

Parked outside a ground-floor Victorian terrace flat, he watches Sandra West through the bay window. It's been raining on and off all morning and the car windscreen is a blur, but he sees enough to know that she and her fiancé, Charles Powell, are arguing. Powell's are angry gestures: head jutted forward, staccato arm movements. She takes his hand. Powell yanks it away.

Their observer isn't interested in their argument. The less he knows the better.

'Fuck off, Charlie boy, and let's get on with it,' he mutters, staring longingly at the heater, which is off, as is the engine. A stationary car pumping out exhaust attracts unwanted attention. 'I hate this country.'

It was a last-minute job, and if it had been for anyone else, he would have refused. A smile spreads across his unremarkable face, remembering the text message *House clearance*, followed by a name and address. He'd done a double take, mistaking Buckingham *Place* for *Palace*, until he saw the Brighton postcode. It came through as he was dragging the Russian woman into a cold storage unit on the outskirts of Moscow. Distracted for a

moment, the bitch had bitten his wrist. He'd almost gouged her eye out to force her to let go.

Peeling back a leather glove, he prods the swollen skin around the semi-circular teeth marks and inhales the pain, then exhales slowly as he folds the leather back into position. Eyes on his target again, Powell disappears from view, leaving the woman dabbing a tissue to her blotchy face. Maybe he's finally leaving.

No such luck. The pigeon-chested beanpole reappears, waving a phone in West's face. She takes it, dials, speaks. The call is over quickly. Must have gone to voicemail. Neither of them has looked out into the street, so he's pretty sure they haven't reported a strange man watching them from a Ford Fiesta.

Bored, he swipes his thumb across his phone's screen and finds the photos of the Russian, Marta Ramazanova. He enlarges them to get a better look. Nice work. Artistic. Shame West's death has to look like an accident. Takes all the fun out of it.

He looks up. The front door opens, and Powell appears in a beige mac. It's still pissing down, so he opens an umbrella and strides off towards the town centre.

'About bloody time.'

The assassin waits exactly five minutes to make sure Powell doesn't change his mind.

With the peak of his unbranded baseball cap pulled low over his face, he leaves the car in a standard black parka and strolls down a narrow path that leads to a back lane running the length of the terrace. He's average height and works hard at being forgettable. His only identifying mark is on his neck which is why he always wears shirts with collars.

An elderly woman in a Barbour bucket hat and jacket passes him, clutching a stick in one hand and a lead attached to a shivering miniature poodle in the other.

'Number twos, there's a good boy, do number twos,' says the woman to her dog, and neither pay the stranger the slightest attention.

The ground-floor flat has exclusive access to a small rear garden. Running atop the fence is a lattice and through one of the little square holes he sees a waterlogged lawn and some wind-blown daffodils. The flats above are empty, their occupants at work. The bedroom looks onto the garden and the ceiling light is switched on, which makes it easy for him to see she is packing a suitcase, moving back and forth in a dazed, mechanical way between a wardrobe and the case on the bed.

The garden gate has an easily picked lock. He opens the gate slowly, wary of rusty hinges, and moves hastily to the back door, taking care to step on the square paving stones so he doesn't leave footprints in the soggy lawn. The rear French door has an old-fashioned turn-key lock. He tests the handle and finds the door is unlocked. He sighs. She's making it too easy. He covers each boot with pale blue, plastic booties and enters. He notices Powell's forgotten Cabinet Office security pass on the workbench by the kettle.

Tempting. But he doesn't take it.

From the next room, he hears sniffing. Cranes his neck just enough to see West, her back to him, bent over her suitcase, reflected in the mirrored wardrobe. Out of sight, he pulls off his cap which he replaces with a ski mask. He readies the syringe of suxamethonium chloride and steps through the doorway.

At that moment, West looks up. In the mirror she sees a man behind her in a ski mask. She freezes. They often do. He moves quickly. Grabbing her from behind, he plunges the needle into her neck. She struggles, thrashes, kicks him, tries to pull the syringe away. Their eyes meet in the mirror, hers wide with terror. She's feeling it now, the gradual paralysis, her arms and

legs turning to jelly. Too late, she tries to scream. Her tongue and jaw won't co-operate. A gurgle, nothing more.

He lays her on the bed next to the suitcase she will never use, then surveys the wardrobe. One side is filled with Powell's stuff; on the other, hers. His client's instructions were very clear. So instead of leaving his usual signature, he will have to be satisfied with a small theatrical touch: a suicide using the ties of the man who drove her to it. He picks out a navy-blue tie with diagonal stripes. Then a sky blue one with white spots, then red with navy spots, red and blue stripes, plain royal blue and, finally, a grey Prince of Wales check. He ties them together and creates a hangman's noose which he pulls over West's head and tightens around her neck. West watches, eyes watery, powerless, her muscles incapable of movement, her breathing so shallow she will be dead soon anyway.

Now for the tricky bit. West probably only weighs fifty-five, fifty-six kilos, but she can't support herself. He manages to get her on a chair, and, using one knee to keep her upright, he throws the other end of the make-shift rope through the ceiling light fitting, a wrought iron thing with candle-shaped lights. He pulls down hard. The light fitting holds. He keeps tugging at the rope until Sandra is dragged up to stand. She makes sucking noises. The next yank lifts her onto tiptoes. With the next, her feet are off the ground. Guttural choking, spittle dribbling. There's an unexpected flutter of her eyelids. Her face swells, turns puce.

When he has her raised a foot from the floor, he ties off the rope to the fitting, then pushes the chair away. It topples on its side, as if she has kicked it away. Stepping back, he admires his handiwork for a moment. He smooths down the duvet's surface, checks he's left nothing incriminating behind, and, having removed the ski mask and pulled on his cap, he leaves the way he came.

Inside his rental car he uses a burner phone purchased at Heathrow Airport to dial Powell's mobile.

'Charles Powell?' The assassin adopts a neutral British accent.

'Yes, who is this?'

'A word of warning. Tell anyone, particularly the police, what you *think* you know about the chancellor, and you will be next.'

'Next?'

The killer cuts the connection. He drives away, dropping the phone into a public bin.