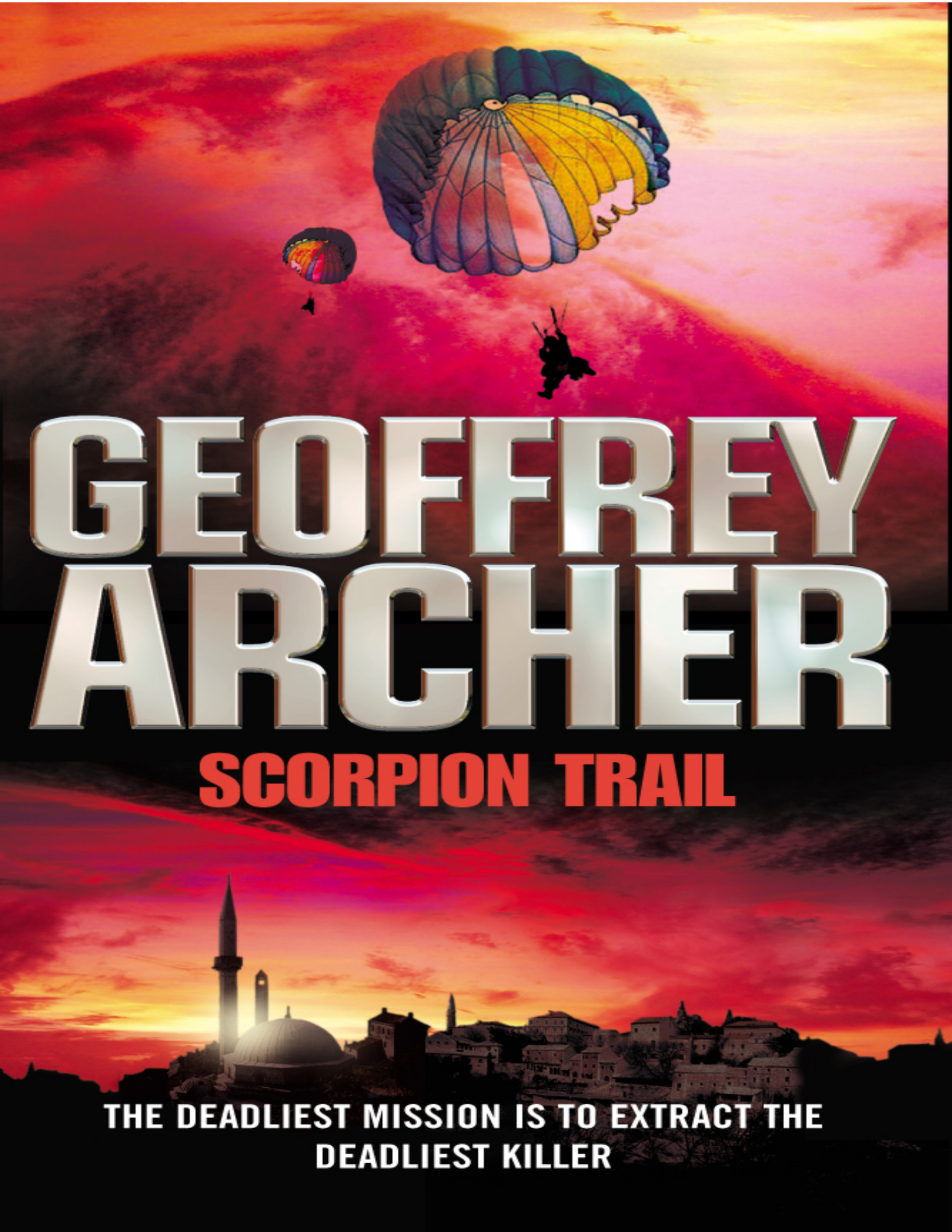


The background of the poster is a dramatic, fiery sky in shades of red, orange, and yellow. In the upper half, two parachutes are visible: a large, multi-colored one (blue, yellow, red) and a smaller one to its left. Below the large parachute, a silhouette of a person is seen falling or jumping. The title 'GEOFFREY ARCHER' is written in large, bold, metallic 3D letters. Below it, 'SCORPION TRAIL' is in a smaller, bold, red font. At the bottom, a silhouette of a city with a prominent mosque dome and minaret is visible against the horizon.

GEOFFREY ARCHER

SCORPION TRAIL

THE DEADLIEST MISSION IS TO EXTRACT THE
DEADLIEST KILLER

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About the Book

Alex Crawford has been out of M15 and the combat zone for twenty years, but now fate has thrust him back into the front line. Though he is an aid worker, the secret service minders who have protected him for so long have reactivated him: they want information about the man who perpetrated a massacre in a Muslim village in Bosnia.

His target is the most ruthless killer in the whole war zone: Milan Pravic, codename the Scorpion. And the only eyewitness to the massacre is a twelve-year-old girl whom Pravic will do anything to silence . . .

About the Author

Geoffrey Archer is the former Defence and Diplomatic Correspondent for ITN's award-winning *News at Ten* television programme. His work as a frontline broadcaster has provided him with the deep background for his thrillers – the bestselling *Shadowhunter*, *Scorpion Trail*, *Eagletrap* and *Java Spider*. A keen traveller, he now writes full time and lives with his wife and family in Surrey.

Also by Geoffrey Archer

SKY DANCER
SHADOW HUNTER
EAGLE TRAP
JAVA SPIDER
FIRE HAWK
THE LUCIFER NETWORK
THE BURMA LEGACY
DARK ANGEL

Scorpion Trail

Geoffrey Archer



To Eva, Alison
and James

'My father hath chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions.'

1 Kings Ch. 12, V. II.

One

Sunday 13th March Scotland

THE BREEZE FLICKED at the collar of his coat. The Highland airstrip was little more than a grass field with a windsock. A single-engined Cessna stood in front of a club house. Sheep grazed beyond the perimeter fence.

The foreboding that gripped Alex was irrational and sudden.

The risks hadn't worried him before. This sport was safe. Statistics proved it. So why the sense of panic, the feeling that some thread binding his world together had suddenly snapped?

The club secretary was used to dealing with worried parents. He'd claimed that the Sky Trainer 'chutes had been used two million times and never failed. Then he'd shown Alex last month's beginners alighting on the grass as if they were gulls.

'You see? Nothing to worry about.'

However, as the pilot strode towards the little Cessna, followed by the instructor and three orange-suited students, Alex had to fight the urge to shout 'stop!'

Jodie, last to board, turned to wave. Trying to reassure himself, or his stepfather?

Still time to stop him. He could run forward and . . .

Hysteria, that's what they would put it down to. They'd restrain him gently, take him to the club house and settle him with a cup of tea so the boy could get on with his life.

Alex tried a grin but couldn't move his muscles. Arms like lead, legs like jelly, tongue puffy and useless. Couldn't speak if he tried. Just that sense of disaster sweeping in like a squall.

The boy had wanted to jump since the age of fifteen. Seen it on television, the floating figure in bright, flapping nylon. The goggled grin at the camera. And the swoop away from the lens as the chute jerked the body, jiggling and jangling, feet braced for contact with the earth.

The power, the freedom, the sheer sense of *joy*. God knows, there hadn't been too much of *that* in Jodie's young life.

His mother was overprotective, but she had her reasons. She'd blanched when he'd revealed his ambition.

'Never, Jodie. Never, never!' she'd begged.

But 'never' is a word you can't say to a man, and the boy was over eighteen now. Nineteen, even. He had asked Alex for the parachuting course as a birthday present.

Kirsty hadn't spoken that morning. Just stood by the big picture window looking across at the Firth, watching the scurrying clouds and the blurs of rain on the water. Not spoken, because the words, if she'd voiced them, would have been pleas for a change of heart that had already been rejected.

Alex knew what she feared. That history would repeat itself. That she would lose her only child the same way she had lost his father.

'He'll be fine, Kay. Just fine. You'll see.'

His steady, brown eyes gave her the warm look he used to soothe women's worries, his soft voice tinted with the Lowlands inflection he'd adopted years ago as a disguise.

He stood behind her, held her shoulders and brushed his lips against her hair. He could feel the tension shooting through his fingers. He took away his hands.

'Jodie *has* to choose, Kay. You can't control his life for ever.'

He saw her tremble, and a tear mark her cheek like a scar.

'Okay, Alex?'

The prompting was from Jodie standing in the doorway, fearful that his escape from the maternal arm lock might yet fail.

'We'd better get a move on, Alex.'

Always called him by his first name. Never 'Dad', although Alex was the only 'father' Jodie had ever known. Kirsty had wanted it that way, out of respect for the dead.

They drove north over the toll bridge, the morning sun to their right struggling through the clouds and silhouetting the trapezoid ironwork of the rail link across the Forth.

Alex had never been to Scotland before events propelled him there in the 1970s. This was a simpler, more conservative community than he was used to, but he'd wanted nothing else, so long as it hid him from the men who sought to kill him.

He had grown the beard immediately, a full set, but clipped short. The simplest of masks. The job at the radar factory, the minders had arranged. All part of the back-scratching world of Defence, they'd told him. He'd be safe here. No one need ever know his past.

The hard part was being alone. Not used to it. He had always had women in his life, sometimes more than one at a time. Not just for the sex. He needed women to blather with, to lean on. Yet how could he share his life, when his recent past was so dark a secret?

Then he met Kirsty and saw the glimmer of a solution to his dilemma.

It was the firm's Christmas dance. She'd been invited by one of the staff to make up numbers at their table.

'The girl's had a tragic bereavement,' the friend confided. 'We felt it time to get her out and about again.'

Married just three years, her husband had been killed in a blizzard in the Cairngorms. Many an experienced climber had died that winter. He'd left her a widow with a nine-month-old baby.

Everything about Dermot, everything about her short marriage to him, Kirsty had locked inside her mind pledging never to forget. The memories were like a sealed room in an old castle; she denied access to everyone. Never talked about Dermot, and couldn't bear others to.

She was a pretty girl. Soft, wavy hair, scrubbed cheeks and blue eyes that glistened with never-distant tears. Alex's heart went out to her.

He began a gentle courtship, hinting that he'd also suffered a tragedy too painful to talk about. As the months slipped by and they became closer, the understanding grew that they both had parts of their lives which must remain private.

'You think she'll cope?' Jodie asked, as they passed the underemployed Rosyth dockyard to the left of the bridge. 'Maybe I'm being a bit selfish.'

'Course she'll cope,' Alex answered, slowing to pass an accident at the junction with the motorway. 'She has to get used to you doing your own thing. Anyway, when you're away at Aberdeen she has no idea what you're up to. It's just a pity she has to know about this particular happening.'

'You're right there!' Jodie nodded. University had been a merciful escape from the over-protection at home.

'I tell you, when you get back tonight, give her a big hug and tell her how great it was. Look, she's terrified because of what happened to your dad. It's understandable, for heaven's sake. But it's something she's got to get through. This jump today could even help.'

'Shock therapy for nervous mothers! I don't think so somehow.'

The rain was holding off. The day before, the instructor had said the weather would have to be appalling to stop the jump. Alex turned off the motorway and pointed the car towards the Ochil Hills.

‘Are *you* nervous?’ he asked the boy.

A moment’s pause.

‘Shit scared,’ Jodie laughed.

‘Think how *I’ll* feel, bloody watching you!’

He thought of Kirsty, wondering if she was still standing by that window, staring at the sky.

Theirs had been a marriage of convenience, but a good one. She had needed a man, to support her and her child. He had needed a woman, to share his bed and to help hide him from the predators. Affection and respect was what they’d had, rather than passion and love. A formula that had lasted nearly eighteen years.

It hadn’t been easy at first, fighting his way past her first husband’s ghost. It took months of wooing before she could even smile without a feeling of guilt. Months more before she let him make love to her.

They’d been out walking in the dunes near North Berwick, just the two of them. Jodie was being baby-sat by her mother. A bright, crystal-clear day in early summer. They’d rested in a clearing in the woods. No one else about. No chance of being surprised. Alex slipped his hand under the soft cotton of her tee-shirt, fingertips finding her nipples already hard.

Then she locked her mouth to his and unleashed the hunger that had been building inside her for weeks. She pulled him into her, climaxing quickly.

Afterwards, as they lay on their backs, she had cried. Sobs of grief at her final acknowledgement that Dermot was dead.

As Alex swung the car through the gates onto the small airfield, a Cessna pulled away from the flightline, bumping over the grass towards the strip. To their right was the club house and hangar and a small square of hard standing for cars.

‘There’s Claire,’ Jodie said. He wound down the window and gave her a ‘thumbs up’. There were as many young women as men on the course.

‘What are all these girls trying to prove?’ Alex wondered aloud.

‘You mean they should all be at home, making babies,’ Jodie retorted. ‘Come on, Alex! It’s a challenge. A big thrill. There’s no difference for men or women.’

‘I reckon it’s a substitute for sex, myself.’

‘Shows how little you know!’

Claire was walking across to them as Alex switched off the engine. She had a pretty smile.

‘You could do okay with her, if you play your cards right,’ Alex teased.

‘Piss off!’ Jodie reckoned he was already well on the way. Chatted her up in the pub last night, after the day of theory lessons at the club.

Next to them was a Range Rover with two large Labradors steaming up the windows in the back.

‘So, what are *you* going to do, Alex?’ Jodie was out of the car. ‘It’ll be a couple of hours before they take us up.’

‘Don’t know. May wander off for an hour. I’ve got the “Sunday’s” in the car, so I won’t be bored.’

‘See you later, then.’

Jodie strode towards the club hangar. Claire touched him on the arm and they went inside together.

There were more parents there, settling down to make a day of it. Mums as well as Dads in most cases. A pity Kirsty hadn’t come. Might have done her good to see other families coping.

Another lone father nodded him a greeting, wanting to talk. No, thought Alex. One of his golden rules: avoid social contact. He smiled briefly, then got purposefully back into the car and re-started the engine.

He took the main road for a mile, then turned up a narrow lane. Another mile and he was on the crest of a ridge with a view over the airfield. He parked in a gateway and as soon as the engine cut heard the bleating of sheep from the field beyond.

He wound down the window, pulled a pack of Bensons from the pocket of his Barbour and lit up. He didn't smoke much these days; it was banned in the office and Kirsty objected at home.

Golden rules. That's what he'd lived by for twenty years. Had to, so the minders had told him. The terrorists had friends everywhere. One incautious word and they could be on to him. And we wouldn't want that, would we, Mister Crawford?

Crawford. MI5 had chosen that name for him. Jarvis was the one he'd been born with. Alexander Jarvis.

They had given him the framework of a new life. Birth certificate, passport, all falsified in the name of Her Majesty. Even a driving licence, once he had settled his address.

Add the rest yourself, they'd said. Keep it simple; make up a new past to replace the one that could kill. No mixing of fact and fiction. Invent it, fix it in your head until you believe it's true, and stick to it.

And never ever reveal the truth, even to those you make love with.

Rules. He'd made some up himself. Told his neighbours he was obsessed by tyre pressures – an excuse to check under his car for bombs.

Some rules he never revealed. Superstitions. Little things he had to do if the good fairies were to keep him safe. Little things like putting his left sock on before the right. There was the daft, childish 'tide' game too.

Every Saturday, unless the weather was atrocious, he would drive to the Yellow Craig beach west of North Berwick, for a run on the sands. His marketing job at the radar factory near Edinburgh was tedious; that beach, with its huge, wide sky was freedom. Freedom from drudgery, freedom from fear. Freedom to imagine what his life might have been like if it hadn't been for that balls-up in Belfast.

He would run near to the water's edge where the sand was firmer, keeping close to the creaming froth of the waves, but never, ever letting the water touch him. If it did, he told himself, the Belfast gunmen who had his name on their 'touts' list, would find him.

Silly superstitions, but in the part of his mind he had to keep private, they mattered.

From the distant hillside, Alex watched the little plane creep across the airfield and lift into the air. Shafts of sunlight bathed the valley in patches of green gold. Rain streaked a hill to his right. Sunday traffic crawled on the road running south to Stirling. So peaceful. So safe.

'Christ! It's been twenty bloody years,' he breathed.

He'd just passed the anniversary of his escape from Ulster strapped into the back of a Hercules. You'd have thought they'd have forgotten him by now, but not according to the MI5 man he phoned once a month. The IRA still handed old photos of him to new boys going active on the mainland.

He slipped on a pair of half-moon reading specs and browsed the newspapers. His bushy brows bunched into a frown. Always did when he concentrated.

Front pages filled with pictures from hell. The blackened corpse of a child burned alive in a Bosnian village.

Massacre of the Innocents - his two papers shared the same stark headline.

The *Sunday Times* reported over forty killed in a single village called *Tulici*. Moslems, this time. Bosnians, Croats, Serbs - the divisions were confusing. They'd all been

Yugoslavs once, in a place people went to for holidays. And now they were killing each other.

It depressed him just to read about it.

He picked up *Scotland on Sunday*. On the front page, a local tragedy. Pictures of a tear-stained Edinburgh mother. Her thirteen-year-old girl had disappeared. Suggestions the child had been seen with prostitutes.

Sad world, he thought. He folded the papers, tossed them onto the back seat and slipped his glasses back into their case. Better take some exercise. He opened the door, got out and locked it out of habit.

He was average height, a little under six foot, with straight, dark brown hair and a sportsman's build. Under the thornproof coat, so stiffly waxed it was like armour, he wore brown cords and a navy pullover. This was how he liked to dress; the business suit he wore on weekdays always felt wrong.

He stuck to the road, striding along the edge of the fields, walking for twenty minutes, his mind on Kirsty and the boy.

Jodie.

'Christ almighty!'

He stopped in his tracks. His stepson's face had suddenly appeared in his mind, sharp and clear as a flash photo. It was the boy's expression. A look in his eyes that wasn't Jodie at all. Terror. Abject terror.

The image was gone again. He shook his head to try to recall it, but couldn't. Most odd. Like a burst of clairvoyance.

No believer in such phenomena, it unsettled him none the less. He stared across at the airfield, then marched to the car and headed back.

The fear he'd seen in Jodie's eyes spread in him like an infection. His heart beat unnaturally fast. He told himself to stop being daft, to rationalize this irrational sensation. Nerves – parachuting was risky and Jodie was about to do it. That's all it was.

But that wasn't all. He began to experience more weird sensations, as if he wasn't alone in the car. A feeling that Kirsty was there. He glanced behind.

This was getting stupid.

Back at the airfield, no sign of the boy. He barged into the old bi-plane hangar, where used parachutes were being tensioned on the floor for re-packing.

'Experienced jumpers have their favourite packers,' Jodie announced suddenly at his side. 'Gives a sort of feel-good factor.'

'Oh, there you are!' Alex started. The boy grinned at him, clad in an orange jump suit. No fear in those eyes.

'They pay three pounds a time. It's worth learning how to do it. Pack five 'chutes and you've earned enough for a jump.'

'You mean you intend to make a habit of this?'

'Most people get hooked,' Claire announced, joining them. 'I've only done five jumps, and it's like a drug.'

Alex eyed her. Older than Jodie. Early twenties perhaps. A broad face, eyes bright with single-mindedness. Not unattractive.

They looked so at ease, the pair of them, Alex felt his anxiety lifting.

'Oh by the way, Alex this is Claire,' Jodie said awkwardly.

He shook her hand.

There were half a dozen getting ready for their first jump. Several Jodie's age, but two in their thirties. They'd spent the last hour revising drills learned the day before. Jodie had driven himself here on Saturday.

'Two days in which to learn how to survive, falling out of a plane,' Alex mused. 'It'd take two lifetimes if it were me.'

'Time you got kitted up.' The instructor took Jodie by the arm and led him to the racks of parachute packs.

'This is when your stomach really gets going,' Claire murmured to Alex. 'But he'll be okay.'

‘What . . . what exactly does he have to do?’ Alex wanted reassurance again.

‘He’ll be on a static line. You always are for the first few. It means there’s a line attached to the plane, and as you fall away it pulls your canopy open. You don’t have to do a thing.’

‘Supposing it doesn’t open?’

‘Always does. But just in case, you carry a reserve parachute on your front.’

‘And does that open by itself too?’

‘You have to pull a handle . . . Look, don’t worry. Everybody’s so safety conscious here, you just wouldn’t believe it. Haven’t had a fatality for five years.’

It was her use of that word ‘fatality’. He sensed a hand on his shoulder. Kirsty’s hand. Not there of course. He shivered.

Jodie waddled back across the hangar, parachute packs strapped to front and back. He pulled a soft leather helmet over his head and eased a pair of goggles into place.

‘Cheer up!’ he said. ‘It’s me doing the jump, not you!’

‘You look like a phantom rapist, in that gear,’ Alex joked, trying to disguise his anxiety.

‘Thanks. Found my *métier* at last.’

‘How do you feel?’

It was a stupid question. Jodie’s face was tense. Nerves, but excitement too.

‘They say it’s the fear that gives you the buzz . . .’ he answered. ‘If that’s true, then I should have a great jump!’

The instructor strolled over.

‘Just come over here a minute Jodie,’ he said, with practised calm. ‘We’ll go through things one last time.’

He led him onto the field.

A new emotion now in Alex’s chest. Jealousy. He’d been father, brother, teacher and guardian to the boy. *He’d* been the one Jodie had trusted. Now there was someone else. Some jerk in a jump suit.

‘Are you excited for him?’ Claire asked.

‘Of course.’ His voice sounded husky.

As excited as their first time together on the stands at a Murrayfield International. As excited as the day he took the twelve-year-old on a day-long crawl through the heather to stalk Red Deer on the Monadhliath Mountains. Landmarks in a life, all as exciting as this, but none so terrifying.

Alex and Claire crossed to the fence separating the car park from the field.

He pulled out his cigarettes again and offered her one. She shook her head.

‘Did *your* family come and watch first time?’ Alex asked, tugging the smoke down into his chest.

Claire shook her head. ‘Didn’t even tell them I was doing it.’

Better that way, maybe. Better if neither he nor Kirsty had known.

Claire asked about his job.

‘Marketing. Radar. I’m an electrical engineer by trade.’

But possibly for not much longer, he omitted to say. The company was being taken over and the work ‘rationalized’. That meant redundancy, probably. Looking for volunteers, and if they didn’t get enough, they’d start naming people. He’d not told the family yet.

Maybe that explained his anxiety today. Fear about losing his job, twisted by his mind into fear for Jodie’s life. For a moment or two he almost believed it.

An engine purred high in the sky. The club’s other aircraft was up with the free-fallers. He squinted at the even greyness above. One. Two. Three and then four tiny figures tumbled from the black ‘T’ shape. Claire counted aloud to five.

‘Five seconds delay! That’s my next step. I’ve done three seconds already.’

One by one, the ‘chutes had popped open.

‘Great!’ Alex croaked. It all looked so easy. Nothing to fear. ‘Bloody great!’

They watched the canopies glide and float towards the field, the bodies beneath tugging on the steering guides.

‘Ram-air canopies,’ Claire explained. ‘Like a wing. You can get twenty-five knots horizontal speed on them.’

As they swooped to land gracefully a few feet in front of them, Claire detached herself from Alex’s side and went to greet one of the free-fallers. He only realized it was a girl when she removed her helmet and shook free a tress of chestnut hair. Claire grabbed her excitedly by the arms.

Alex lived that moment with them. Faces aglow, the world their oyster. Make the most of it, he thought.

For an instant he was Jodie’s age again. In a flash of memory, he recalled a noisy pub in Hampstead and a girl called Lorna Donohue.

Lorna, who’d caught his eye and left him breathless. A golden-haired teenager. Someone who really *had* believed in clairvoyance. They’d been lovers for just a few weeks and she’d told him they’d never be parted. Then she’d dumped him and disappeared back to college in America.

Lorna Donohue. Perhaps the only woman he’d ever truly loved. They’d met again in Belfast a decade later, quite by chance. Once more the chemistry had been instant, so explosive that time it had scarred their lives. The result for him – exile in Scotland. For her? He had no idea.

The memory faded. All in the past. The past he never dared talk about.

The pilot climbed into the little plane, followed by Jodie and the others.

‘Alex!’

Jodie waved from beside the doorway.

Alex stared back, unable to speak.

‘Alex?’

The boy looked strained, wanting a response.

‘Yes!’ he managed to shout at last. ‘Good luck!’

He clutched the fence, telling himself to be rational. Of course there was a risk. People *had* died, parachuting. But

not beginners, not on a static line.

The engine flicked into life. His last chance to run across and stop them . . .

‘Don’t be so fucking stupid!’ he growled to himself.

It was Kirsty’s fault. Paranoia must be infectious.

The aircraft began its take-off run. He waved again, a terrible, empty feeling.

It was a tight squeeze in the back of the plane. No seats. Just a bare metal floor and a gaping hole to the slipstream. Jodie was to be first out and had to kneel, gripping a webbing handle.

The Cessna banked and climbed to 2,200 feet. The instructor tapped Jodie’s shoulder, then ran his hand along the strap connecting his back-pack to a ring on the floor. All secure, all as it should be. Thumbs up.

‘Okay now,’ he yelled above the engine and the wind. ‘Into the doorway and take the bracing position.’ He gave a reassuring grin.

Jodie’s heart pounded so hard, he couldn’t speak. His mind was blank. He’d forgotten everything. Everything he’d been taught in the last two days. Gone.

Think.

Legs over the edge. Strange how it didn’t affect him, looking down at the earth two thousand feet below. Couldn’t go more than two rungs up a ladder normally.

Left hand on the sill, right on the door frame.

Good.

Turn to look at the instructor. The man grins again, gives thumbs up, his eyes asking for an acknowledgement. Jodie nods. No going back now.

Go! The signal.

Hesitation.

Go! Go!

Pushes off from the sill and the frame. Airstream hits like a gloved fist at a hundred and fifty miles an hour.

'Aaaaah!' The scream choked in his throat by the wind.
Spread arms. Count. One thousand, two thousand, three
thou . . .

Bang. The straps jerk under his groin as the 'chute opens.
Shit!

Now what. Check canopy. He strains his head back. That
beautiful dome of blue and white.

He feels sick. Doesn't know whether to laugh or cry.

'Hey! This is amazing!'

He laughs.

'Jodie!' A man's voice in his ear. 'Don't forget to steer.'

The radio. He'd forgotten about it. Another instructor was
on the ground, watching through binoculars, talking to him
on the VHF.

'Is that him?' Alex asked, craning his neck up at the sky.

'Should be,' said Claire. 'He told me he was first out.'

'God! Isn't that great?' Alex's voice cracked with relief.

'Told you it was foolproof.'

'Christ,' thought Jodie. 'Where am I?'

The field was nowhere to be seen. He pulled a line to close
a vent on the back of the canopy and began to swing.

'Pull hard on your left.' The metallic radio voice again.

He did and swung the other way.

'Now let go the guides. Straight ahead now.'

At last he saw the hangar and the windsock, and then the
orange cross on the grass which was his notional landing
point. Miles away, and he was dropping fast. He looked
straight down.

Oh, no! That bloody clump of trees they were warned
about.

He willed the canopy towards the field. Eight miles an
hour forward speed, that's what he should have in still air.
But looking at that bloody windsock, the wind was gusting
too strongly. Wasn't moving forward at all.

Ground coming up fast.

'If you go in the trees, remember legs together and cover your face. No problem.'

So reassuring, the voice in his ear. All right for him. Done it a thousand times.

O..oh! Here we go.

From across the field, the man who'd spoken on the radio watched from his van as Jodie's legs pierced the dome of green-black branches. Soon obscured by the pine foliage, all he could see was the blue and white canopy snagged and deflated above, and the vaguest hint of an orange suit close to the ground.

'Remember. Don't do anything now. Just wait for someone to come and help you down. Repeat. Don't do anything.'

He picked up the other handset and told the control room what had happened, just in case they hadn't already seen.

The radio in Jodie's ears died when he hit the trees. Twigs snagged the wires. One foot twisted against a branch and he banged a knee. Then suddenly he stopped, a metre from the ground.

'Fuck!'

Heart pounding, he jiggled in his harness, trying to shake himself free.

'Hah!' he shouted.

He was stuck but ALIVE! Elation hit him.

'I've bloody done it!'

He looked up through the trees. The plane droned into position for its next drop.

'Hah! Ha, Ha!' He laughed out loud. He'd just come down from there! Jumped from that same little plane. From that little dot in the sky.

Ten feet tall, that's what he felt. A few more jumps and he'd be onto the square canopies, the ones that zipped around like autumn leaves.

He looked down again. So close, yet so far. Except he wasn't far. Three feet at the most. Easy. For heaven's sake, he'd just jumped from two thousand feet all by himself. Couldn't let the last few inches defeat him.

He reached down to his groin and began to unbuckle the harness.

'Shit! He's in the trees!' Alex had taken an involuntary step forward as Jodie disappeared from view.

'That's bad luck. On your first jump,' Claire answered calmly.

'Isn't it dangerous?' he asked, turning to her.

'Should be okay. They tell us it's the softest landing you can get . . .'

'If you don't get stabbed by a branch.'

'See that van down the far end of the field?'

He looked where Claire was pointing.

'They've got ladders and stuff. If he's caught in the trees, they'll get him down in a wee while. He'll just stay dangling until they come. That's what they teach us.'

Alex stared harder at the van. Motionless as a rock.

'Why don't they get a move on?' he growled.

'They have to wait until the others are down. The guy in there is talking to them on the radio as they drop.'

That terrible sense of dread was back. He began to walk.

'They won't want you on the field,' Claire called after him.

Alex heard, but didn't hear. The relief at seeing Jodie's 'chute open had evaporated. Something was wrong; something desperately wrong. *He* knew it, if no one else did.

There was a little gate into the field. An instructor grabbed him as he ran through it.

'Hang on, mister. You canna go through here. There's students jumping.'

'Jodie . . .!' Alex panted, pointing. 'He's in the trees.'

'We know. We know. He'll be a'right. They'll get to him in a couple of minutes.'

‘Now! You’ve got to get him now!’

The jump-instructor saw the panic in his eyes.

‘Okay. Okay. We’ll go together. But if I tell you to do something – you do it fast. No questions asked, okay?’

Alex nodded.

‘Come on then.’ They began to run towards the copse. ‘It’s your son, is it?’

Alex felt a chill descend. Kirsty’s son, but his too in all but blood.

‘Yep. My boy.’

The jump-instructor kept a hand on his arm and checked the sky as they ran. The last of the novices was on the way down. But they were well clear. No problem.

They neared the trees. There was a smudge of orange between the trunks. Jodie’s jump suit. Feet almost touching the ground, but not quite.

In the scrub at the edge of the wood the instructor faltered. There was something not quite right. Something about the head . . .

‘Jodie!’ Alex yelled, fighting his way through the saplings. ‘Oh, God . . .’

Nothing. No response. No movement.

They heard an engine revving. The van with the ladders was coming across.

‘Jodie?’ Alex croaked, the branches slashing his face. The instructor joined him as he broke through to where Jodie dangled.

The boy’s body hung twisted in the straps, the harness half on, half off. In the struggle to free himself, a strap had slipped round his neck bending it to an angle that no neck should ever be.

‘Oh my Christ . . .’ murmured the instructor. ‘He’s tried to get himself down. You mustn’t do that – we tell them.’

Alex stood transfixed by Jodie’s startled, indignant eyes, the nightmare image that had come to him on his walk.

‘Quick! Take his weight,’ the instructor ordered.

Alex gripped the lifeless thighs and lifted. The instructor reached for Jodie's wrist and felt for a pulse. There was none.

'His neck's broken,' he said, but Alex didn't hear him, deaf to the instructor's words, and to those others who rushed to help. Jodie was dead. He'd seen it, and done nothing.

Two

Thursday 17th March

KIRSTY'S BROTHER HELPED her from the first of the Daimlers. She wore a navy blue coat over a long, black skirt, her face wraithlike beneath a veil.

Alex emerged from the second limousine and paused on the cobbled ground, watching his wife's alabaster visage turn towards the tower of the kirk. He saw her legs threaten to buckle and her brother grip her more tightly. Eighteen years before, she'd made the same journey here to bury another part of her life.

They stood to one side while the coffin was slid from the hearse. The distance between Alex and Kirsty was just a few metres on the stones, but emotionally a canyon now gaped between them.

On Sunday, when Alex had returned to the house overlooking the Forth, Kirsty had known already, her sixth sense confirmed by seeing a stranger driving their car, with Alex in the passenger seat and a Range Rover pulling up behind.

'You've killed him!' she'd whispered as he opened the door.

Ashen faced, he couldn't meet her look. He'd thanked the people who'd helped him home and bade them leave. Then the dam of Kirsty's feelings had broken.

Her accusations had found their mark. He *could* have prevented Jodie's death. He'd had the premonition after all.

Why hadn't he acted on it? Because he hadn't believed in premonitions, that's why. And anyway, it had been *Jodie's* choice to jump, *his* decision. The boy was nineteen, not nine.

Kirsty had railed at him, her charges growing wilder, beating him with her fists. She kept throwing out Dermot's name. Accused Alex of trying to erase him from her memory. Said Dermot was angry at being forgotten, angry at the way Alex had taken his place as Jodie's father. She'd even claimed Dermot had returned from the dead to take back his son.

Nonsense. Madness. She'd needed help, of a sort he couldn't give. He'd telephoned for the doctor to come, then called her brother to break the tragic news to the family.

Her sobs had cut deep, the pain of her grief compounding his own. They'd been punished, she'd said. Punished for forgetting the past. It was Alex she blamed. No one else. *He* had brought this on them. Nothing would shake her from that belief.

As the hours passed, her anger had subsided, but she'd not let Alex touch her. Their marriage was over, she'd said. It had died with Jodie.

She'd left the house that same afternoon and gone to stay with her brother.

'She doesn't want to see you again,' he'd reported two days later. 'I suppose you know that.' He was visibly distressed. They'd got on well, he and Alex.

'She's talking about moving to a retreat . . .' He'd shaken his head. 'Almost twenty years since Dermot passed away, and she's never come to terms with it. Should have had treatment long ago . . . I'm really sorry. None of *us* is blaming you, you know that.'

Alex had thanked him.

In the small, grey, stone church, Alex sat across the aisle from Kirsty, her eyes fixed on the coffin below the chancel