

PROLOGUE

Michael had been sitting there for 40 minutes with the long plastic tubes, one of which he'd managed to insert into his back passage. Another was attached to a rubber pump mechanism, which he had already squeezed with his right hand to pump warm water around his bowel. The indignity of his daily routine was horrendous. Just as he began to think he'd wheel himself into the shower and try again later, his bowels evacuated and his ears were greeted by the sound of a mini Niagara Falls. *Thank Christ*, he thought to himself and pulled the bell cord.

Annie, the young Filipino girl had only been his carer for two weeks. She may have been young, but she'd been fantastic. You didn't have to explain everything to her 50 million times; you just told her once, and she'd get on with it. Better still, she'd smile and engage in normal conversation; not like those sour-faced bitches from the agency who moped around as if the world owed them a living and gave you the impression that they were doing you a favour by just showing up - even when they were half an hour late.

Within minutes Annie had wheeled him into the shower and was washing his hair. In truth, he could probably have managed it himself, even though his stomach muscles were clearly on their way out, and it was an almighty effort to sit up straight, but it was nice to get this kind of attention. Besides, it had been a long time since a woman had smiled at him.

'So what you do today, Mr Hollinghurst?' Annie asked while dousing his head with the shower as if watering a delicate flower that was in desperate need of a good drink.

'Oh, I don't know. Thought I might have a spin on the heath. Buy *The Telegraph* and catch up with the god-awful news. How about you?'

Annie smiled and shrugged. 'The usual. I go home to look after nan.'

She was a bright kid. She'd been to university back home and had a degree in economics, and now was only in the UK to look after her elderly grandma living in Golders Green. How many English teenagers would have the decency to ditch their lives and up sticks to look after an aged relative? Probably no more than you could count on the fingers of one hand, Michael surmised.

Annie wheeled him out of the cavernous wet-room, and through into the bedroom. ‘Nice picture,’ she said as they swept past the fireplace displaying the large framed shot of all four of them on the day of his daughter, Natasha’s graduation ceremony at Durham University. They were all beaming; even that cow of a wife of his. Those days were long gone. Life had moved on. Though sometimes Michael felt like his life had just stopped moving and had come to a crashing halt on 7 July 2005.

Part One

DEVILS & DUST

Bruce Springsteen, 2005

CHAPTER ONE

He could remember that morning very clearly now. It had been a day like any other. He'd just checked his email on his mobile and had stepped onto a train at Edgware Road. The train had barely left the station, and like everyone else, he was just going through the motions of the daily grind, hanging onto

the handrail while someone else's elbow blocked his vision. This was the joy of commuting on London's electric sewer.

He could vaguely recall that deafening blast, but that's all. No white flashes; no screams; no pain; no dying passengers; no heroic paramedics; just nothingness. The media had been full of it, of course. Blurred CCTV images of those four demented individuals had appeared on newsprint the world over, and the whole ghastly business had acquired its own moniker; its own brand identity; its own soundbite: 7/7. London's very own 9/11.

His clearest recollection was the face of that large black nurse bearing down on him. 'Hello there Mr Hollinghurst. You're at the Royal London Hospital.' He remembered hearing her chirpy voice very clearly, but it took a while before his eyes could focus properly.

He'd been there for some hours to undergo minor surgery to remove shrapnel from his right leg. And then he'd been transferred to Stanmore, the national hospital for spinal injuries.

The horror of it all came flooding back to him when he found himself in another altogether more claustrophobic tube. The MRI machine was a marvel of the technological world. It was also bloody uncomfortable. Lying there surrounded by whirring cold metal, he caught fleeting fragments of the moments before the blast. The attractive young woman sitting opposite applying eye mascara and pulling unflattering faces while doing so; the young guy with designer stubble reading the well-thumbed copy of *Our Man in Havana* by Graham Greene; the toddler with the pink headband sitting on her mother's lap. Their ghosts had come back to haunt him and his eyes had welled up with tears. What had given him the right to cheat death?

Some hours later he'd been wheeled back into his ward. There were three others sharing this utilitarian space with its grey flecked flooring, medical paraphernalia and lightweight dividing curtains that could turn your shared world into a private one in a mere swish.

The consultant had arrived with his entourage of student doctors and a dutiful nurse with an Irish accent had drawn the blue curtain, surrounding them in a calm oasis of nylon. Mr Hudson was your typical consultant, privately educated at some minor public school in the home counties, followed by a stint at King's College Cambridge and that long slog up the greasy pole that was the NHS. And here he was with his thinning grey hair and ruddy cheeks going through his file of notes. 'Well, I hope

we're making you feel as comfortable as possible, Mr Hollinghurst. You've been through the most terrible ordeal. But the important thing now is to get you through this as best we can.' The rest of the one-sided conversation had washed over Michael. He could hear the pleasant and calming sound of Mr Hudson's dulcet tones and could understand the meaning of individual words but for some unfathomable reason hadn't been able to comprehend the sentences; to join up the dots. The word *compression* seemed to be one of the words that had cropped up quite a lot. *Trauma* was another. And then, rather ominously, *surgery*.

Once he was fully conscious and the full horror of a C3-C5 spinal compression injury began to sink in, the dark clouds had begun to gather and suicidal thoughts became the order of the day. He'd lost all sensation from the neck downwards, He'd lost bladder and bowel function; his legs were totally useless appendages that would lead a life of their own by going into uncontrollable spasms that would reverberate like a pneumatic drill on overdrive, through his entire body. It was just as well he had lost all sensation because that would have driven him nuts. Life was just about surviving. It wasn't much of an existence.

Things started to go downhill with Louise when they moved him to the rehab unit at Stanmore Hospital. In all honesty, their relationship hadn't been that great before all this happened. If he was going to be brutally honest, he'd tell you that they started to fall out of love a couple of years after their second child Ben had arrived. They'd grown apart like so many couples, and just held it all together for the sake of the children. But this; well this had changed everything hadn't it? He couldn't handle being the way he was and she couldn't handle him. And the implosion of their marriage, though inevitable, was still incredibly painful and ugly.

The day he received his first manual wheelchair, a lightweight Swedish little number with a blue carbon fibre frame, was the day his charming wife had announced that she was going to leave him in his hour of need. It was best to make a clean break and start afresh, she had said. She'd found a suitable three-bedroom flat in leafy Highgate. And she had already told the kids who were 'cool' about the whole thing. 'Look, Michael. We both know that this marriage has become a sham. It was only a matter of time before we were going to separate - go our own ways. Alright, I know it's fucking bad timing on my part. And I'm really sorry about that. But it's no good pretending anymore; going

through the motions. The children are no longer children, and we've both got to live our lives.' She paused, and he wondered whether she had rehearsed the little speech. As a senior planner at one of London's most fashionable advertising agencies, she was always rehearsing her presentations. She'd spend hours getting the intonation of her voice just right and practising the art of leaving pauses in precisely the right places for dramatic effect. She was good at it, and she knew it. 'I know this whole thing feels shitty, so I'm going to make it as easy as possible. I'm going to forgo my share of the house. I don't want anything from you other than those two Rembrandt etchings, which I paid for.' Those dark, scratchy portraits of old men did little for him. He remembered the day she'd dragged him round that huge international sale of old masters in Regents Park. There were no prices on display; you had to ask for the catalogue, and most of the oil paintings had asking prices that ran into six figures, so those two etchings were a snip at just five and a half K. She was more than welcome to them.

The only saving grace was that both kids weren't going to abandon ship too. In fact, they had both decided adamantly to stay in the house with him, despite the fact that the place was obviously going to look like some kind of geriatric home with catheter bags, commodes, standing frames and enough wheelchairs to shake a stick at. If it hadn't been for his two well-grounded kids he might well have lost the plot. They kept him sane, and in a strange way, they had grown closer than they'd ever been.

Natasha had returned to the family nest having finished her geography degree at Durham with a 2:1, and Michael had helped her with the unenviable task of finding work and paying her way. He'd assisted her with her CV and personal statement in much the same way as he used to check her dissertations. Her writing skills were first class but were occasionally let down by a mild form of dyslexia. An affliction that meant that certain words like *where* and *were* would frequently get mixed up.

While her academic experience had come to an end, Ben's was just beginning. Unlike his sister who threw herself into her academic studies, Ben coasted through everything with minimum effort. He was naturally bright but incredibly lazy. His school wanted him to try for Oxbridge, but Ben had refused point-blank. He didn't want to spend all his time swotting for A stars when As would be perfectly achievable without the sweat and endless hours at his desk. After all, he could be doing more

useful stuff like going down the pub with his mates, watching movies and playing computer games. His attitude really wound up Louise. But the more he stuck to his guns, the more Michael admired his son's attitude. And when he finally got the grades he needed to study Physics at Warwick Michael had been genuinely delighted; which irritated Louise no end. She still had Cambridge in her sights, and never forgave her son for not at least trying.

Some months after the terrorist attack, Michael had discovered quite how lucky he'd been. Had he been standing a couple of feet to his right, he wouldn't be here at all. He had been protected to some extent by a plate glass partition and two other passengers, both of whom absorbed the full force of the blast and were killed instantly.

It was extraordinary how something as heinous as this asinine act of intolerance and hate could throw up so much human compassion and love in its wake. The doctors, nurses, paramedics, counsellors and members of the public who didn't know him from Adam, had restored one's faith in humanity. He'd received handwritten get-well letters from primary school children. And he'd been sent enough flowers to open his own florists, but ironically didn't get to see any of them as it was now a health and safety policy of the NHS not to have any flowers or plants on the wards for fear of cross-contamination.

The Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital in Stanmore was a rabbit warren of a place with endless corridors off its main arterial highway that sloped quite dramatically from one end of the building to the other. The irony of the steep slope wasn't lost on Michael. 'How the fuck are you meant to wheel yourself up and down this bugger if you're in a wheelchair?' he asked the hospital porter as he wheeled him into his new home - a relatively large ward with eight beds.

The porter, a young lean and extremely tall Caribbean laughed. 'Hey man, how am I meant to know. They shoulda thought 'bout that one before building this place. Know what I mean?'

In the three months at Stanmore he'd been shown how to manage his bowels with a system of pipes and a hand pump; he'd been taught how to use his wheelchair; he'd had countless sessions with physiotherapists to learn how to transfer from his bed to his chair with the assistance of a sliding board; how to transfer from his chair onto a car seat and toilet seat; he'd even managed to get himself into a standing frame with a motorised hoist; he'd had intensive counselling with a psychotherapist.

Throughout this period he'd been angry and depressed for obvious reasons. And although he hadn't been a great advocate for shrinks in the past when he'd been able-bodied, he could now see their value. When you've been through something as traumatic as this, you need to have someone you can share all your deep-seated feelings with; someone you can scream at or cry with. Because if you don't express your anger and frustration, you just end up internalising it; and the more you do that, the more it eats you up from the inside, and the more depressed and bitter you become.

The three months seemed like three years. He had hated the place with a passion, but at the same time, he knew that he desperately needed to be here to get his head straight and learn how to carry on living as a tetraplegic. He needed help with tackling all those *why* questions that continued to plague him, as they do with so many victims of terrorist atrocities. *Why me? Why that train? Why hadn't I gone to work five minutes later? Why hadn't I got into the carriage next door?* There were no answers, but the more you aired the questions to a sympathetic ear, the easier it became to move on. Not that it was ever particularly easy. This said, there was also that other very big question that lingered in the back of his head over the perpetrators themselves. Why on earth would they want to blow themselves and loads of innocent men, women and children to kingdom come? This in many ways was the most perplexing question of all. Try as he might, Michael just couldn't begin to understand this level of utter hate. How could a rational human being (and these guys were rational; they weren't clinically insane) want to kill innocent people in the name of Islam? For heaven's sake, some of their victims were also Muslims. History had thrown up plenty of evil monsters. Pol Pot was deranged enough to want to kill intellectuals; Hitler was deranged enough to kill Jews, homosexuals and people with disabilities; but this bunch of thugs seemed to want to kill everyone on the planet including their own lot. And every time there was some ghastly incident reported in the media, the radicalised perpetrators would fit the same profile. They would either be educated and perfectly polite citizens who kept themselves to themselves, or they'd be small-time crooks, losers living on the margins of society. They were the strangest of bedfellows.

The porter had positioned him in the vacant bay, and as he did so, the dinner lady appeared with her trolley and deposited a couple of plates covered with plastic covers on the adjustable hospital table that she neatly slid over his bed just above his lap. 'There you are my dear. Here's your haddock and

cauliflower cheese, and rice pudding for dessert.’ Michael forced a smile and removed the lid from the steaming plate of grey NHS fare.

The man in the opposite bed was doing likewise. ‘Don’t worry. You get used to the food here. I find it’s not so bad if you don’t actually look at it too hard. I leave my glasses off. Works for me.’ And with that, he began to demolish the contents of his plate. ‘The name’s John by the way,’ he managed between mouth-fulls.

Michael raised his hand in acknowledgement. ‘I’m Michael. I was at the Royal London before coming here. Nice to meet you, John.’

John stretched over his table and recovered his glasses, which he propped on his nose. ‘That’s better. I can actually see you now. What are you in for then Michael?’

Michael tentatively placed the grey haddock in his mouth and chewed. It could have been worse. ‘Oh, I’m in for rehab having damaged my spinal cord quite high up. So I’ve lost everything below the waist. How about you?’

‘I’m here for rehab too. I’ve got what they call a lipoma, and it’s also pretty high. So my legs are useless. They reckon I’ve had it since birth and that it’s grown very gradually over the years. Woke up four months ago and just couldn’t move. The surgeon here did the best he could but there’s not a lot they can do other than relieve the pressure in the spinal cord.’ He removed the lid on his dessert and spooned the contents into his mouth. ‘So how did you damage your spine? You weren’t horse riding were you?’

‘No, not at all. I was riding a train. I was on the one that got blown up at Edgware Road.’

‘Oh, Lord. I am sorry. Those bastards need to be locked up.’

‘No need for that. They blew themselves to pieces. Saved us the trouble.’

‘Of course, they did. Don’t understand this whole suicide bombing thing. Course, the Japs started it didn’t they?’

Michael was a little confused by John’s line of argument. ‘Did they? I’m not sure I follow.’

John removed his glasses and waved them in Michael’s direction. ‘They started it all with Pearl Harbour and their damn kamikaze pilots. They used planes as flying bombs, and Al Qaeda did the same when they flew those two airliners into the World Trade Centre.’

Michael reckoned John must have been in his seventies, so had probably been a schoolboy during the war. 'I hadn't thought of that,' he said. 'But at least the Japanese were targeting the military; not civilians.'

John nodded sagely. 'We can all be accused of targeting civilians during war I'm afraid; us, the Germans and the Americans. Look at Hiroshima and Nagasaki - well over 100,000 civilians were killed by those two bombs. But conflicts today are different. We're not just fighting nations with conventional armies; we're up against rogue states who operate across the globe through terrorist cells. Completely different ball game.'

Michael was pleased to be having a conversation with someone other than a doctor or nurse. Until now, the other patients he'd been sharing a ward with had either been comatose or too uncomfortable to talk. 'What do you think makes someone want to kill innocent civilians, John?' he asked, sensing that John would have an answer. He seemed to have an answer to everything.

'Well, that's easy. All boils down to ideology.' John paused and poured himself a glass of water. 'You see, if you believe that Allah is the only eternal being in the world and that your faith is the only true faith, and that all others denigrate yours, then you can come to the warped conclusion that everything the Western world stands for is inherently evil and threatens your very existence.'

There was a long pause as a nurse had checked John's temperature and blood pressure, and then drained his catheter into a grey cardboard bottle.

Some hours later they had continued their conversation over tea and biscuits. John had been a headmaster of a grammar school in Canterbury. 'Went there straight after leaving Birmingham University to teach history,' he'd explained. 'Ended up as headmaster, and spent my entire working life in that school. You become pretty attached to a place like that when it's become such a big part of your life, you know. Still miss it to be honest.'

Michael smiled and nodded. 'Job satisfaction is a pretty valuable commodity these days.'

'Best job in the world, teaching. Mind you, in my day it was different.' John finished his tea and placed his cup and saucer back on the trolley. 'Back then teachers could devote themselves to what they knew best: helping shape and inform impressionable young minds. Now you have to spend your

time filling out paperwork, administering, playing the system and keeping the likes of OFSTED off your back.’

That phrase: *helping shape and inform impressionable young minds* struck Michael. Who, he wondered, was helping shape the impressionable minds of young Muslims?

As it turned out, this would be the first and last conversation with John. He was transferred the following day to an Intensive Care ward as his breathing had deteriorated dramatically during the night. His bay was soon occupied by an uncommunicative soul with all manner of tubes and wires protruding from orifices, veins and nerves.

It was a couple of days before Michael engaged in another conversation of any length. This time with an attractive young female

doctor with long chestnut hair and tortoiseshell glasses. She had bounded into his space, introduced herself and smiled broadly while twiddling with her stethoscope as if it were a row of worry beads. ‘Hello there Mr Hollinghurst. Nice to meet you. I’m Camilla and I’m one of the doctors in Mr Hudson’s team. Now I know Mr Hudson has already spoken to you at length about the compression to your spinal cord. The team here discussed your case this morning, and the general view is that surgery is something we might want to seriously consider to try and relieve the pressure on your spinal cord. But of course, at the end of the day, that won’t be our decision, it will be yours. Mr Hudson is in theatre at the moment, but as soon as he’s out he’ll come and explain in detail what the operation involves, and how it might help. And you’ll be able to ask him any questions you like. Is that ok?’

‘Well actually, no, it’s not ok. It’s far from fucking ok, ok?’ She clearly wasn’t terribly used to this kind of verbal rebuke from patients and went visibly red while looking at her feet. ‘Look, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be rude,’ he added. ‘It’s just that... well, I’m not in a good place right now - and I’m not talking about this hospital. The idea of surgery frankly terrifies me.’

She looked up. ‘There’s no need to apologise, Mr Hollinghurst. I can perfectly understand your concern. As I said, you don’t have to have surgery if you don’t want to put yourself through the trauma. That would be perfectly understandable and acceptable. All we can do is offer you our

professional view and advice. Whatever you decide, you can rest assured that we will do everything we can to help and support you.'

'Thank you, doctor. There is actually one question I'd like to ask you if that's ok.'

'Feel free. Fire away.'

'The old boy who was in the bed opposite, John. Can you tell me if he's ok?'

'I'm afraid I don't know, but I can certainly find out for you. I'll get back to you as soon as I know.'

Is that all?'

'For now, yes.'

She smiled and turned, leaving a faint whiff of perfume in the air. Michael was feeling tired. He pushed the button on the bed's remote control until he was lying prostrate, and closed his eyes.

Mr Hudson didn't materialise for a whole day. And when he finally did, he did so with three young students, none of whom looked much older than Michael's son Ben. 'Hello, Mr Hollinghurst. I hope you don't mind if my students sit in on this meeting.' He tugged awkwardly at the blue curtain. 'Now, we've had a good look at the MRI and we can see exactly where the compression in your spinal cord is taking place.' He produced a black and white print-out and pointed his pen at various sections that meant absolutely nothing to Michael. 'The tightness around your spinal cord here is causing all the problems. Now, we have two options: we can either sit tight and wait to see if the swelling and resulting compression in this area dissipates over time. Or we could carry out what we call a laminectomy to remove part of your vertebrae to try and relieve some of the pressure here. Personally, I think this has a good chance of helping, but the downside is that it's a fairly big operation and will require a longish hospital stay to recover. There are, of course, no guarantees that surgery will improve matters. And on top of this, there are obviously the usual risks associated with surgery of this nature to take into consideration. So it's not an easy decision for you I'm afraid. But it is an option that is worth thinking about.'

One of the students began to scribble notes in his notepad.

'And if I decide to do nothing, how likely is it that I'll see any discernible improvement?' asked Michael.

Mr Hudson screwed up his face and looked in considerable discomfort. Had he been a car mechanic about to give a diagnosis on a car, he'd have no doubt been sucking air between his teeth. 'That's hard to say. If the swelling within the tissues comes down and there is any improvement as a result, it could take anything between three and six months. But any possible improvement is going to be marginal I'm afraid. If there has been no improvement by six months, it's highly unlikely that you'll see any subsequent improvement.'

'And if I decide to have surgery, how long will it take to recover?'

'You're probably looking at three months, give or take a few weeks, assuming that there are no complications, infections or suchlike. It is, I have to say, a fairly unpleasant procedure to recover from. So to help your body cope with the trauma, you'll be on some pretty heavy-duty painkillers for the first few days following surgery. So let me make it absolutely clear that I wouldn't blame you in the least if you decided not to go ahead with it. But at this juncture, it is the only possible option open to us. So there you have it. You don't need to make any decisions for the moment. Just think about it; talk to your family, and sleep on it, and let me know in a few days.' And with that, he and his three acolytes smiled courteously and were gone.

CHAPTER TWO

As a young child growing up in East London, Mohamed Farik and his older brother Salah had a fairly normal Muslim upbringing. Their father had been born in British India and their mother in East Pakistan. Together they had worked hard to raise a family and to embrace the British way of life while remaining good Muslims. As far as Mohamed the child was concerned, Islam was a religion, pure and simple. His father had made it very clear to him that there was no place for politics in religion. 'Islam,' he had said to both his sons, 'was about purifying our hearts and drawing closer to God.' But the death of Mohamed's older brother Salah was to change all that.

Salah had been the most studious of the two boys, having completed a Masters in Mechanical Engineering at Leeds University. Following his graduation, he could have secured a good job with

Rolls Royce for whom he did a placement over two summer recesses in succession. In truth, he could have worked for almost any successful engineering company, but instead decided to sidestep industry and use his knowledge to teach others. His first and, as it turned out, last job took him to Sheffield University, and it was here that he was to publish his first academic textbook - *The Aesthetics of Mechanics*. Following its publication, he became restless, left the university and announced to the family that he was taking a year out to travel. As a reasonably devout Muslim, he'd always wanted to learn Arabic.

Quite how he had ended up in Baghdad, nobody quite knew. But there he had remained for some months. While Iraq's dictator continued to taunt the West, the family had pleaded time after time for him to return to the security of the UK. And Salah had reassured them that he would return in good time. What he hadn't told them though was that he was gay, had fallen in love with another academic by the name of Imran, and was blissfully happy for the first time in his life. So while he could keep up the pretence of intending to return to the UK, deep down he knew that it would be almost unthinkable to do so. After all, his parents were elderly and frail; to introduce his partner and own up to his sexual orientation while his parents were in their twilight years, struck him as an act of gross insensitivity. They would be devastated; it would probably send his father to an early grave. At the same time, he didn't want to live a lie. But it had to be said that doing so from afar was a great deal easier. So all in all, staying put for the time being at least, was by far the most convenient option. One he could live with. And as for all this bluster and posturing from the American and Iraqi administrations, he, like so many others, was convinced that this whole pantomime would play itself out.

Sadly for Salah and countless thousands of Iraqis, the pantomime would turn into a tragedy of epic proportions. By the time Britain and the US had lost patience with Iraq's irrational tyrant and had unleashed their so-called 'shock and awe' strategy of endless air sorties and continual bombardment of the city, the family was at its wits' end. All communications by then had broken down.

The family was eventually officially notified by the authorities of Salah's death months after his body had been recovered from the rubble and he had eventually been identified through dental records. He had been living in one of the buildings close to the Ba'ath Party's headquarters, which had been inadvertently hit by a cruise missile. The Americans called it 'collateral damage'. And there had

never been an apology from anyone for this heinous and senseless crime. From that day onward, Mohamed held America and the West in contempt. They had started this senseless war and killed his brother along with countless innocent men, women and children; and for what? Saddam had been bluffing all along. His weapons of mass destruction amounted to no more than a pile of rusty old chemical canisters that were well past their sell-by date. The inspectors had said as much.

Today, Mohamed's benign, rose-tinted childhood image of Islam was a very distant memory. The mosque he attended now was one his father would have balked at. Segments within the mosque in Stepney harboured the view that Islam was in fact far more than just a religion, and many of its young members subscribed to this line of thinking. Here one could readily read the works of radical Islamists; men like Abul Ala Mawdudi, the founder of Jamat-e-Islami; the very same man who penned the following words: 'Islam is a revolutionary doctrine and system that overthrows the government. It seeks to overturn the whole universal social order.'

Mohamed had become a key activist at the mosque, taking part in what was known as *Da'wah*, the Arabic word for *invitation*. It was in effect a call to Islam; a conversion programme aimed at winning over moderate Muslims. And over time, he had become friendly with a wide circle of young Muslims and his views had become increasingly extreme as a result.

One of his closest friends was George Caxton, a white Muslim convert who now went by the name Qssim El-Ghzzawy. His passion for Islam had been infectious. And his knowledge and eloquence made him a very popular public speaker. Years earlier he'd spoken out vociferously on the subject of the Balkan conflict. 'O ummah of Islam. Your sisters and mothers are being raped in Bosnia,' he had declared at a meeting in Tower Hamlets. 'And all you do is pray. You have a duty to protect your brothers in Bosnia. Together we must do everything we can to overthrow the existing political order in Muslim countries in order to establish an Islamic state. With a caliph in place, God willing, an Islamic army will assist our brothers and slaughter the Serbs. For we know only too well why the international community sits on its hands and refuses to arm our Muslim brothers... There is a conspiracy among the unbelievers; the Zionists and Christians to reduce the number of Muslims in Europe.' The atmosphere had been palpable, and Qssim's words had caught the imagination of his audience as effectively as a single match igniting a mound of dust-dry kindling.

Talk of jihad (holy war) and Khilafah (the worldwide leadership of Muslims) was now on the lips of many hot-headed young Muslims. This said, in-fighting and factionalism between the myriad of Islamist groups, which all held conflicting views in terms of theology and politics, was pretty bewildering.

But all this talk was beginning to sicken Qssim. Action spoke louder than words. And, he, Qssim El-Ghzzawy, was going to show his allegiance to Allah and his contempt for the stinking kafirs - the unbelievers of this world who had conspired against Muslims. 'Fight in the cause of God those who fight you, but do not transgress limits, for God loves not transgressors. And slay them wherever ye catch them, and turn them out from where they have turned you out; for tumult and oppression are worse than slaughter.' Were these not the divine words of the Quran?

He had returned home to the 70s tower block in the less than salubrious urban sprawl that was Ilford and took the lift up to his one-bedroom flat on the 5th floor. Here he removed a bottle of Stella Artois from the enormous American style fridge and took it out to the small terrace that faced southeast towards Mecca and sat at the grubby plastic garden table on the grey balcony. He may have fallen in love with Islam and the struggles of its people, but he hadn't embraced its religious strictures quite so rigidly. He wasn't going to banish alcohol from his life, and neither would he cease eating ham. Beneath the table was a leather case. He unclasped the fixtures and raised the lid slowly. The sleek lines of the sniper rifle lying neatly in its constituent parts never failed to move him. It made his heart race that little bit faster and caused a cold sweat to break out on the back of his neck. It was a thing of sheer beauty. Engineered by a master gunsmith from an off-the-shelf sporting rifle, it had been chambered for a .22 Magnum and had been fitted with a suppressor telescopic sight. He lifted it out from the dark cobalt sea of velvet and felt the precision of its cold steel barrel slide through his rough fingers. The telescopic eyepiece slotted into place with a reassuring click and he brought his right eye up to the glass lens. It was heavy, but not too heavy.

The church was no more than 500 yards away, on the opposite side of the busy A12. It wasn't an especially attractive red-brick pile and had probably been built in the 20s, but it was certainly large. Qssim trained the gun on a large modernist sculpture of Christ on the cross and lined up the crosshairs with the forehead and the bloody crown of thorns. Then he slowly brought it down past the attempt at

mildly decorative Art Deco reliefs and stopped at the enormous arch housing two solid oak doors that remained decidedly closed.

Before long, one of the double doors opened and the congregants began to spill out. Qssim found the head of a portly balding man in a checked shirt and gently squeezed the trigger. The gun clicked harmlessly. Had it been loaded, that fat Kafir would now be dead meat splayed on the pavement. Within minutes he'd calmly pulled the trigger on no fewer than 25 unbelievers. This felt good. The anger that had been coursing through his veins had found an outlet, and he was feeling relaxed and sublime. He put the gun down and prised open the bottle with the edge of the table, and took a large swig.

*

The whole Islam thing had originally appealed to him when he'd been serving time at Aylesbury's Young Offender Institution. He'd been banged up for almost two years of a four-year conviction for murdering his father. Not a long sentence for murder you might think until you consider the mitigating circumstances. George, as he was known before his stint behind bars, and his younger brother had from a young age been subjected to the most appalling sexual and psychological abuse at the hands of their father. The abuse continued until George's mother filed for divorce when her eldest son was just 13. And the boy's interest in guns had begun when he turned 18, and thoughts of retribution kept him up at night. Then, by chance, a friend had excitedly shown him an old Russian army issue Nagant MI 895 revolver and three bullets intact in their gleaming brass housings. He'd managed to steal them from his grandfather's safe. And George had persuaded his friend to let him have the gun for the princely sum of £50.

Tracking down his father hadn't been particularly difficult. He'd gone through the local phone directories and found that there was only one V. B. Caxton listed in the local area. He'd borrowed his mum's car on the pretext of going for a job interview and instead had driven over to Otley Way, a nondescript terrace of Edwardian red brick houses that had seen better days. Most no longer sported the original sash windows and leaded glass front doors. In their place were those ubiquitous

double-glazed frames of the greying white plastic variety, and grubby net curtains. He'd found a space on the opposite side of the road and slipped on a pair of sunglasses. He felt like a complete prick. But it had to be done. It seemed like an eternity before the front door was to open but open it did, and that fat bastard eventually stepped out into daylight. He hadn't changed, of course. Still had that ruddy red complexion, greased back thinning grey hair and pointed chin. George had seen enough and turned the key in the ignition.

It was a whole week before he'd drum up enough courage to go back with the loaded gun. It was early evening. This time there were no parking spaces nearby so he'd parked further down the road and walked back to the house.

A young woman answered the door, and he'd asked if Vic was at home. He was apparently having a bath. 'That's ok,' he had said. 'I'll wait.' The girl had shown him into the communal lounge, smiled nervously and had then disappeared. He wasted little time, bounded up the stairs and could now hear the sound of running water. The adrenalin was pumping through his body. He was incredibly angry. He just wanted to get the job done. The bathroom door was half glazed with frosted glass. He tried opening it but knew instinctively that it would be locked. His father always locked the bathroom door. So instead he threw all his weight shoulder-first into the ageing woodwork, and the door surrendered feebly with the sound of splintering.

'What the fuck...' The pink figure of his father was discernible through the steam.

'Hi, dad. Just thought it was time to pay you a visit.' And with these words he'd pulled out the gun, pointed it directly at his father and pulled the trigger. There was nothing more than a sickening click. And in an instant, that large pink frame had sprung from the water like an enormous whale. Before George knew it he could feel his father's filthy hands around his neck and the cold tiles of the wall pressing hard against his back. His strength began to sap, but before it did he summoned up all the energy he could muster and focussed on the trigger.

The crack of the gun was impressive in a confined space and its immediate effect was that the hands around his neck loosened like a taut tourniquet being cut. He could breathe again. And then he had fired the gun twice more for good measure and could feel the dead man's warm blood pouring forth as profusely as the hot water tap, which was still flowing.

He hadn't given any thought to the consequences of his actions. He didn't really care. Justice, as far as he was concerned, had now been done. He had eliminated his past; his demons could take a running jump; he could move on.

*

His barrister had been a pretty cool black guy. 'The name's Charles but you can call me Charlie,' he'd said on their first meeting while shaking George's hand enthusiastically. Charlie turned out to be as charming and persuasive in the courtroom as he was in real life. He had argued convincingly that years of sexual abuse had been the sole motive and an overwhelming provocation behind George's act of violence on that fateful night. George's mother had broken down in tears and admitted that she had suspected her husband's vile crime, but had done nothing until she finally filed for divorce. Friends had corroborated George's experience at the hands of his father, and even one of his teachers had attested to his good character. The judge had taken it all on board, and despite the guilty plea, had passed a sentence of just four years of which he would only serve two.

The Aylesbury Young Offender Institution was a foreboding kind of place with its oppressive Victorian architecture; cold metal steps, rails and walkways; and its endless cavernous echoes of metal on metal. Some of the inmates were loners and didn't seem to speak to anyone if they could help it. George could easily have become like one of them had it not been for Ibrahim. Ibrahim was different to most of the others. He was relatively small and slight with wire spectacles and an infectious grin. George had met him in the library where Ibrahim had secured a place as one of the institution's librarians. Over a period of many weeks, George had struck up a friendship with Ibrahim who in turn had introduced him to his circle of mates or *brothers* as Ibrahim liked to call them. They were all Muslims, and were a tight-knit community, always looking out for each other and ready to come to the assistance of any of the brothers should the need arise. And there were times in this place where you really did need that kind of support. More importantly, it was a good thing to be seen to be part of such a loyal clan. It minimised the risk of anyone else picking on you in the first place.

Before long, George found himself becoming more and more interested in Islam as a result of hanging out with the brothers. He began to read books in the library. He learnt about Salah, the five daily prayer rituals and began to read the Quran. And then one afternoon he had greeted Ibrahim in the library and asked nervously if he could become a Muslim. Ibrahim smiled broadly and embraced his friend. 'Of course, you can my friend. If you are sure and have the conviction to serve Allah, then it is the simplest thing in the world.'

George nodded eagerly. 'I am sure Ibrahim. I want it more than anything in the world.' His friend smiled once more and led George to a quiet corner of the library and removed a copy of the Quran from one of the shelves.

'Now my friend, to become a Muslim you have to recite what we call the Testimony of Faith in Arabic. The words simply mean *There is no true God but Allah, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God*. So if you are sure you want to do this, my friend, simply place your right hand on the Quran and simply recite the following words after me: *La ilaha illa Allah...*'

George placed his hand on the holy book. '*La ilaha illa Allah...*'

'Good. And now: *Muhammad rasoolu Allah.*'

George looked into the dark brown eyes of his friend. '*Muhammad rasoolu Allah.*'

With these words, Ibrahim hugged his friend. '*Jazak Allah Khairan...* May Allah reward you with blessings, brother.'

From this moment onwards, George found himself embracing Allah wholeheartedly and taking part in prayers with the brothers. He had become a fully-fledged member of the brotherhood, and that's when he changed his name.

*

Following his release from the Young Offender Institution, George, now Qssim, began to regularly visit a mosque in Stepney, East London where he came into contact with individuals who passionately believed it to be the duty of all good Muslims to speak out on behalf of their oppressed brothers around the world and take part in jihad - a holy war against the Western oppressors. The greatest

vitriol being reserved for the Americans and Israelis who had, according to the most radical among them, conspired to destroy Islam. He began to visit fringe groups and listen to the impassioned words of radical imams who praised the martyrs who had flown passenger airlines into New York's iconic twin towers. Men with their bushy grey beards and long flowing robes who now called for the establishment of an Islamic state to strike out at unbelievers everywhere. And he spent much time watching videos online of the suffering of Palestinian children in Gaza. The more he watched and listened, the more incensed he became, and the more his feeling of hatred that he had harboured for his father, came to the surface and reared its ugly head.

By the time he met Mohamed, Qssim was a passionate young man with a cause in his heart and a fire in his belly. To non-believers he was something entirely different; he was a seething, radical Islamist.