

THE ICE QUEEN  
THE AZURE SYNDICATE TRILOGY; BOOK ONE

By Henry Stokes

First published by XX, Australia 2014

Text copyright © Henry Stokes 2014

The moral right of Henry Stokes to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted.

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of the copyright owner of this book.

Design by © Henry Stokes

Cover image: © Henry Stokes

Typeset in; XX

Printed and bound in XX by XX Publishing Group, City, State

National Library of Australia

Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

Stokes, Henry, 1987- .

The Ice Queen/Henry Stokes,

XX Number (XX format)

XX

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, business, organisations, places and events are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

XX Numbers

[www.henrystokes.org](http://www.henrystokes.org)

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

## PROLOGUE

## THE MAN IN THE DARKNESS

The stretch of road was deserted as far as the eye could see. It was dark. The road was bordered by nothing but woodland for ten minutes drive either way. There were no lights along this section of Wakehurst Parkway. He scratched his short trimmed beard as he contemplated what he needed to do. From his vantage point he could see cars approaching around the bend further up the road, and also had a clear path to the road directly below. He took a slow, deep breath as he ran a hand through his medium length dark blonde hair.

He ignored the car approaching from the other direction. He knew his target would be coming from the south. His meeting would have finished around 9pm, so he should be coming past any minute. He replayed his plan in his head making sure he was prepared. Having followed his target for months he was certain the man would be alone in the car.

Lights appeared over the horizon. He pulled out his night binoculars to get a better look. It was the wrong make and model, not the Mercedes he was waiting for. He put down the binoculars. A few minutes later he watched as the car passed by. He heard loud music and saw a bunch of teenagers drinking. Not his problem.

He had kept tabs on his target for some time, and had a good idea of what he was like - a private and shy man whether at work or with his family. There was a lot about his life that he kept hidden from both parties. The biggest secrets were the crimes he had committed without any recompense. He pulled his leather gloves tighter and retied the laces on his sneakers in a double knot. He scanned the path to the road in front of him, his eyes having adjusted to night vision. He had already walked the path a few times clearing rocks and sticks that could pose a trip hazard, keeping low to avoid being seen by passing cars.

He saw another set of headlights approaching from around the bend. He pulled up his binoculars to check the car. It looked the right colour and the shape was definitely a Mercedes. It looked to be the right model as well. The headlights made the plate partially visible. He strained to see it, squinting. He focused the binoculars until he could see. It matched up.

He felt an instant adrenaline rush. He had a window of one minute. He sprinted down to the roadside, checked for traffic coming from the other direction. Nothing. He was all clear to go ahead. He ran back to the trees, grabbed the large log he had left there with both hands and started dragging it onto the road. It was heavy but he was still able to drag it onto the road quickly. He saw headlights coming around the corner. He would be in full view in a few seconds. Satisfied it was in position he sprang back off the road and retreated behind the cover of the trees. As soon as he reached them he saw headlights illuminate the log. That had been close.

He was sweating and breathing quickly. He tried to take deep breaths to slow it down. Crouching low he watched as the silver Mercedes approached the log and slowed down. It slowly came to a stop but the engine was still running.

There was a moment of silence. All he could hear was the engine running, trees being blown in the cold night wind and the chirping of crickets. He took a deep breath, his

breathing now almost back to normal. The door clicked and opened. He saw the man emerge from the vehicle on the right side.

“Fucking hell ... what is this?” the man said irritated. He was in his sixties but could pass for being in his forties. He was a bit out of shape however. “This road is a bloody menace” From the trees he could see the man shaking his head as he lumbered towards the log.

He drew his knife from his pocket.

He kept low and moved quickly but silently, he didn't want to make any noise. He ducked back and made his approach by going around the back of the car, so that he could come up on the man from behind. The man started tugging on the log and groaning. It was only in that moment where he showed his age. He approached his target from behind, his blade ready in his right hand.

“Over here” he said to the man with a smirk.

His target jumped and turned. He said nothing at first, seemingly too startled to talk. Then he noticed the knife in his hand.

“Who are you?” he said with fear in his voice.

“It is time that you paid for your crimes” he said bitterly, ignoring the question.

He took a step backward, his hand raised covering himself. “Stay back!” he shouted weakly.

He rushed forward and plunged the knife deep into the man's chest. He deliberately made the incision low and ripped upwards. The man fell to the ground slowly. There was a moment of silence as he coughed and stared up at him.

“If you're looking for it, I didn't even have it,” he said with a bitter smile, shaking his head weakly. “... the blue flash drive”

The man took a few weak breaths. Then the life left his body. As he withdrew the knife he saw the eyes were fixed wide open. Somehow, looking at the man up close for the first time. It didn't seem right. Whatever he had been in the past, he was an old man now, a dead old man. There was now a family without a husband and father. He sighed and drew back. The body fell limp, lying face down. He lifted up the man's left palm and made a few quick and light swipes at them with the knife, giving them defensive wounds. He put it back down, lifted the other palm and did the same.

With the body taken care of, he pulled out the wallet from the man's back pocket. He looked at the ID. Kelvin Anderson. Born 1950. He breathed a sigh of relief, relaxed in the knowledge that his target was down. He needed to establish the reason for the crime. He pulled out the wad of cash from the wallet and flipped through the notes; five hundred in fifties. It wasn't enough to justify a planned robbery. He turned the man over and took off the slim gold neck chain he was wearing, and unhooked the expensive watch as well. There would be another five hundred or a thousand dollars worth in those two. When the police asked the family, they would notice these things missing. Meanwhile he would sell them off quickly in two separate pawn shops several kilometres away which didn't have cameras. They would turn up in a few

weeks through the police investigation, but he would already have the cash. He felt the motive of robbery would look convincing.

He dragged the log off to the side of the road; it would raise too many questions. Better to leave the crime scene as simple as possible. He frowned as he dragged the log, thinking about what the man had said about the flash drive. He didn't understand what he had meant. He sighed and forgot about it. Probably some other crime the man had been involved in. Having moved the log, he grabbed a small branch with lots of leaves at the end and used it as a broom to sweep away evidence of his footprints as he backtracked to the trees. He left the car engine running. Someone would drive by soon enough and slow down when they saw the lights, then the body.

He backtracked to his vantage point, sweeping his footsteps away as he did. He stayed low and moved slowly, just in case a car passed by. He looked back at the crime scene which was now a hundred meters away, he could barely see it once he reached his vantage point. He picked up the shoulder bag, and following one last look over his shoulder, started walking through the bush, parallel to the road, sweeping behind him as he went.

After five minutes of walking he saw a pair of lights approaching. He didn't think it would be so soon. No matter. He ducked low as they passed by, but he was far from the road, invisible to the driver. After it had gone he kept walking, brushing as he went. He took off his dark canvas jacket and put it in his shoulder bag. He would soon be warm enough with the exercise.

After twenty minutes or so, he heard a police siren in the distance. By this time he was in an elevated position, looking down on the road. He could see the headlights far away through the trees. The siren got louder as it passed and then faded away. He kept walking.

He hiked for a further five minutes through the bush before finding the path he was looking for, and proceeded to make a move east along the walking trail. In the distance he could hear another police siren from the road, but he was far away by now and could no longer see the road. The walking trail continued to climb. It took him another ten minutes to reach the top before pausing to catch his breathe before starting his descent. Within another ten minutes he had reached the start of the walking trail near Cromer and the beaches. His shirt was covered in sweat from his walk, and it was now getting cold from the night air.

When the street was in view, he set down the shoulder bag, and pulled out the change of clothes he had prepared. He took off his sneakers, got out of his dark jeans and black tee. Finally he stripped off his underwear and socks, to be thorough. He rubbed himself down with the towel he had brought, wiping off sweat and dirt. Having cleaned himself up, he laid down the towel and stood on it like a bath mat. The cold night air had made his skin turn to goose bumps. He shivered in the light breeze as he put on clean underwear and socks, then put on blue denim jeans and light green branded tee shirt. He slipped on the casual shoes he had brought and laced them up. Finally he put on the stylish biker style leather jacket that had set him back a couple hundred dollars. It was one of the last objects he owned from his former lifestyle. It had paid its weight in gold in terms of cover disguises. Back in street clothes, he packed away the dirty clothes and everything else into the shoulder bag.

He looked around for any sign of people. It was now past 10pm, he had walked for forty minutes from crime scene and was now far away separated from any police in attendance by the large national park. Satisfied there was no one else around, he walked into the streets. His car was parked two streets away, and was in a dark street far from any houses. He reached his car and opened the boot, stashing the small shoulder bag under the spare tire, just in case he was stopped by police. It would pass a quick check. Even if they stopped him, he doubted they would suspect him. He got into the drivers side of the car and waited a nervous moment before turning on the police radio. He listened for a few minutes to the police chatter, all of it was about the body found by the Mercedes. Forensics had only just arrived on scene. It would take some time before the police started searching the area. He sighed in relief. They were focused on checking traffic up and down the road. He started the car and pulled out, driving along the coastline. From there it was a short drive to the highway and his trip back to the city.

## PART ONE

## THE JOURNALIST

She moved across the room, touching a man's arm as she passed. She laughed and threw her hair back lightly, her long golden curls. She had a svelte figure and wore a dark blue dress, which fit perfectly and cut off at her knees. Her high cheekbones lifted as she smiled and enchanted the room. All were helpless to her. Her smile, her style, her grace. No one could blame them. Every room she went into lit up and was brightened by her presence. He looked at her from outside while he smoked the last of his cigarette. He was wearing a black coat, blue button up shirt, dark jeans and black leather shoes, and he wondered how he must look amongst these people six foot tall model types. He was an average height man with light brown eyes and short dark hair standing in a room full of blonde haired and blue eyed models.

He thought to himself that he had seen girls like her before. The beautiful ones, the charming ones, the ones with a commanding presence. The bright lights of the gallery illuminated her light bronze skin, softer than smooth.

“Stop staring Will”.

He turned and saw a friend teasing him as she walked passed. He felt foolish for being caught fixating. He hated to be like the other guys in the room, caught admiring this gorgeous woman. He turned his attention back to his cigarette, his own little moment of calm away from the superficial world inside.

He frowned thinking about how he had ended up at this party. Being a columnist with an entry level into the media world had brought him close to this crowd. The media and the artists in Sydney ended up in the same circles. The people there usually had similar jobs; an interior designer or a foreign correspondent, a photographer or a cameraman, a graphic designer or a journalist. The romance that once existed in journalism had all but been lost, but for a few select journalists, the adventure remained. Unfortunately he was not part of that lucky cache. His writing was purely economic.

It had started with a Masters thesis that no one had wanted him to write. He was one of the only people who had written about increasing risk in financial markets before the 2008 crisis. He tried argue that CDOs were a largely unregulated and misunderstood market, and had tried to draw comparisons with the bursting of the dot com bubble and similar speculative busts. His economic professors had tried to explain how he was wrong, and had essentially viewed him as a heathen for doubting in the power of free market economics. He had written the thesis anyway. Through a stroke of fate, his thesis had come out just before the 2008 boom, and then the bursting of that bubble. Will and other similar academics had been vindicated, and with the benefit of hindsight, were able to say they had seen it coming. In the fallout he had been described as one of the experts that had been seen it coming. It always felt false to him. The truth that only he knew was that he had gotten lucky; he had written at the right time on the right issues.

Following that he had been approached to publish a book version of the thesis, which ended up selling successfully. For a moment he was successful. He spent most of the money buying an apartment in Crows Nest, purely so he could have a café at his doorstep. He spent the rest of it into publishing a second book. It had been a more speculative book about applying economic theories to reducing crime. The key theory

he developed had been the spiral bankruptcy theory of criminality. Regardless of how proud he was of his work, the book had not drawn as much attention and had barely sold. His moment of success had passed and the money from his initial success had dried up quickly. But the more he was exposed to the world of journalism, the more he missed the work he had done as an academic. He'd submitted some articles to newspapers, a simplified version of his academic publications. Most were focused on inequality, but also dealt with financial markets and other economic issues. Based on the success of his first book, he had been offered a freelance writing position. It was the perfect situation for him, but for the most part he was living paycheck to paycheck.

His friend called out to him, he pulled one last drag on his cigarette and dragged himself inside. Away from the cool night air.

He crossed the room, thinking how welcoming the inside of the gallery was. The tea lights that adorned the dark brick walls around the outside courtyard made everyone look like strangers. Under the warm, bright lighting inside the gallery everyone looked more recognisable. The warm light seemed to accentuate the yellow in all colours. People's skins seemed to glow and their eyes sparkled. Perhaps it was why this lighting was so common in this environment, it made everyone seem more glamorous. He had grown up coming to galleries such as this, he was more or less used to it by now. The artist crowd that he belonged to and yet was never comfortable with. As he reached his friend, he made eye contact with the group and smiled.

"I don't think you've met her yet", he heard his friend say.

The woman slowly tilted her head to face him, a smile forming on her face. He looked at her as her eyes turned to him. It was all over when they made eye contact. Her big bright eyes looked into his. Ocean blue eyes that sparkled under the lights, warm and inviting.

He had always been a sucker for eyes.

She was beautiful. She looked like a princess, or a queen, but definitely something regal. There was something ethereal and unreal about her. She lightly took his hand and they shook while his friend made introductions, but he was not paying attention.

"Will, this is Amber".

For the first time in his life he couldn't quite figure out what to say. He wished he still had a cigarette in his hand.

## THE DETECTIVE

The train doors slid open. There was a drawn out hiss and a low ringing sound signalling the station. The voiceover announced the stop but the speakers always seemed to muffle the sound, it was impossible to figure out where you were in this city from sound alone.

As the hydraulics released, Aoki Sun stepped from the train to the platform. Her black hair was tied back, she wore black flats, tan pants, her top black and silver and a dark purple wool cardigan. While she had the cardigan, she wished for a heavier jacket, but almost always forgot this in her morning rush. She concentrated as she stepped over the slight gap between the train and the platform. It wasn't much of a gap, but every day she found it required her attention. Despite the money in Sydney simple things like that never seemed to get addressed she thought.

The cool night air rushed to meet her as she disembarked; she felt the chilled gust that accompanied the night time. It was nearly half past eight at night and there were only stragglers drifting home from work. The figures exiting the train were illuminated only on one side by the lighting at the station. The other side obscured. There was no talking and no sound save the hiss of the train doors and the shuffle of scuffed soles.

As she left the platform she suddenly realised that her eyes were watering. She wiped it away. It sometimes happened to her, a by-product from her constant fatigue and days spent in front of the computer.

Her mind was still racing. She was always wired after work and on edge. Most of her colleagues forget about work the moment they walked out the door. She suspected they weren't really thinking about it while they were there, just going through the motions. For her, the work followed her and was always with her. She was always thinking about the cases she was working on at the moment. Occasionally it led to moments of brilliance, where a few pieces of information and inferences came together to create a significant realisation.

Mostly however, it meant a lot of sleepless nights and mornings spent longing for more sleep.

As she left the lit area of the station she thought about a case from that day: a man who had murdered his girlfriend. It was a crime of circumstance, they had been a happy couple, there were obvious signs of a fight at her apartment, and he had left a lot of evidence. He'd been the first suspect and it hadn't taken long to arrest him. Once arrested he hadn't talked much, merely covered his face and looked at the ground. There was no fight in him. The signs of remorse were there. She couldn't stop thinking about why he had done it, a woman's life was lost and he would have to contend with killing the woman he still loved, as best she could tell. Moreover, for all the evidence to the contrary which revealed he had killed her, she felt sorry for him. She felt as though he would take it all back. On one of the few occasions that he looked her in the eye, she saw in him that his life had lost meaning. She knew in that moment that he loved her, she felt sorry for him.

Because of this she felt sick. The man was a murderer, and had murdered someone who loved and trusted him. Her partner on this case had been content enough that it was wrapped up, and wasn't too concerned with why the man had done it. Behind the

case though there were always motivations. Her partner wasn't an uninterested man, he cared about the case, he cared about the justice but wasn't relishing the prospect that this man would suffer in imprisonment. He was content, but he didn't want to know the why behind the case. She however couldn't help thinking about it.

She walked briskly from Stanmore station, on the narrow sidewalk in the dimly lit street. She decided that next time she had a chance to talk to this man she would come out and ask him gently why he did it. She adjusted her cardigan that had become dishevelled from the handbag tugging on her shoulder, and found herself impulsively pulling a cigarette from her bag. She paused for a second as she lit it. She heard footsteps behind her, and subtly but swiftly turned her head.

Nothing.

Just a mousy woman reaching her hatchback, heels clicking as she traipsed back from the station. This woman was one of the many who had many stages in their commute to work. This woman had driven close to the train station and then caught the train from there. This habit had always confused her. She never understood why these people didn't just live on the train line, or catch a bus. She knew that rents were expensive the closer you got to the city, and she understood that, but when she considered all the additional costs of tolls and petrol, she wondered whether that wouldn't balance out. Additionally, she couldn't help thinking that the entire practice of driving to work was harmful to both the environment, let alone one's wallet. She decided to shrug it off, if it were one of her friends then she would have challenged them, but if not then there was no point dwelling on such issues.

Inhaling the very last of her cigarette, she reached the outside of her apartment. Through the window of her apartment she saw one of her two cats and already felt in a better mood. She waved at her cat with a big smile on her face. She saw the cat look at her, then look away and jump down from the windowsill. She climbed the stairs as she heard her partner Rick in the kitchen. He was always there ready with food when she got home. She turned her key in the lock and opened the door.

"Hey" she called out.

He popped his head of the kitchen and smiled, "Hey love, how was work?"

"Yeah," She grumbled with a sullen face, "... alright". He chuckled.

He pointed to the stove, "I did you up some pasta, it's pretty terrible but at least it's free".

She smiled as she chucked her bag on the floor. A clear foot taller than her, he was lean and handsome. She'd noticed those exact things and in that order when she had first met him. She had felt only attraction to him at first, until she learned that he truly had a kind heart. He had large blue eyes, which was rare considering most of his family had been Italian. At her insistence, he had trimmed his permanent five o'clock shadow that he had favoured in his single days, and they had reached a truce with him having a trimmed goatee. He always looked handsome with it. She gave him a cuddle as she walked into the kitchen. He wasn't the best of cooks, or the most adventurous, but he always put the effort into making sure she came home to food when she worked late, and always tried to cook her things she liked. It was the small things like that she appreciated. They made her days a little more bearable.

“How was your work? How long have you been home for?” she asked.

“Meh, wasn’t too bad, got home around ... four, I think? I had training today, we had all that motivation bullshit”, a frown on his face. He had recently started work in an HR company, the first job he had in a few years that was related to his management degree from uni. What he had found out quickly is that management and human resources were soft sciences, and referred to as bullshit by the income generating areas of companies.

“Yeah? You alright?” she said, feeling the brush of the cat’s fur through her work pants. She bent down, kept her gaze on her partner, as she stroked the jealous feline. His back raised and eyes closed as he purred over the attention he was now getting.

He sighed. “This isn’t really what I want to do. But it’s good to have a regular paycheck again”

For a moment she had thought he would talk about going back to study, she was glad he hadn’t mentioned it. While she truly did want the best for him, it had been so stressful for both of them when he was studying full time. He had only been able to work part time, and there were periods where he wasn’t working. Between their living costs, and their ongoing mortgage payments, she had been sick with stress at times. Needless to say that she had been smoking a lot during that period, she had managed to cut down nowadays, and felt she was close to quitting. She wasn’t excited to go back to those dark days of worrying how ends would meet. While his new job wasn’t too stressful for him, he had told her that it wasn’t what he thought the industry would be. In uni he had thought he would be able to design new management systems, new ways of motivating and structuring remuneration and rewards. The reality was far different. In the business world after the economic downturn of 2008, business focus was on reducing costs. Chief among them labour costs. In his first job after university, he had been responsible for assisting in identifying which employees were not business critical, and then arranged for their retrenchment, a window dressed term for laying someone off. After several rounds of cuts, he found himself on the other side of the desk, being told he was no longer needed. The irony was not lost on him.

She rubbed his shoulder to reassure him, she could see from his expression as he focused on cleaning up that he was still having a crisis of faith. She hated seeing him like this, and she knew that at some point he would need to get out of this industry and retrain himself.

“We had to break into the motivation groups again today ...”, he said as he looked away, frowning.

“Oh ... I’m sorry”, she knew exactly what kind of day he would have had. Part of their motivation strategy was to have the teams break into ‘motivation groups’. She had found out it was exactly as pretentious as it sounded. Each group had a name like ‘success’, or ‘teamwork’, or ‘initiative’ and so on. They then had to each speak for several minutes on why this name was so important to their team, and what they would do to improve their team’s performance.

She had to stifle a laugh, his modern corporate torture would be hilarious if it weren’t forced on them in such an Orwellian fashion. There were usually several directors present, watching, taking notes.

She changed the subject and discussed plans for the weekend to cheer him up. He brightened a fair bit when he remembered that it was Thursday. She finished her dinner and tumbled the bowl into the sink, she saw him scrunch his face at the clunking and scraping sound, instantly remembering how it annoyed him and felt guilty.

The rest of her nights after work always seemed to go quickly after dinner, and followed predominantly the same routine. Watching a few episodes from her hard drive on the tv, slumped together on the couch. He would usually go to bed after an hour, as he had to get up early for work. She was a nighthawk and would usually stay up late watching tv, always going to bed far later than she anticipated.

After another night gone by too fast, she took a moment before bed to have a cigarette outside and reflect. As she lit the smoke and dragged on it, work started to come back to her. She rubbed her face and sighed, partly due to exhaustion and stress. It did no good though. When she closed her eyes she saw the woman's body again from today, she saw the boyfriend's eyes as he looked in and saw his guilt and remorse. Try as she might she kept thinking on how the relationship between victim and suspect had ended, and thinking about her and her kind hearted man. She felt sick and upset with herself for thinking like that. But she couldn't control her thoughts sometimes, a side effect of her job she had found, always thinking the worst. She managed to finally put all thoughts of work out of her head around 2am. Suddenly feeling tired, she stumbled to bed and crashed. As she fell asleep, one final thought snuck over her before sleep took hold; she realised she would have to do it all again tomorrow. Her eyes closed and she drifted into darkness.

## THE MAN IN THE SHADOWS

He wore all black. Dark jeans the only exception. The night sky was darkest here away from the central hub of the city. The city lights close by obscured the stars, but there were no lights on the buildings. The suburb was kept mostly in darkness. Nighttime around Kings Cross was mostly a world in blackness, a few car lights flashed passed occasionally. The street lights were mostly broken or dimmed, providing only a faint yellow outline of the surroundings against the backdrop of darkness. Remaining unseen wasn't a problem. This part of town wouldn't see much expenditure on repairing them. Despite being so close to the city centre, it was largely ignored by police and government. It was the centre for drugs and prostitution in the city, for the most part the authorities turned a blind eye to crime in this area. No one ever said it, but the authorities believed it was better to leave crime in that area rather than risk it coming into their neighbourhood. He was a few streets away from the main busy strip, he was in the quiet area. There were a few addicts on the steps, occasionally a dealer on the odd corner, but as long as he didn't make eye contact they were unlikely to remember him. He stuck to rules like this to remain undetected as long as possible.

Rule number one: never be seen.

A convenience store presented an obstacle. There was a small low resolution camera at the door. It was designed to catch people as they walked in but it would also catch part of his image as he walked past. He crossed the wide street without looking, there were no cars in this part of town at this time. By avoiding alleys and the people on corners, he was able to avoid any of the criminals that would cause trouble. Any of the other criminals he supposed. His shade of justice he always knew wasn't understood. Doing the right thing wasn't always legal. All he could do was avoid detection and avoid attention. This part of town was a perfect hunting ground, it was a rare opportunity he couldn't pass up. He'd moved as soon as he found out his target would be here.

The apartment building was around the corner. He hoped his timing was right.

As he turned, he saw there was a light on the third floor across the street. There was only one car in the block that was less than a year old, the others were twenty to thirty years old, there was a driver sitting behind the wheel ready to pull away, waiting outside the building. There were a few glimpses of shadows from the apartment, the slight hum of muffled bass that could be faintly heard from the street. If he had figured right, that's where he would be.

He picked his spot. An alcove on a building across the street that looked abandoned. He approached it slowly and calmly so as to not draw the attention from the driver. The door was broken in and hadn't been repaired in a few years. There were no noises inside. He immersed himself in the shadows by the doorway. He wore a grey hooded jumper and a faded black leather jacket over to conserve warmth. A black beanie was keeping his head warm. At the same time it obscured his features. For this target he had chosen to look more haggard, he looked more the part.

He focused his attention on the building across the street. Whatever had brought a man like that to this part of town was part of something dark, and best left unfound. It was unusual for people like this to liaise directly when they needed things done or

obtained. There was usually a go between or a mule that could do it for them. It must have been something important.

He plotted his route, counted the steps and figured out the timing. Checking one last time for people in windows, cameras anywhere or any lights that could jeopardise his chance. He assessed no threats and readied himself. A positive mindset was key to anything. In his childhood in Northern Europe he had been told about the power of visualisation. He assumed his teachers would at the least frown upon the activities in which he had chosen to utilise this mantra.

There was movement and a conversation in the building. Silhouettes moved past the window. The car across the street turned on, silently. The lights were left off; the driver was trying to draw as little attention as possible. The first figure out of the door was the bodyguard, checking the coast. He held a hand up and made a signal. Then he emerged. Navy blue suit, white silk kerchief, black polished leather shoes, even in the shadows and dim light he could see the taut flesh on his face, tortured with fake tans and plastic surgery, lips that were unseemly inflated, his thin hair tightened back, whiteness matched only by the unnatural gleam of the fangs that bore through. In the darkness they seemed incandescent. Wealth had made him a grotesque caricature of a man.

He went over his plan one last time; 16 paces, stick to the wall, draw at the fifteenth.

He set off. He moved quickly.

On the thirteenth the guard turned. He drew at fourteen. The guard spun as he was knocked down.

He cornered on his target and locked eyes with him. The grey eyes widened suddenly. Panic and terror. Evil regressed back to a child. At some level, no one ever escapes from being the scared child they were growing up, afraid of the world. They hide it better, deny it to themselves, but at some level there is always something that can shock them out of their facade. The barrel of a gun being pointed at your face is one such thing.

Sixteen. He shot. The grey eyes turned white. The guard went to draw, but a shot to his right forearm crippled him. The guard shouted and dropped again.

By eighteen he was back in the darkness, moving along the wall, avoiding the street lights. He turned into an alley, turning again quickly to exit into a different street. He crossed the street, sticking to the exit route he had planned.

Within a minute, his target was legally dead, the guard was only just calling for an ambulance. The man in the shadows was gone and impossible to distinguish from any other person on the streets.