardo Giordano felt more comfortable doing business through family members, preferably his sons. Tradition. Rodrigo had no doubt that Alessandro would deliver his proposal promptly and accurately. It was a solid first step, but any decision would be made by his father. The detail would follow later. However, self-interest and the possibility of huge profits would focus Giordano's attention; Rodrigo was sure of it. And where money was concerned, the Mafia always paid attention and understood the game perfectly.

After exchanging pleasantries, Rodrigo introduced the real subject of interest.

'We understand you are looking for a new supply line ...' began Rodrigo, steering the conversation in the desired direction. Alessandro wiped his mouth with his serviette, took another sip of wine and then launched into a detailed account of the family's drug business, providing quantities, territories and connections. He explained how, with Gambio's death, a main rival had been removed, allowing the family to dramatically expand its influence, territory and reach, as far as drug supply was concerned. He pointed out that the family's business interests now extended deep into Central and Eastern Europe, with extensive new interests in the United States as well, especially in Chicago.

Making sure he looked suitably impressed, Rodrigo listened patiently. 'If I understand you correctly, you are looking to us for an exclusive drug supply line, possibly through Naples or Marseilles; is that correct?' he asked.

Alessandro nodded. 'Could you deliver the quantities I mentioned?'

Rodrigo began to laugh. 'You know we can,' he said. He was intentionally a little curt, to put Alessandro off balance. 'The real question here is, *do we want to?*' he continued. 'Do we want to restrict ourselves to an exclusive arrangement with you, or do we continue to do business with our existing partners as usual?'

'Yes, I suppose that's the real question here,' conceded Alessandro. He realised he was no match for Rodrigo when it came to negotiating a deal of this magnitude and complexity, and almost regretted having come alone. Rodrigo saw a flicker of uncertainty on Alessandro's face, and a hint of dejection in his body language. It only lasted for an instant, but being a practised observer of human behaviour, he had noticed it. At that moment, he knew he had his opponent exactly where he wanted him to be: vulnerable

and exposed. It was time to throw him a lifeline. Yet, what that lifeline entailed was the very thing Rodrigo needed himself, desperately. It was the very reason for the meeting itself. But of course, Alessandro wasn't to know this.

'As an experienced businessman, you will understand that a deal like this is only possible if there is something in it for both parties,' said Rodrigo.

'Obviously.'

Rodrigo sat back in his chair and watched Alessandro carefully. 'As it happens, there is something we need; something you could provide that may persuade us to consider your proposal,' he said. 'And it isn't money,' he added quietly.

Alessandro sat up. Perhaps not all was lost. 'What might that be?' he asked hoarsely.

'Your expertise and your connections.'

Alessandro looked puzzled. 'I don't understand. Would you care to elaborate?'

'Of course. Your family has all the right connections, experience and expertise to carry out something we need, but we wouldn't be confident to do ourselves.'

'Forgive me, you speak in riddles. What is it you need?'

'An abduction.'

'A what?'

'You heard right; we want you to abduct someone and deliver him to us.'

'Who?'

'Later.'

'Where?'

'London.'

'When?'

'Soon.'

'High-profile target?'

'Absolutely.'

'Public place?'

'Definitely.'

'Security?'

'Huge.'

'Difficult then,' said Alessandro, draining the last of his wine.

‘What do you think? The stakes are high here, but so are the profits,’ said Rodrigo, lowering his voice. ‘If it were simple, I wouldn’t be talking to you. In our world, Alessandro, nothing is free. I’m sure you know that.’

Alessandro nodded, feeling more confident. This was the kind of language he understood. ‘To be perfectly clear, what you are telling me is this,’ he said. ‘If we carry out the abduction successfully and deliver the target to you, you will enter into an exclusive supply arrangement with us?’

‘That’s about it.’

‘I will have to discuss this with my father. In our family ... you know ... he—’

‘I understand perfectly,’ interrupted Rodrigo, smiling. He knew he was on the home stretch now. ‘I will need a decision.’

‘When?’

‘By Friday.’

‘You got it.’

‘Let’s drink to that.’ Rodrigo reached for the bottle and refilled their glasses, secure in the knowledge that *Operation Libertad* had just taken a huge step forward; it had moved from probable to possible.

‘Good idea. Salute!’ said Alessandro, and held up his glass.

Giordano villa, Florence: 5 April

Florence airport was bustling as usual. Because he had no luggage, Rodrigo walked straight past the baggage carousel and headed for the exit. Dressed in a pair of khaki pants, white shirt, blue linen jacket and wearing a panama hat, he looked like one of the many tourists who had just arrived from London.

When he gave the taxi driver the address, the driver looked at him, surprised. ‘Are you sure this is the right place, sir?’ he asked.

‘Quite sure,’ replied Rodrigo.

The driver shrugged as he pulled his taxi away from the kerb.

Rodrigo put on his dark sunglasses, settled back into his seat, and prepared himself for the meeting he had so hoped would eventuate. Used to dealing with the ruthless mega-rich and powerful, he wasn’t fazed by what he was heading towards. However, it wasn’t every day that he went to meet one of the most notorious Mafia bosses in Italy. An experienced negotiator, Rodrigo knew that preparation was always the key to a successful outcome.

So far, everything had gone exactly as he had planned. After their meeting in Amsterdam, Alessandro had gone back to Florence to talk to his father, and Rodrigo had gone to London to wait for the invitation he was almost certain would come soon. It did. He had received a phone call from Alessandro the night before, inviting him to come to Florence to meet with his father to discuss the proposal raised during their meeting.

The baited hook had been thrown into the lake of temptation; it was now up to Rodrigo to make sure it was swallowed as well. And that, Rodrigo knew, would be far more difficult to achieve because what he was about to ask in return for the juicy bait, was so daring and audacious that only a handful of ‘specialists’ in Europe were capable of carrying out what he had in mind. Most, he knew, wouldn’t even consider it at any price and dismiss the whole idea as the fantasy of a lunatic. Rodrigo was hoping that greed, ego and ambition – his main negotiating tools – would be strong enough to tip the scales in his favour, and override caution and good sense. And to get to that point, he had

to know how to deal with the man he was about to meet. And to know how to do that, he first had to know as much as possible about him.

Rodrigo had done his homework. His research team in New York had done a marvellous job digging up Giordano's murky past and had come up with a few surprising gems that Rodrigo could use during the negotiations should unexpected obstacles stand in his way.

Rodrigo smiled as soon as the taxi pulled up in front of the massive, wrought-iron gates of the Giordano villa just outside Florence. *Fortified compounds look the same all over the world*, he thought. An armed security guard came over to the taxi and opened the back door. 'Mr Rodrigo?' he asked.

Rodrigo nodded, paid the fare and gave the anxious driver a large tip.

'You are expected, sir. Please come with me,' continued the guard. 'But first I will have to search ... please stand over there. I'm sure you understand.'

'Completely,' replied Rodrigo, smiling, and held up his hands, quite used to the procedure. It was standard practice every time he went to see Cordoba. There were no exceptions when it came to security.

Rodrigo followed the guard up the long gravel driveway to the magnificent seventeenth-century villa overlooking Florence that had once belonged to a wealthy merchant. Alessandro greeted Rodrigo at the front door, thanked him for coming and ushered him inside.

Riccardo Giordano was waiting for his guest in the palatial ballroom on the ground floor, which had been converted into a comfortable living room with large couches facing the tall windows overlooking the gardens. Despite its size the room, with its striking marble floor and two large fireplaces facing each other at either end, was surprisingly intimate.

Giordano, a man of simple tastes, hated ostentation. Unlike his rivals – the Lombardos and the Gambios – he preferred comfort over pretence and didn't believe in spending a fortune on paintings and antiques just to impress. Always aware of his humble childhood in Calabria, where a pair of shoes was a treasure that had to last for years, the women toiled in the fields from sunup to sundown just to put food on the table and the men disappeared, often for weeks, doing what was never discussed around the dinner

table, Giordano was a predictable product of his past. Growing up in a traditional Calabrian Mafia family with almost no formal education came at a price.

Barrel-chested, short and stocky, with a tanned face like creased leather that had seen too much sun and violence, he looked more like a peasant from the south used to hard labour than the feared head of one of the most powerful Mafia families in Italy.

‘Thank you for coming,’ said Giordano, walking towards the door to meet his guest. While perfect, his English had that melodious accent that reminded Rodrigo of Italian celebrity chefs who presented popular cooking shows on TV.

Rodrigo realised at once that the man’s appearance was deceptive and disguised a sharp, cunning mind, and he was instantly on guard. He had often met men like Giordano in the course of his career and knew how dangerous and costly underestimating such a man could be. Cordoba, his notorious client, was of the same ilk. Meeting Cordoba for the first time, it had been difficult to imagine that the unassuming, quietly spoken, balding man with the handlebar moustache was a billionaire businessman with a drug empire and a private army that had whole countries living in fear, and presidents and generals doing his bidding at a click of his fingers.

They are well suited to do business together, thought Rodrigo, extending his hand. ‘Thank you for inviting me. Like you, I prefer to do business in person,’ he said, as they shook hands. As he looked at Giordano, he noticed that the man’s most striking feature was his eyes, radiating intelligence and danger.

Giordano pointed to one of the couches. ‘Please take a seat. I’m just having a morning snack; would you care to join me?’ he continued affably.

‘Love to,’ replied Rodrigo, recognising the traditional hospitality. In Italy, it was always about food.

Moments later, a little old lady dressed all in black and wearing a headscarf entered the room and placed a large wooden platter stacked high with thinly sliced prosciutto, various salamis, a slab of goat’s cheese and handfuls of olives, on the table in front of them.

‘My mother,’ said Giordano. Rodrigo stood up and smiled at the lady, who smiled back.

‘I bring bread and wine,’ she said in broken English and hurried out of the room.

‘At ninety-two, she still bakes fresh bread every morning,’ continued Giordano. ‘Come, Alessandro. Sit down and let’s eat.’

For a while the three men sat in silence, enjoying the food, and Giordano’s mother returned as promised with fresh, warm bread and chilled wine. Rodrigo had decided to let his host take the lead when he was ready as he was clearly used to calling the shots.

‘A little more wine?’ said Giordano and reached for the bottle of Chianti on the tray.

‘Yes, thank you,’ said Rodrigo, aware that Giordano was watching him carefully. *He’s sizing me up before starting any negotiations,* he thought.

‘Alessandro has told me about your proposal,’ began Giordano. ‘I must say, I was a little surprised.’

‘Understandable,’ said Rodrigo, instantly on guard. The negotiations had begun.

‘Is that why Mr Cordoba got in touch with me and sent you to negotiate? This is more than just about a new supply arrangement, isn’t it?’

It was a shrewd opening question and Rodrigo realised at once where this was heading. To sidestep the question or give an evasive answer would be a grave mistake.

‘Quite possibly, yes.’

‘Why would he do that, you think?’

‘Because he obviously considers you the best choice for what we have in mind, and because he believes you are a man we can trust.’

Giordano nodded, seeming satisfied with the answer. ‘And why would I be the best choice?’

‘Because of your track record.’

‘Track record? What on earth do you mean?’

‘May I speak frankly?’

‘Of course. In my home there is no room for anything else.’

‘You have already demonstrated that you have what it takes to carry out a complex, high-risk, high-profile operation similar to the one we have in mind. You have the contacts, the resolve, the courage and the means, and that is exactly what we need.’

‘And what makes you say that?’

Rodrigo took his time before replying. He knew he had to choose his words carefully. If he approached this delicate subject the wrong way, the negotiations could quickly turn

sour and he could find himself leaving empty-handed. With a man like Giordano there was no second chance. On the other hand, if he chose the correct approach and gained Giordano's confidence, a deal was definitely possible.

'Someone who can arrange the daring assassination of his son's killer in front of a crowded church at a funeral service attended by hundreds, while the chief prosecutor is standing next to him at the time, has all the qualities we are looking for.'

For a while there was silence and Rodrigo could feel his stomach begin to churn as a flicker of sickening doubt raced through him. Perhaps he had chosen the wrong approach? After all, he had just accused his host of having arranged the assassination of a deadly rival, who many believed had ordered the killing of his son two years ago. While there had been much speculation and innuendo in the papers for months about the killing, and accusing fingers had pointed at Giordano, no-one was ever charged. The perpetrator had got away with it. Rodrigo noticed that Alessandro was looking at the floor, but his father was staring straight ahead.

'I like your candour, Mr Rodrigo,' said Giordano, turning towards his guest, 'and your courage.' The ice had been broken. 'In our business, straight-talking men are rare. Yet, I believe it's the best, no, the only way. Now, please tell me about your proposal.'

During the next hour, Rodrigo went through the daring plan in detail. He explained every step, holding nothing back except the identity of the target and the precise date and location of the proposed abduction. That information would be supplied later, once a more formal agreement had been reached. He touched on the obvious risks and dangers without trying to downplay the real possibility of mayhem, even death, should something go wrong. At the same time, he was carefully watching Giordano for signs of hesitation or displeasure or, God forbid, shock. He couldn't see any.

'And in return?' asked Giordano quietly after Rodrigo had finished.

'We enter into a long-term supply arrangement that suits your needs, at a price that will reflect our gratitude and appreciation, after the mission has been successfully completed.'

'And your current arrangements with Lombardo?' asked Giordano, watching his visitor through hooded eyes.

Rodrigo had been expecting this. The Lombardo family was Giordano's main rival in

the drug business, and a serious thorn in his side. After the removal of Salvatore Gambio and the collapse of his business empire, the Giordanos and the Lombardos had reached an uneasy truce that had steadily deteriorated as the Lombardos slowly extended their influence and gained the upper hand. To a large extent this had been due to the Lombardos' superior supply arrangements with the H Cartel in Italy and the United States.

A skilled negotiator, Rodrigo realised it was now the right time to play the card that would clinch the deal. It was always prudent to hold something back for just such an opportunity.

'Upon successful delivery of the target, unharmed, to us, we will stop our supply arrangements with the Lombardos and make yours an exclusive one,' said Rodrigo, dropping the bombshell that could drive the Lombardos out of business and establish Giordano as the undisputed master of Florence. This possibility alone was worth millions.

The expression on Giordano's face told Rodrigo everything he needed to know. He had hit the mark.

'In that case, Mr Rodrigo, we have a deal. However, in our circles we seal such a deal with a kiss,' continued Giordano and stood up.

Surprised, Rodrigo stood up as well. Giordano walked over to his visitor, embraced him and kissed him on both cheeks. Rodrigo knew this was an expression of great trust and honour, and to break such trust was unthinkable and would have dire consequences. This gesture alone was worth more than the most watertight contract. His client in Bogota would be pleased. Operation Libertad was on.

'Where are you off to now?' asked Giordano, escorting his guest to the front door.

'Back to London. I have a connecting flight to Colombia leaving tonight.'

'Please tell Mr Cordoba we very much look forward to working with him.'

'I will,' said Rodrigo. He stopped at the front door and turned to face Giordano and his son. It was time to ask the final question. 'There is one more thing I'm sure my client would like to know, if possible, and so would I,' said Rodrigo, 'for peace of mind ...'

'Go ahead.'

'Who would you use to carry out this assignment? You would need a team of experts to work on something like this, right?'

Giordano turned to his son. ‘Alessandro, please tell our friend how you will go about this.’

‘We have access to a group of highly specialised freelance operators, originally from war-torn Kosovo,’ began Alessandro, pleased at finally being asked to contribute. ‘With lots of experience; very sophisticated. We have used them before and they have delivered every time. I can assure you; we can supply the necessary boots needed on the ground.’

‘So, what’s the next step?’

‘I will be in touch after we’ve assembled a suitable team; every day counts now. After that, I expect the operatives will contact you directly for further information and will keep you in the loop. They are very efficient and well connected.’ Alessandro paused and opened the door. ‘Absolute pros,’ he added, ‘with an outstanding track record.’

Rodrigo looked impressed. ‘Thank you, gentlemen, that’s all I needed to hear,’ he said, and then shook hands with Giordano and his son, and walked to the waiting car.

New York: 9 April

As promised, Alessandro had been in regular contact with Rodrigo since their meeting in Florence and had kept him up to date. Substantial progress appeared to have been made in a few short days, which gave Rodrigo confidence and allayed some of his fears that the project may be too ambitious, or that Giordano might have been carried away and somewhat hasty in agreeing to the deal.

However, it had taken Alessandro less than twenty-four hours to engage a ‘team’ that was apparently already on the job, gathering vital intelligence about both the target and the venue. Alessandro had called Rodrigo late the night before to tell him that one of the team members would contact him the next day to clarify certain vital matters and to keep him informed of their progress. For the first time, Alessandro also disclosed the name of the team – Spiridon 4 – and indicated that team members would identify themselves by using that name.

An early riser, Rodrigo arrived in his office at seven-thirty as usual. His PA, who had started an hour earlier, prepared his coffee – black and strong – just as he liked it. She was about to take the coffee into her boss’s office when her phone rang. It was the security guard downstairs, informing her that a young woman wanted to see Mr Rodrigo. Because the office didn’t open until eight-thirty, he would have to activate the lift and send her up to the floor.

‘We have no early appointments. Please ask her what she wants,’ said the PA, checking Rodrigo’s diary again.

The security guard did as he was told and called back.

‘That’s all she said? How weird,’ said the PA. ‘Hold on, I won’t be a sec.’

The PA put down the receiver and hurried into Rodrigo’s office. ‘There’s a woman downstairs with security, asking for you.’

‘Oh? Did she say what it was about?’

‘All she said was Spiridon 4 ...’

‘*What?*’ Rodrigo almost shouted. ‘Tell him to send her up straight away. I’ll meet her at the lift myself.’

When Alessandro had said that someone from the team would contact him, Rodrigo certainly hadn’t expected that to mean in person. Standing at the lift, he watched the indicator light on the panel creep slowly up to the thirty-second floor. For some reason, Rodrigo felt his stomach tighten and a wave of unease wash over him as the lift door opened. From what Alessandro had told him, the team consisted of some of the most deadly and secretive guns for hire on the planet. He was therefore unable to hide his surprise when a young woman of about thirty, a small backpack slung casually over her shoulder and dressed in jeans, a Princeton University sweater and wearing sneakers, stepped out of the lift.

‘You must be Raul Rodrigo,’ she said, extending her hand. She had noticed the expression on Rodrigo’s face and smiled as she recognised the familiar effect she had on people who met her for the first time. ‘You look just like your photo on the firm website,’ she continued, trying to put Rodrigo at ease. ‘I’m Teodora. Can we go somewhere private to talk? The fewer people who see me here, the better.’

Rodrigo ushered his unexpected visitor into the boardroom. He had recovered quickly and was beginning to size up the young woman. *She’s so young*, he thought. *Certainly not what I expected*. He found it difficult to imagine that the young woman with the boyish, short black hair and large horn-rimmed glasses, which gave her an endearing, studious look, could possibly be a member of a hit squad hired by the Mafia to carry out treacherous assignments. *She looks like a mature student going to a tutorial*, he thought as he closed the door behind him, but she appeared totally at ease and in control.

‘Spiridon 4. What a curious name,’ began Rodrigo, trying to take the lead. ‘What does it mean?’

‘*Spiridon* means spirit in Serbian, and my team has four members.’

Rodrigo raised an eyebrow. ‘*Your* team?’

Teodora walked over to the large window with an uninterrupted view across the water to the Statue of Liberty, and for a moment glanced at the famous icon that had welcomed thousands of immigrants to the promised land of freedom and opportunity.

‘Yes. Is that a problem?’ she asked quietly.

Rodrigo wasn't used to being put in his place, and certainly not in his own boardroom. 'That will depend, I suppose,' he replied, a little annoyed, 'on why you're here, and what you are about to tell me. Please take a seat.'

Teodora turned around and gave Rodrigo her best smile. 'Very well,' she said, choosing a chair near the window. 'I can already see we'll get along famously. May I have a glass of water, please?'

Rodrigo walked over to the fridge. 'Still or sparkling?' he asked.

'Sparkling, please. The bottle will do nicely.'

Rodrigo handed her the bottle of water, sat down opposite her, folded his arms in front of his chest and looked at her expectantly.

'Firstly, why am I here? I came to check you out. I do this at the beginning of every assignment,' said Teodora cheerfully, and took a sip of water. 'It's part of our assessment.'

'*Assessment?* Assessment of what?' asked Rodrigo.

'Risk. It helps us decide whether or not to take on the job in the first place, and how much to charge.'

'And did you? Check me out, I mean?'

'Oh yes. I also went to Maryland and Alabama to check out the target.'

'You've been to Marshall Space Flight Center to check out Professor Stolzhus?'

Rodrigo looked incredulous.

'I have. What shall we talk about first: you, or the professor?'

'Let's begin with me.'

'Very well.' Teodora sat back in her comfortable chair, and for a moment took in the splendid view as she collected her thoughts.

'In a way, we are not all that different from each other,' began Teodora. 'You do in the courtroom and around the negotiating table what we do in the field.'

'And what might that be?' asked Rodrigo.

'We both take on challenging projects that others would find too daunting and risky, and then produce results for our clients and get paid a lot of money for it. This takes courage and imagination. We are also not afraid to think creatively and outside the square.'

Generalities, thought Rodrigo, unimpressed, *bordering on platitudes*.

Teodora read his body language and decided to move up a notch. ‘You arrived in this country with your parents and siblings from Mexico when you were six. Penniless and with very little English, your father struggled to find a job. When he finally did, working as a labourer on the wharves, he toiled twelve hours a day for a pittance that could barely keep his family alive.’

Rodrigo stiffened and sat up but didn’t interrupt as he remembered those difficult childhood days, brought so unexpectedly alive by the astonishing young woman he had just met.

‘Then two years later,’ continued Teodora, ‘tragedy struck. Your father had a fatal accident ... By the time you were fourteen you already had two jobs, helping your mother who was working in a laundry during the week, and as a cleaner on weekends. This makes your success later at law school even more remarkable, as you continued to work so hard right up to your graduation and bar exams.’ Teodora paused, and looked at Rodrigo. ‘The only reason I’m telling you all this is to give you an indication of the detail we go into with our initial assessment. We build up a careful profile of our clients and those who are important to our assignments. I’m sure you understand.’

Rodrigo nodded, but didn’t reply.

‘You live with your partner, a curator at the Metropolitan Museum, in a penthouse overlooking Central Park. You have a bank account in the Cayman Islands with several million dollars on deposit, and another one in Jersey. Tax reasons. After leaving your previous firm where you were a senior partner for many years – under a cloud of scandal because of your homosexuality – you established this practice and are currently working almost exclusively for the H Cartel in Colombia. Hernando Cordoba, to be precise. Do you want me to go on?’

Rodrigo shook his head, completely taken aback. ‘No, thank you. That’s enough. I get the picture. Very impressive ...’

‘And one more thing,’ added Teodora. ‘You have a luncheon appointment today at twelve-thirty with a prosecutor. The only reason I mention this is that your internet security is seriously defective. It took our hackers just minutes to penetrate your firewall and access your diary ...’

‘Remind me never to let your team work against me or my clients,’ said Rodrigo, smiling. He found that a little humour was always the best way to hide embarrassment and surprise. ‘If I am such an open book, I’m dying to know what you’ve found out about Professor Stolfus. Please tell me.’

Teodora took another sip of water and then continued, enjoying herself. Confronting clients with this kind of detailed personal information was always an important part of every assignment; a serious test of personalities and resolve.

‘Our enquiries so far have focused on the professor’s current position at NASA, not his background and early life as that didn’t seem relevant to our assignment. All we know in that regard is that he grew up on a farm in Pennsylvania in a strict Amish family, had a serious accident in his early twenties, then went to Princeton and had a stellar rise in academia as one of the brightest students of his generation. However,’ continued Teodora, ‘his current position at NASA is interesting ...’

‘In what way?’ asked Rodrigo.

‘Because it has a bearing on likely security arrangements should he be allowed to leave the US and travel to London to attend the Hawking memorial service in June. And that is by no means certain at this stage,’ said Teodora, dropping the bombshell.

‘What makes you say that?’ Rodrigo felt his stomach churn. It was a familiar feeling he experienced every time he faced unexpected bad news.

‘First, let me put his current position at NASA into context. Stolfus is without doubt the brightest, most highly regarded physicist and cosmologist in the US, if not the world today. According to many, including Nobel laureates, he is a genius mathematician and Hawking’s likely successor. That makes him an exceedingly valuable asset, a national treasure in fact, who has to be protected. And protected he is, I can tell you. He is surrounded by strict security on all sides. His movements are restricted; his contract with NASA is quite specific about this. He lives in a guarded compound at the Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama, and outside the compound he’s driven around in an armoured car.’

‘Why?’

‘Because he is part of the “Genius Club”, as it is affectionately known in academic circles.’

‘Can you elaborate?’

‘Apparently, there are currently six members of the Genius Club. Not all of them work at NASA and the space program, but all are somehow connected to national security. They are the brightest of the bright. Mathematicians, physicists like Stolfus working on artificial intelligence, space programs, missile shields and climate change. Cutting-edge stuff like that. The US military depends on them and their work.’

‘Are you suggesting he may not be *allowed* to attend the memorial service?’

‘Precisely. Since his return from the space station the other day, he has met with Director Goldberger on several occasions about this. He has created a huge fuss, as the director doesn’t want him to go. Strictly speaking, Stolfus is not allowed to leave the US without permission. It’s all in his contract.

‘However, he’s digging in. He’s determined to go. He says this is one occasion in his life he cannot afford to miss. And his recent publicity since that remarkable broadcast from space has given him considerable leverage. But at the same time, it has also given him huge exposure. He’s become an overnight celebrity. It will be difficult to stop him. Ultimately, it will be up to the president to make the decision. No-one else is prepared to take responsibility.’

‘And you’ve found all this out in a couple of days?’ said Rodrigo.

‘We have some of the best hackers in the world working for us. Their ingenuity is surprising ...’

‘I can see that. So, where to from here?’

‘If you agree, we would like to proceed on the basis that he will be allowed to go. It’s the most likely outcome. However, we must already factor something critically important into our planning.’

‘What?’

‘Extraordinary security arrangements by both the US – CIA most likely and army intelligence – and in the UK, MI5. This will go all the way to the top.’

‘Incredible! And you and your team are still interested?’

‘Certainly. This will only have a bearing on our fee, but fortunately for you this is not your problem, is it, Mr Rodrigo?’ said Teodora, smiling.

‘I must say, I didn’t quite expect this,’ said Rodrigo, shaking his head.

‘Assignments like this are never straightforward. That’s why we make our assessment first. That way at least, there are no surprises.’

‘Do you walk away from many?’

‘Some. But most of the time it has nothing to do with difficulties on the ground, so to speak. The real problems are always the clients ...’

‘But not this time?’

‘It would appear not. We’ve worked with the Giordanos many times before.’

‘So, may I assume that my client and I have passed?’

‘With flying colours.’

‘Thank God for that!’

‘Not that many do.’

‘And your fee?’ asked Rodrigo, unable to resist the tempting question.

‘Not your problem. But it will reflect the huge risks we take.’

Wow! thought Rodrigo. *I can imagine.*

‘That’s why we can only work every now and then. We have to keep a low profile.’

‘Understandable.’

Teodora looked at her watch and stood up. ‘But now I really have to go. I have a plane to catch. Thanks for the water,’ she added, a sparkle in her eyes. ‘There’s one more thing ...’

‘Oh?’

‘Where do you want to take delivery of the target? That may have a bearing on our fee.’

‘Morocco.’

‘Ah. Makes sense. The H Cartel is using Morocco as an entry point into Europe.’

‘You are well informed.’

‘Can make the difference between success and failure. Perhaps even life and death.’

‘Quite so.’

‘I’ll be in touch,’ said Teodora.

‘I’m looking forward to it.’

Marshall Space Flight Center, Huntsville, Alabama: 12 April

The think-tank at the Marshall Space Flight Center – MSFC – the brainchild of a US Nobel laureate and jokingly referred to by scientists around the world as the ‘Genius Club’ – was chaired by Professor Zachariah Stolfus, the undisputed star. An eccentric genius who lived in almost monastic isolation in a building once occupied by German rocket scientist Wernher von Braun, Stolfus was a familiar sight at the MSFC, as were his bodyguard, his pushbike and ‘Gizmo’, a rescue dog who accompanied him everywhere – even to his lectures and meetings. It was rumoured that his dog knew more about rocket science than all the members of the club combined.

It isn’t often the case that a man’s reputation is closely matched by his appearance. Not only was Stolfus affectionately known at MSFC as *Little Einstein*, a nickname he had brought with him from Princeton, he looked like him too. Shortish, in his late forties, with a thick beard but no moustache and a bushy head of hair that made him look like the famous German-born theoretical physicist, he walked with a limp and almost always wore a newsboy cap, white shirt, braces, and a bow tie; undoubtedly a throwback to his Amish childhood in Pennsylvania. Yet he was blessed with an exceptional mind and without question was one of the brightest and most gifted theoretical physicists in the United States, if not the world.

At Princeton he had dazzled the professors with his mathematical ability and an inquisitive mind that could grasp complex concepts in an instant, and then turn them upside down and explore ideas and possibilities in ways that were totally original and unique. He could then quickly distil and refine these ideas into concepts he could explain mathematically, and was well known for filling entire blackboards and whiteboards with calculations and long equations only he could understand, and then expressed surprise when others couldn’t immediately follow what he was getting at. To him, it all appeared obvious and easy, and he sometimes found it frustrating and tedious having to explain what he was trying to say.

An illustrious career in academia seemed assured and offers came flooding in from

various prestigious institutions. That's when he came to the attention of the CIA, who wanted to recruit him. Mathematicians of his calibre only came along once in a generation and were in great demand not only by the CIA, but also by the military.

Stolfus had declined. With his eyes firmly trained at the heavens, he had bigger things in mind. He wanted to solve the mysteries of the universe, not national security.

Stolfus left his bike with his bodyguard downstairs at the entrance and walked up the stairs with Gizmo to the meeting room on the first floor. It was the second Thursday of the month, the day the Genius Club met at MSFC. Every other month, it met at the Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland, which was Stolfus's second home. It was the first meeting of the club since Stolfus had returned after a long stint on the space station. It was also their first meeting since Hawking had died, and Stolfus had decided to dedicate the meeting to Hawking and his remarkable ideas and achievements. But this was only part of the reason. He also had a plan ...

The other members – two women and three men, all in their thirties – had already arrived by the time Stolfus entered the room, and were chatting and drinking coffee. Gizmo seemed to know them all and went from one to the other for a pat, his tail wagging, before settling down in his usual corner beside the blackboard.

The first few minutes were spent with good-natured banter as everyone teased Stolfus about his newfound fame since that extraordinary message from space had gone viral.

'They'll make a movie about him, for sure; you'll see,' said one, 'now that he's a celebrity.'

'If only they could find an actor to do the man justice,' teased another.

'Not easy,' said one of the women, grinning. 'I can't think of anyone.'

Stolfus held up his hand. 'Enough, guys. Perhaps I'll just have to play myself, should someone be brave enough to ask,' said Stolfus. 'That should send the box offices around the world into a spin.'

'Well, if they spin fast enough, they could turn into a black hole,' speculated the other woman, 'and no information could then get out. That would solve the problem.'

'And deprive the world of a masterpiece?' said Stolfus, grinning. 'But seriously, I'm glad you mentioned black holes, because that is precisely what I would like to talk to you

about.'

Stolfus turned to the blackboard behind him, picked up a piece of chalk and quickly wrote down an equation, the chalk making a spine-chilling, screeching noise. It was one of Hawking's most famous equations, the one Hawking had requested be engraved on his tombstone because it embodied his greatest contribution to science:

$$T = \frac{Hc^3}{8\pi G M k}$$

'Hawking radiation,' said Jake, one of the men in the group. 'You want to talk about black holes?'

'Precisely,' replied Stolfus and turned around to face the others seated in front of him. 'I know this is not what we were going to discuss today, but I would like to raise something a little different if I may, in memory of the great man who just passed away.'

Stolfus paused and ran his fingers through his bushy hair. 'It's all about the largest objects in the universe, and the smallest particles,' he continued, 'and a tantalising paradox, all embodied in an elegant theory trying to bridge the gap between quantum physics, and physics on a cosmic scale. Simply put, it's about black hole *evaporation*.

'Hawking radiation is a paradox, a conundrum; that's what Hawking left us. He started the conversation, it's now up to us to continue it. But I believe that's not all. He left us much more than that: a challenge. Orbiting in space for a few weeks as I have done just now gives you a lot of time to think, and a different perspective.

'As we know, black holes warp space and time, and until quite recently it was believed that nothing could escape from a black hole, not even light, because it is incredibly dense and gravity would therefore not allow this. Then along came Hawking in 1973 and turned this on its head. "Not so," he said. Why? Because unless they can consume more matter, black holes will leak radiation and particles, shrink over billions of years and eventually explode and disappear. Like hungry beasts they have to be fed. If not, they will fizzle and die.'

'We know all this, Zac,' said one of the men sitting in the front.

‘Quite so,’ replied Stolfus. ‘In fact, I believe that collectively between all of us in this room, *we know a lot more*, if only we could combine it all, share it, harness it, explore it *together ...*’

‘What are you getting at, Zac?’ asked one of the women, Barbara, who knew Stolfus well.

‘Hawking believed that we are getting very close to a theory of everything, a unifying theory that would answer all the questions in the universe, including the paradox I was just talking about. In fact, I believe he was getting close but sadly, he ran out of time. One can only speculate what he would have been able to achieve with a little more time up his sleeve ...’

‘Sure, it’s the holy grail ...’ muttered another man at the back, sounding a little impatient.

‘It is. Please bear with me. I’m convinced that all the right ideas are here in this very room. But at the moment, they consist of different pieces of information, like a jigsaw puzzle, waiting to be put together to show the whole picture.

‘I know your areas of expertise, your talents, your strengths better than anyone. Looking around the room I can see quantum mechanics, thermodynamics, the Big Bang, wormholes and time travel. I can see singularities, event horizons, entropy and space time, to name but a few. You are all intimately acquainted with the work of Laplace, Planck, Heisenberg and Dirac. What more do we want? If we can bring all those pieces, all that precious knowledge gained together, we just may have the answer right here ...’

‘You really believe that?’ said Barbara.

‘I do.’

‘Based on what?’ asked Jake, becoming excited. For someone like Stolfus who was always cautious and reserved, and questioned everything, to say something like this was quite extraordinary.

‘On what I know and what I *sense ...* We all know that some of the greatest discoveries begin with gut feeling and asking the right questions. I can point to countless examples and so can you.’

‘So, what have you got in mind?’ asked Barbara.

‘I want to throw you a challenge. We could call it the Hawking Challenge. Apart

from everything else we do, we work together on this as a team. Divide the tasks; pool our insights and our knowledge. Six brains, not just one. Just think of the possibilities. Up there in orbit, I could see the big picture. I believe we can do this. I can be the guide, the conductor if you like, but we are all part of the same orchestra, playing in harmony to create an inspired symphony to make the angels listen, and dance to our tune. What do you say?’

‘Very poetic, Zac,’ said Barbara.

‘Exciting stuff. Let’s put it to a vote,’ said Jake. ‘All right. So, who wants to be part of this orchestra?’

Five hands shot up into the air. Stolfus smiled and then raised his own. ‘We’ll talk again later, but now let’s get down to business and discuss what’s on the agenda or we’ll get into trouble. Barbara, would you like to begin?’

Barbara was about to open the folder in front of her when someone knocked on the door and then entered. It was the director’s secretary.

‘Sorry for interrupting, Professor Stolfus, but the director would like to see you. It’s urgent.’

Stolfus followed the secretary across the courtyard to another building, his bodyguard trailing behind them. ‘Do you know what this is about?’ asked Stolfus. To be called into the director’s office like this was most unusual.

‘No idea,’ replied the secretary. ‘All I know is some bigwig from Washington and someone from the CIA arrived this morning. Both are with the director right now.’

‘Sounds ominous. Could be an arrest warrant; what do you think?’ joked Stolfus.

‘Are you a spy, Zac?’

‘I’m only spying on the stars.’

‘I don’t think that’s an offence, especially not around here. They are all doing it. Must be something else.’

‘We’ll soon find out.’

‘Ah, Professor Stolfus,’ said Chuck Goldberger, director of the MSFC, as soon as Stolfus entered his office. ‘Apologies for interrupting your meeting, but this couldn’t wait. Let me introduce you.’

A man and an attractive young woman in her late thirties who were seated on a couch

stood up and introductions were made. The man was from NASA HQ in Washington, the woman, who introduced herself as Major Andersen, was from the CIA.

‘This is about your application,’ began Goldberger, ‘to attend the Hawking memorial service in London.’

‘Ah,’ said Stolfus, relieved. ‘And here I was thinking I must have unwittingly committed some serious space crime up there and was about to be hauled over the coals ...’

Everybody laughed. The ice was broken.

‘Nothing like that,’ said the man from Washington. ‘In fact, it’s all good news. Your application has been approved. It went all the way to the top, the president himself.’

‘I had no idea this was that important,’ said Stolfus.

‘Oh yes, it is. As the coordinator of several highly sensitive, multibillion-dollar projects – many of them defence and national security related – you are one of the most important men in the country, Professor, and therefore a potential target.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Stolfus, frowning.

‘There are some governments that would go to great lengths to get their hands on you,’ interjected Major Andersen. ‘And they’d pay a small fortune for what you know and what you can do. And then of course there are always the terrorists—’

‘You can’t be serious!’ interrupted Stolfus. ‘I’m just a scientist, for God’s sake.’

‘Precisely, and since your broadcast from space, a very well-known one. You may have been working in the shadows until then, Professor Stolfus, under a cloak of anonymity, but now you are in the spotlight, like it or not, and that makes you vulnerable,’ said the man from Washington.

‘Vulnerable? In what way?’

‘I will let Major Andersen here explain what will be involved when you travel and leave the country,’ said Goldberger, sidestepping the question. ‘She will be in charge of security and accompany you on your trip.’

For the next half hour, the major took Stolfus step by step through the elaborate security arrangements. ‘In fact,’ she said, coming to the conclusion of the briefing, ‘the president ordered that the same level of security is to be provided to you as if he were to travel himself to attend the service. Do I make myself clear?’ The major looked sternly at

Stolzfus.

‘Perfectly.’ *She looks so young*, thought Stolzfus, sizing up the CIA agent sitting opposite, but he knew it would be a mistake not to take her seriously. She was obviously used to being in control. *Must be top notch. They wouldn’t have sent her otherwise.*

‘In London, the Metropolitan Police and MI5 will be in charge of security, obviously in close collaboration with us; CIA mainly ...’ continued the major. *Super smart, eccentric; not used to being told what to do; a little awkward around women*, thought the major, sizing up the man she would have to protect. *Could be a problem.* He clearly had no idea how important he was. She would have to tread carefully and gain his confidence.

‘I don’t have to remind you, Professor,’ interjected the man from Washington, ‘that none of this is to leave this room. You are not to discuss it with anyone. The same secrecy obligations apply to this as to all of your work. I’m sure I don’t have to remind you of your obligations in that regard ... and please don’t write anything down.’

‘I completely understand.’

‘That’s about it for now,’ said Goldberger and stood up. ‘We mustn’t keep you from your work any longer, Professor. Major Andersen will be in touch and will brief you more fully in due course.’

This is ridiculous and totally unnecessary, thought Stolzfus, shaking his head as he slowly limped back to his meeting. It should have been a simple, straightforward affair, not a full-blown national security exercise. But for some reason, he was suddenly feeling apprehensive about the trip.

END OF THIS SAMPLE

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