

# FLOOR 68

Jack Probyn

**CLIFF**EDGE  
P R E S S

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ISBN: 978-1-912628-17-9

eBook ISBN: 978-1-912628-15-5

First Edition

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## PROLOGUE

### A Friend From The Past

**August 1, 2017, 22:17**

Charlie Paxman was going to change the face of humanity. Forever. It was dying, and he was the cure. He had been for a long time. He just needed a little longer.

The smell of chemicals smacked him in the face as he entered his small, nondescript one-bedroom flat in Greenwich. The stench clung to his nostrils and the inside of his throat and lingered there. He coughed and convulsed. Chucking his bag on the sofa, he removed his hand from his mouth. It felt moist.

Blood.

Lined with something else Charlie had never seen before. An internal fluid he didn't know existed. *Strange.*

Creating the virus was beginning to have serious detrimental effects on his health. But soon it would all be over.

His work would be complete, and it would be ready for release.

Charlie wiped the blood from his hand onto his trouser leg. He moved around his flat, taking off his coat and placing it on the back of the chair in his office, before undressing to his boxers. Feeling his bladder press down hard on him, he went into the bathroom. The tension in his body relaxed as he pissed into the toilet, ignoring the splash back on his feet and legs. Leaving small droplets of urine on the seat, and with the stench of chemicals and poison rising through his nostrils, he decided it was time for his second shower of the day.

The first was in the morning. The second was when he got home from work, to remove the smell of greasy food and salt from his skin and hair. The third was just before bed, to rid himself of the outermost layer of chemicals in his pores.

Charlie stepped into the shower. The steaming water hugged his body and loosened the tense muscles in his back and shoulders. It had been another stressful shift. His manager had been on his case again, chastising him for serving food to the wrong table. It wasn't his fault he hated his job. It wasn't his fault he had been kicked out of a dream career he had yearned for since he was a child. It wasn't his fault the world's problems were taking immediate effect.

But it was his responsibility to fix them.

He switched off the shower, stepped over the lip of the bathtub and dried off, wiping the condensation away from the mirror so he could look at himself.

The man he saw was different to the one he had been a few months ago when this entire process began. The messy, unkempt blond hair receding at the temples. The high, hollow

cheekbones that made him look malnourished. The lines on his forehead. The bushy blond eyebrows nestling above deep-set eyes, which held a haunted look that reflected the fluorescent bathroom light overhead. The five-day post-shave stubble that lined the sharp angles of his jawline. The thin frame, small shoulders, skinny waist and legs miraculously supporting the weight of his torso. The sinewy forearms, skeletal fingers and bony wrists.

It hadn't been long, and his body was already suffering. The coughing. The bleeding. The vomiting. The fatigue. His immense exposure to the virus had weakened his immune system beyond repair. And when the time came for it to be ready, he hoped he would be in a fit enough state to see it through – he hoped he'd be alive.

A lot had changed since he'd begun. And he had sacrificed even more. But it was necessary. The world needed to change. Humanity didn't know it yet, but it would thank him later. Even after his death, his name would live in infamy, forever written in the history books. Adored by many. Abhorred by more. But he didn't care; he believed that what he was doing was right, and he had the technological and scientific know-how to succeed.

Nothing was going to stand in his way.

Charlie dressed, shoved the towel in the wash bin, and returned to his desk. He started up his computer and played static noise to help him focus. To his right, quietly humming away, was a large metal cabinet with one glass vial inside, rotating. The glass was green, his favourite colour. He moved to the cabinet, pulled aside its small metal hatch, and peered in. The machine's harsh pool-blue light almost blinded him at

first, but his eyes had long since adjusted.

Charlie inspected a timer at the top of the machine. Two more hours until today's incubation period was finished. The device had been running all day, silently building the world's most powerful virus. Fifty millilitres of clear, genetically engineered liquid. He felt proud. His life's mission in one small container.

Satisfied for the time being that everything was in order, Charlie slid across to his desk and opened the BBC News homepage. Breaking news articles about the worst terrorist attack London had ever seen littered the page. He read through them. Shook his head in disgust. What Adil and Moshat Hakim had done was nothing compared to what he could do. What he was *going* to do. The attack was minor, insignificant – the needle of destruction amongst the haystack of chaos.

His work was going to change the world.

Quickly bored with the images of burning train wreckages and an auto-playing interview with a police officer and victim – a man called Jake Tanner, whom the media and public adored – Charlie turned his attention to another article. It piqued his interest more than anything else.

He scanned the page. The story was about the World Health Organisation – the agency he had once been a part of and that had started this entire project. Their annual conference, usually held in Geneva, had been moved, and would now take place in The Shard, western Europe's tallest building, on December 2, seven months later than it was supposed to have been held.

A smile grew on his face, sending a strange tingling

sensation coursing through his body. Charlie checked his calendar and noted the virus's completion date would be December 1. Four months away. The day before he would be reunited with old colleagues, old friends, and old enemies.

*Time to get down to some serious work.*

Pushing himself away from his desk once more, Charlie began his secondary preparations. Inside the wardrobe by the office door was an AK-47, an explosive vest, a saw and a handgun, surrounded by crumpled wads of aluminium foil, all wrapped up in some clothes and thin sheets of copper inside a duffel bag. The weapons, vest, and copper sheets were purchased earlier in the year through a contact he made by chance one night at the restaurant. Untraceable. Undeniable. Nothing would ever lead back to him, and by the time it did, he would be long gone.

Charlie placed one final item – a nine-millimetre handgun – in the bag and sealed the wardrobe shut with a padlock.

The countdown had begun, and he couldn't wait. He looked one last time at the article's featured image that filled the computer screen – a man and woman, side by side, waving to the camera, smiling, happy – and then began the rest of the work that needed completing.

Five metres away, hanging from the wall inside his flat, was another image of the same man. Except this time Charlie was with him, and they both held an award, grinning fervently.

The man was a friend from the past, soon to be seen in the future.



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## Appointment

**November 28, 2017, 14:11**

Adrenaline and endorphins surged through Jake Tanner's blood. The music in his ears blocked out the rest of the world while the gym's air conditioning set the hairs on the back of his neck and arms on end. The boxing gloves hugged his fists. He jabbed the bag again and again, feeling his body vent its anger on the big sack of sand. After releasing one final heavy right hook, he stopped to remove his gloves and wipe his forehead with the palm of his hand. A thin layer of sweat slicked off his skin, and he dried his hand on his shorts. He looked out of the windows as he grabbed a bottle of water. At the city of London. At the autumnal grey sky. At the pouring rain. At the droplets descending the windowpane. It was just after lunch, and the gym inside New Scotland Yard was empty. Nobody could

afford to spare the time to come down here.

Except for him.

Over four thousand personnel hours had been logged for everyone in SO15, the Metropolitan Police's counter terrorism department, since the attack on 01/08, and Jake's hours were less than ten per cent of that. The investigation had even stretched into other departments within the Met's Specialist Crime & Operations division. Jake had been allowed to come back to work on the proviso he shorten his shifts and carry out a reduced workload. Which meant the numbers would only increase for everyone else. And yet they were still no closer to finding Moshat Hakim, the terrorist responsible for the attack, or uncovering any affiliation he had with any terrorist organisation, either domestic or international. To make matters worse, investigations had been impeded by Adil Hakim, Moshat's brother. It had taken the cyber security team months to hack into Adil's seized computer hard drive, and when they were finally able to, it was blank. Adil had placed a fail-safe on it that wiped the contents after weeks of inactivity. Adil Hakim had won, and he was still fucking with them even though he was dead.

Just the thought of him annoyed Jake. Throwing his water bottle to the ground, he picked up a rope and began to skip. In recent weeks, he had been training hard, improving his physical fitness while allowing his mental health to fall by the wayside. Most of his time in the gym was spent working, preparing, and imagining the day he would reunite with Moshat Hakim. The day he would defeat him - sending him to prison for the rest of his worthless life. Or even better - and completely off the record - the day he would kill Moshat

Hakim. It was a day Jake looked forward to.

'Supersonic' by Oasis played in his ears. The guitar riffs spurred him on. He breathed in and out rapidly through his mouth as he jumped to the beat.

The door at the end of the gym opened. DCS Mamadou Kuhoba, Jake's boss and one of his closest friends within the service, stepped through. He was a wide-set man with a large stomach, and his short, tightly curled hair was shocked silver. Jake stopped at once, dropped the rope to the floor next to his bottle, and removed his earphones.

'What's going on in here, then?' Mamadou asked, advancing towards Jake.

Jake looked around him. 'Petting animals at the zoo. What does it look like?'

Mamadou's face dropped. 'Funny. I was just wondering if you were all right.'

'Yeah.' Jake shrugged. 'Why wouldn't I be?'

'I've not seen much of you, that's all.'

'I've been busy.'

'So you keep telling everyone. I feel like I haven't spoken to you properly since that day. I'm glad you stuck with us in SO15 and didn't join MI5. I couldn't see you as a spook.'

'It would have been too much physical and mental strain. Elizabeth and I decided it was best I turn it down. Not just for me, but for the family, too.'

'I'm glad. Although I wouldn't want to be working there right now. Lot of backlash.'

'Why?' Jake frowned.

'While you were signed off, Director General Brockhurst declared that Moshat and Adil had been on their radars. They

investigated but found nothing of any worth, so they stopped. It was his decision,' Mamadou said.

'Wouldn't be the first time they've let someone slip through the net, would it?' Jake said. He was referring to an attempted attack that had taken place in a shopping centre last Christmas that both he and Mamadou had thwarted.

Mamadou smiled, avoiding the comment. He reached into his back pocket and produced his phone. He stared at it a while, hesitating, as if afraid to speak about something on his mind. He cleared his throat. 'IT sent me the logs for your computer the other day.'

Jake froze.

'And?' he said, trying to act as nonchalant as possible.

'It made for interesting reading.' Mamadou looked to his left and gestured to the row of benches by the weight rack that ran along the wall. 'Shall we?'

Jake didn't respond. Instead, he found himself a seat and looked up at Mamadou as he sat opposite. The synthetic leather was uncomfortable, and he could feel himself sweating even more.

'We need to talk, Jake. Are you sure you're OK?'

Jake sighed. He hated being babied liked this. It had been constant ever since he'd returned from the hospital following the attack. Mamadou, Elizabeth, Frances, his mum – they all wanted to show him that they cared, that they were there for him. They acted like they knew how he felt. But they didn't. None of them did. How could they? How could he ever let anyone close to him know what he was feeling when he didn't understand it himself?

'What did you see on the log?' Jake asked. He found himself

gripping the bench's edge until his knuckles whitened.

'Your internet searches, mate. PTSD. Symptoms, signs, treatments. Why didn't you tell me you were suffering from it?'

'I thought it would have been obvious,' Jake said, grinding his teeth. He chided himself for forgetting to delete his browser history. It was a rookie mistake, and now he was suffering the effects of it.

'Well, sure. It's assumed. But I'd not had any confirmation. That stuff is above even my pay grade.'

'How can it be? You're my supervisor.'

Mamadou leaned closer, resting his elbows on his knees. 'I thought you were having meetings about it.' He spoke softly, the quietest Jake had ever heard him. For a moment, there was no employer-employee divide between them. They were just two friends, having a chat.

'I was,' Jake said, looking to the floor. In the months succeeding the attack, Jake had had multiple counselling and therapy sessions with the in-house psychiatrists. But he was still no closer to finding peace, nor to finding the time, let alone approval, to chase Moshat himself. Jake had to live with the harsh reality that he had let the man go. That's what played through his mind every time he looked at Elizabeth, or lay next to her in bed. Every time he looked at his own wife, he was reminded of Martha, Elizabeth's mother, who had fallen victim to Moshat. Some nights he lay awake recounting the events of that day, reliving them, trying to think of what would have happened if he'd acted differently.

'Why did you stop going to the meetings, Jake?' Mamadou's face contorted as his concerns for Jake grew.

Jake fell silent.

'Come on, Jake. You can tell me. We've known each other a long time, and this is the first time you've shut me out. I can't help you if you don't let me. No one can.'

Jake opened his mouth to speak, but the words wouldn't come.

'I've been busy,' he said defiantly.

'With what? Don't tell me it's because you've been in here all this time.'

'Elizabeth. She needs me. I've had to reschedule most of my meetings with the psychiatrist because she's worried about the baby. She's been dealing with a lot of stress. Her mum. Me . . .'

Jake hesitated. He hated lying to his friend, but it was necessary. The simple explanation for it was that he didn't want to discuss his problems with anyone. Not even himself. Every time he searched on the internet for symptoms and signs of PTSD, he feared himself – worse, he hated himself – even more. The thought he could be susceptible to it, that he had let everyone down by suffering from it . . . It made him feel weak and vulnerable.

'When was the last time you saw someone?' Mamadou asked, touching Jake's leg, bringing him back to the present.

Jake searched his mind. 'September.'

'September? Bloody hell, Jake. That was over two months ago. A lot's happened since then. Has your PTSD been getting worse?'

Jake didn't respond, which was encouragement enough for Mamadou to continue.

'Why haven't you spoken about it with anyone else?'

'Because it's hard, all right? Admitting defeat like that.'

'Admitting defeat?' Mamadou rose. 'You can't be serious? Nothing about what happened on that day was normal. Nobody blames you for anything. Nobody went through even a tenth of what you did. Nobody.'

Jake looked up. Stared into Mamadou's deep, dark eyes. 'You did.'

'That's different. I've learnt how to deal with these things.'

'Have you been speaking with someone about your mum?' Jake asked.

Mamadou paused a beat, reached into his pocket and produced his mobile. 'Right, listen up. I'm not going to send you back to the shrink here; they'll get pissy about you lying to them and trying to get out of so many meetings for so long. I'll appease them for you. What I'm going to do instead is send you to the specialist I saw. She's an expert. Even if her methods are . . . unconventional. She helped me loads. Whatever she prescribes, I want you to consider trying. I did, and it went against everything I stand for, but I have to admit it helped. It's only a short-term solution. The moment it becomes long-term, you speak with me about it.'

*Unconventional. Short-term. Long-term. What does he mean?* Dozens of questions and concerns floated about Jake's brain.

Mamadou extended his hand. 'Give me your phone.'

After removing the earphones from the jack, Jake passed his mobile to Mamadou.

'I'm adding her details to your address book. Her name's Kim Olson. Just make sure Elizabeth doesn't see it. She'll start to think something's up,' Mamadou said. His eyebrow rose and the sides of his mouth flickered.

'That's the least of my worries,' Jake said, finding himself

smiling. It was a long time since he'd done that. In the months following the attack, he had ostracised himself from the rest of the team, and it felt good to have a chat with someone he cared about, and to find something they could laugh about.

Mamadou returned his phone. Jake stared at the name and number on the screen.

'What are you waiting for?' his friend asked, clearing his throat. 'I'm not leaving until you book an appointment.'

Jake stared at Mamadou in disbelief. 'Come on, Mam. That's not necessary.'

'Yes, it is. I'm not having you flake out on me. You're making that call. And if you don't, I'll make it for you.'

Sighing, Jake stepped to the side and dialled the number, so that Mamadou was just out of earshot.

The person on the other end answered on the second ring.

'Dr Olson speaking.'

'Hi, Doctor. My name's Jake Tanner.'



2

## Therapy

**November 28, 2017, 15:06**

Dr Kim Olson was an attractive woman in her mid thirties, with brown hair and even more vibrant earthy brown eyes – the colour of the leaves on the ground outside. Her high cheekbones and pursed lips made her look as if she were constantly posing in front of a camera. She had been born and raised in Norway. She was forced to study at a top university in Oslo, chosen by her parents. The only thing she had any control over was the subject she studied, and in the end, she'd settled for psychology. She had focused on the consequences of dealing with psychological trauma for members of the emergency services, and after two months of searching, had found counselling prospects in Norway slim, especially in the policing world. When she graduated several years later, she

decided she would emigrate to England in search of a better career.

‘And that’s when I decided to consult freelance for high-profile cases – and individuals – in the UK.’ Kim removed her glasses from her forehead and placed them on her nose. ‘Enough about me. Let’s talk about you. After all, that’s why you’re here.’

She was wearing a grey blazer with a white shirt underneath. The top two buttons were undone, revealing a small patch of skin just underneath her collarbones that still left everything to the imagination. She sat to the side of her desk, left leg folded over the right, with a small notebook resting on her knee.

‘Thanks for meeting me on such short notice,’ Jake said.

‘This isn’t how my clients usually arrive,’ Kim said, nodding at his sodden top.

Jake looked at his chest and sniffed. His sweaty odour slapped him in the face. He hoped she couldn’t smell it. ‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘Blame Mamadou. He sort of sprung this on me.’

‘How is Mamadou?’ Kim asked.

‘Shouldn’t I be asking you that? Considering you’re the one seeing him.’

‘*Was* seeing,’ she corrected. ‘He cancelled our meetings a couple of days ago. He didn’t tell me why, but I think he sorted everything he needed to. Although, in our meetings, he mostly seemed concerned about you.’

‘What did he say?’ Jake asked, his curiosity getting the better of him.

The sides of Kim’s lips rose. ‘Come on, Jake. You know that’s confidential between myself and DCS Kuhoba. Much

like this conversation between you and I.'

Jake stared at her. He didn't know what to say. He always hated these meetings, especially his ones with the resident shrink at the Yard. He was more suited to being the one on the other side of the chair, asking the questions, probing deeper into a suspect's life, diagnosing.

'From what I hear, Jake, you're something of a hero,' Kim began.

*No, I'm not*, Jake thought. He hated being called that. At first, he thought news tabloids printed that word for attention and sales. But the longer the investigation into the 01/08 attack, code named Operation Tightrope, continued, the more prolific and infamous Jake became. Journalists and members of the public would wait outside his house, stop him in the street, disturb him in a coffee shop or in his local Tesco, and ask him about his version of events. They all wanted to know the same thing: What really happened?

'I'm nothing of the sort,' Jake replied. 'I was just doing my job.'

'Don't be so modest. You saved thousands of lives. The death toll could have been far greater if it weren't for you.' Kim looked at him with open admiration; he returned her gaze with a scowl. He wanted to move the conversation forwards but didn't want to be rude about it.

'What else have you heard?' he asked.

'Mamadou tells me you're a psychology graduate.'

Jake prepared himself for a barrage of questions. 'How much more do you know?'

'Enough. So, I know how difficult this is for you. He also told me your previous psychiatrist prescribed medication for

your PTSD. Is that right?’

Jake bowed his head.

‘How long have you been on them for?’

‘A few months.’

‘Does your wife know?’ Kim nodded at Jake’s wedding ring.

‘Nope.’

‘Do you think she deserves to know?’

‘I don’t want to worry her.’

She scribbled something down on her pad. ‘Why did you start the meds?’

Jake swallowed before responding. He was cautious about how much to tell her. How much was safe? How much was confidential, and how much would be relayed back to Mamadou at the end of it all?

‘Night terrors.’ A lump formed in his throat.

‘Night terrors? Tell me about those.’

Jake looked at the ground, then at Kim, then back to the floor. Finally, deeming it a safe place to talk, he began. ‘I’m still seeing him. Moshat. I’m still re-experiencing everything, again and again. That night. The explosion. The gun. The blood.’

‘Has the medication helped in any way? Have the night terrors abated?’

Jake shrugged. ‘It’s not doing anything.’

Dr Olson nodded as she continued to write on the paper. ‘And how frequent are these episodes?’

‘Almost every night. The last one was today. I woke up in a puddle of sweat.’

‘Is that a regular occurrence?’

Jake nodded.

'And what happened in this particular vision?'

'Moshat's face appeared. I was working at my desk, filing a report from years ago, and he was just there . . . at my desk, lingering in the background.'

'What case were you working on?'

'I can't remember.'

'Can't, or don't want to?'

'I don't know. It was something to do with Operation Tightrope.'

'But I thought you said it was a case from years ago?' Kim asked, constantly making notes on her pad as she spoke.

'I did. It was. It seemed like years ago. But it was 01/08. I could see the images of my mother-in-law and Tyler on the documents, but it was dated 2012. I don't know why.'

'Is there anything that happened in 2012 that you might be repressing?'

He shook his head. 'Nothing that's even remotely related to this case.'

Kim fell silent as she made a final note on her paper. She pressed the pen to her lips and chewed the top. 'How much of this have you told your wife? Do you discuss with her the nature of your terrors?'

Jake hung his head low.

'You need to tell her, speak with her about it. The more you shut people out, especially your family, the more they'll separate from you. I can only do so much. I can only offer you a certain amount of help. The other fifty per cent you have to find yourself.' The hum of Kim's computer monitor seemed to reverberate around the room. 'If you can't confide in your wife, then there must be someone you can trust.'

'Tyler,' he said, surprised to hear himself say it. He hadn't referred to his friend by name for some time, and whenever Tyler came up in conversation with relatives or family friends or strangers, Jake always referred to him as just 'him'.

'There you go,' Kim said. 'Mamadou tells me you see him on the first day of every month. That's good. Your coping mechanisms are different to anyone else's. Completely different to Mamadou's. He doesn't visit his mother.'

'I thought that was confidential.' Jake's eyebrows rose.

'That bit isn't. So, tell me: What do you do when you see him?'

'I speak to him. That's it. Sometimes I make sure his grave is OK. Sometimes I leave it up to the staff – but they do a shitty job of maintaining it. He gave his life for me, and I'm not going to let the memory of him be ruined by some lazy people who aren't willing to do their job properly.'

Kim nodded as she made another, final note on the paper on her lap, underlining it.

'Here's what I want to happen. I'm going to prescribe you something, but before I do, I need you to tell me what Mamadou told you about me.'

'I'm not sure I understand.'

'When Mamadou referred you, what did he say? Anything about my methods?'

Jake hesitated as he considered, replayed the conversation in his mind. What was it he had said? 'That you were unconventional.'

A smile formed on Dr Olson's lips. 'Good. He's already managed your expectations.' She tore the top-right corner of the paper and handed it to him. On it was a mobile number

and a name: Mark. 'Right there is someone who will help you further. I need you to stop taking the antidepressants your psychiatrist gave you for now and try a different prescription. Our next meeting will be on December fourth, a couple of days after you've been to visit Tyler. There, I want you to tell me if the new medication has made a more positive or negative impact on you than the antidepressants. With this particular form of treatment, however, it is up to you whether you wish to share the fact you're taking the new meds with your wife or not. Sound good?'

Jake grunted as a way of response. His eyes remained fixed on the shred of paper he held in his hands. The sound of Kim rising from her chair startled him. He joined her, and they wandered over to the door, the meeting adjourned.

Kim opened the door. As Jake left, staring at the name on the paper again, she said, 'From what I hear, you and he have had a relationship in the past.'

He stared at her, and then at the piece of paper once more. Mark. *Mark?* Did he know anyone by that name?

As Jake exited the office, he ignored the door closing behind him, removed his work phone from his pocket and dialled the number. The internal memory of the phone populated the name. In his address book, Jake had only one contact under 'Mark.'

An informant, specialising in gang crime and drugs.

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