

THE SHADOW PROJECT

Scott Mariani grew up in St Andrews, Scotland. He studied Modern Languages at Oxford and went on to work as a translator, a professional musician, a pistol shooting instructor and a freelance journalist before becoming a full-time writer. After spending several years in Italy and France, Scott discovered his secluded writer's haven in the wilds of west Wales, a 1830s country house complete with rambling woodland and a secret passage. When he isn't writing, Scott enjoys jazz, movies, classic motorcycles and astronomy. His books have sold worldwide and he is currently working on an exciting new vampire series, to be published by AVON in summer 2010.

To find out more about Scott Mariani go to www.scottmariani.com

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SCOTT MARIANI

The Shadow Project

AVON

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permission of the publishers.

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Technological progress is like an axe in the hands of a pathological criminal.

Albert Einstein

The dogma of Christianity gets worn away before the advances of science.

Adolf Hitler

Chapter One

The Sonoran Desert

An hour's drive from Maricopa, Arizona

Early May

Rock and dust, scrub and cactus and the blinding white sun beating down. Nobody ever came out here.

The dust from two off-road vehicles drifted upwards into the still air as they bounced and lurched across the arid wilderness. The big silver Subaru 4x4 in front crunched to a halt on the stones, doors opened and three men got out.

One of them didn't want to be there. He stood out from the other two, and not just because he was the only Japanese guy and they were white Europeans. He was also the only one with a .45 auto to the back of his head and his wrists bound behind his back. Tape, not cord. Cord would leave a mark, and his captors didn't want that. A length of the same silver duct tape was pressed firmly to his face, muffling his protests. The T-shirt he was wearing was damp with sweat.

His captors knew his name – Michio Miyazaki – and that he was a scientist. Beyond that, it wasn't their concern why this was happening to him.

The bright red Jeep Cherokee following the Subaru pulled up alongside. Its driver killed the engine, stepped down, ran

her fingers through her blonde hair and wiped the sweat on her jeans. There was no sound except the ticking of hot metal and the feeble protests of the prisoner as the two men started marching him away from the vehicles.

The Jeep was Miyazaki's, as was the technical equipment in the back. When this was over, it would look as though the scientist had been out here on a research trip, collecting samples. That fitted his profile. He was unmarried, single, no kids, tended to keep to himself, and he wasn't a well man. Nobody would question what was about to take place.

The woman walked around to the passenger side of the Jeep, opened the door and lifted out the small container she'd been riding uncomfortably beside through the desert. This was one item that didn't belong to Miyazaki. It was a pale blue plastic lunchbox, with tiny air holes pricked in the top. What was inside weighed almost nothing. The woman held it away from her at arm's length. With her other hand she grabbed a shoulder bag from the footwell, then shut the Jeep door and trotted to catch up with the others. As she joined them she could hear the prisoner pleading with them through his gag.

They all ignored him.

'This'll be fine,' the taller of the two white men said in their own language, glancing around him. The stocky guy with the muscles straining under his cotton shirt kept the .45 aimed at Miyazaki's head.

The woman set the container down on the ground and stepped back, happy to get some distance from it. She reached into the shoulder bag and pulled out a pair of thick leather gauntlets. Tossed the right glove to her colleague, then the left.

'You do it,' she said. 'I'm not touching that thing.'

The tall man pulled on the gloves. The one with the gun swept his foot out and Miyazaki crumpled on his back into

the dirt. He was crying now, tears streaking the dust on his face.

The tall man walked over to the container and squatted down beside it. The others watched as, very carefully, he unsnapped the lid, lifted a corner, peered inside, dipped his gloved hand into the container and stood up with the thing in his fist.

Miyazaki started struggling and protesting with renewed energy when he saw the glistening brown scorpion trapped between the man's fingers. He'd spent his life deeply involved in one small specialised corner of science, but he had enough knowledge of other disciplines to know that these people had done their research well. This was an Arizona bark scorpion, one of the most lethal arachnids on the planet.

Miyazaki couldn't take his eyes from the creature as the tall man walked towards him with a smile. He struggled against his bonds as the scorpion came closer and closer. He could see it wriggling, the long tail lashing out, the stinger turgid with venom. Now it was right over him, six inches above his heaving chest. He could feel his heart pounding dangerously fast.

The man dropped it on him.

The scorpion landed on its feet and froze, as if cautiously assessing its new surroundings. Miyazaki began to gibber, every muscle in his body racked tight as he strained to see the thing that was perched on his torso.

But the scorpion was more interested in flight. It scuttled away, slithered down his ribs and dropped down onto the sand.

'Shit.' The tall man stepped quickly over to where the creature was trying to dig itself in, and scooped it back up. Sand ran out from between his fingers as he clenched the scorpion tightly in his palm.

‘Try again,’ the woman said.

The tall man nodded. He admired the creature. These things were tough. They’d been around for millions of years, unchanged, perfect. And they’d still be around long after humankind had obliterated itself. He didn’t want to harm it, just to stress it a little and activate its primal defence mechanisms. He squeezed hard and gave it a shake, feeling its hard carapace wriggle through the glove. Then he held it over Miyazaki’s exposed neck, where sweat was pooling in the hollow at the base of his throat, and let it drop a second time.

This time the creature landed on Miyazaki’s skin with its defences on full alert, poised to strike. The stinger lashed out, faster than a rattlesnake, and found its mark.

The scientist screamed behind the tape and thrashed on the sand as the creature scuttled away. His captors could see where the scorpion had stung him, a livid pin-prick already swelling on his neck three-quarters of an inch from the jugular artery.

‘That should do it,’ the woman said over the muffled cries of terror.

‘Gonna kill the fucking thing now,’ said the stocky guy, watching the scorpion as it ran towards the cover of the rocks. He pointed the pistol.

The woman slapped his arm down. ‘No shooting.’

‘Yeah, leave it be,’ the tall one said.

The stocky guy gave a shrug and put the pistol away. They looked down at the prisoner. His movements were already slowing, eyes rolling back in his head as the toxic shock started shutting down his weak heart. After another minute he wasn’t convulsing or kicking any more. His arched back sank down against the sand, his head lolled to one side and stayed there.

The tall man kneeled down next to the body and used a clasp knife to cut the tape from the dead man's wrists. Once that was done, he ripped away the gag.

'Now let's dress this thing up to look how it's meant to,' the woman said.

*The Picos de Europa mountain range
Northern coast of Spain
Two days later*

The killers set out early. Seven in the morning, the low sun was glinting over the mountain peaks.

They'd driven up until they ran out of track. It was a long way down to the tree line. The cold breeze buffeted the van and made it hard to open the door. The woman stepped down from the vehicle and shivered. Reaching for the Minolta binoculars that hung from her neck, she scanned the mountainside, up, down, left and right. Nothing but rocks and shrubs.

Her two colleagues got out and walked around the van to join her. 'OK?' the tall man asked her without a smile.

'Let's get it done.' She stepped over to the back of the van, opened up the back doors.

Julia Goodman blinked as the sunlight hit her eyes. Her heart was in her mouth and her hands wouldn't stop shaking. She knew what was coming. She'd known it for days. Just not how they'd do it.

'Let's go,' the woman said.

'Please.' Julia had repeated that word so often, it seemed to have lost all meaning. But all she could do was keep saying it and hope. Her eyes brimmed with tears. 'Please.'

The woman looked at her impassively.

'I'm so sorry.' Julia had been saying that a lot, too. 'I'm sorry I couldn't make it work. I—'

‘Save your breath.’

With a last glance around them, the two men dragged Julia from the van. She struggled and kicked, but they held her tight and her cries vanished in the wind.

The woman walked around to the side door, slid it open and yanked out the quilted jacket, the hiking boots, the rucksack. Everything inside it had been checked and double-checked, right down to the keys to the blue Renault Espace that had been leased in the university lecturer’s name two months earlier. The Renault had already been transported to a hidden storage facility nearby. By the time the accident was reported, the car would be up here waiting for the police to find it.

Again, they’d thought of everything. They always did, every detail. It was what they were paid for.

The woman carried the gear over to Julia and dumped it at her feet. ‘Put it on.’

Julia obeyed, weeping uncontrollably and shaking so badly she could barely tie the bootlaces.

‘Please,’ she kept saying. ‘Please.’

‘You want to die some other way?’

‘I don’t want to die,’ she sobbed. She collapsed to her knees and sank down to the stony ground. ‘I don’t.’

The men yanked her up by the arms and held her steady as the woman grabbed the rucksack and looped the straps around her arms, then walked round to her front and did up the fastenings. Julia was sagging at the knees, too weak to fight, making little whimpering sounds.

‘See?’ the woman told her. ‘If you don’t fight it, it’ll be much easier.’

Twenty yards from where they were parked, the ground sloped sharply down to the edge of the precipice. The woman and the two men kept a tight hold of Julia as they walked her in that direction.

‘Please don’t do this,’ Julia pleaded desperately. ‘I’ll keep trying. I’ll work harder. I can make it work. I know I can. Give me another chance. Some more time. I—’

‘Shut it,’ the tall man commanded, and she did.

Then, with a sudden surge of energy, she ripped free of their grip. The stocky guy made a grab for her hair. She lashed out with a hiking boot, and he yelled in pain as the steel toecap caught his shin. Then she was dashing away from them, scrambling over the rocks.

She didn’t get far before they caught up with her and dragged her back. Ten yards to the edge. Five. Three. A sheer, vertiginous, thousand-foot drop below. The wind was whipping her hair across her face, sticking to her tears. She let out a cry when she looked down.

‘Nice view from up here,’ said the stocky guy, still grimacing with the pain in his shin. Then three strong pairs of hands shoved her hard down the slope towards the edge. She lost her footing and stumbled and rolled, grasping for stones and rocks, anything that would halt her momentum as she slithered towards the drop. Her fingertips found a crack in the rock, and suddenly she stopped sliding and was dangling with her legs in space. Her eyes were crazed, teeth bared, her breathing rapid.

‘Damn,’ the woman breathed. ‘Why do they always make things difficult?’

‘Don’t let me fall,’ Julia implored them. ‘Help me. Please. Don’t let me die.’

‘Could just leave her,’ the tall man said. ‘She won’t hang on forever.’

The woman shook her head. ‘I want to see her go over.’ She thought about the options. Too risky to scramble down the slope towards the edge and kick her hands loose. A long stick would work, but there wasn’t one around. She saw a

jagged stone and picked it up. Hefted it in her hand. It was about the right size and weight.

‘No,’ Julia quavered.

The woman lobbed the stone. It caught Julia on the cheekbone. She let go of the rock and went tumbling into empty space with a guttural shriek that died away as she spun and cartwheeled down to the rocks below.

Four long, drawn-out seconds later, the scream was cut short along with Julia Goodman’s life.

Then the killers returned calmly, quietly, to the van, thinking about what to do with the rest of the day.

Chapter Two

Le Val Tactical Training Unit

Near Valognes, Normandy

Six weeks later

Ben Hope was sitting at his desk facing a mountain of papers, letters, contracts, insurance policies and bank statements, feeling impatience mounting up inside him and wanting to dash the whole lot to the floor when his radio beeped and Raymond on the security gate informed him that the first of the new clients had arrived.

A few seconds later, a gleaming black Porsche Boxster roared into the yard. It circled between the buildings and let out two long blasts of its horn.

‘Here comes Rollickin’ Holligan,’ said Jeff Dekker from his desk on the opposite side of the office and looking at his watch. ‘Right on time.’ Jeff was a former officer of the SBS, the Royal Navy’s Special Forces regiment, and Ben’s right-hand man at Le Val.

Ben threw a glance at his friend and felt like saying something about respecting clients, but kept his mouth shut. The truth was, he didn’t like Rupert Shannon any more than Jeff did, and had been glad that almost two months had passed without the guy turning up. But business was business, and

the ex-Para and his new six-man bodyguard team had booked Le Val for an intensive two-day refresher course in VIP close protection after landing some new contract in Switzerland. That was what Ben did, pass on his special skills to men like Shannon, so that vulnerable people would be kept safe and protected. His opinion of the guy didn't matter.

Ben and Jeff both got up from their desks and walked over to the window.

'I was getting bored of paperwork anyway,' Jeff said, rubbing his hands together. 'Just think. This time next week I'll be in Nice, basking on a beach with a frosted glass in my hand. You should come along. Five days of doing nothing but sitting watching the girls go by.'

'And no paperwork,' Ben said with a smile.

Jeff rolled his eyes. 'Can't bloody wait.'

'It's been a busy time. You deserve a holiday.'

'So do you. The place is closing down for that week anyway.'

Ben laughed. 'Only so that I can catch up on all the other things that need doing around here.'

They watched through the window as the Porsche parked up across the yard, near the small bungalow that Ben had built for Jeff next to the trainee accommodation block. The early evening sunlight glittered off the car's sleek bodywork and tinted windows. The driver's door swung open and Rupert Shannon climbed out wearing aviator shades, a shiny black leather jacket and a wide grin. The breeze ruffled his sandy hair and he quickly patted it back into place as he glanced around him.

Jeff shook his head in disgust. 'Will you take a look at this guy? If the fucker was made of chocolate, he'd eat himself.'

Ben was about to head for the door to greet their new arrival, when the Porsche's passenger door opened.

‘Shit,’ Jeff muttered. ‘I had a feeling she’d be with him.’

Ben followed Jeff’s gaze and saw Brooke Marcel get out and walk around the side of the car. Her thick auburn hair was tied loosely back from her face, and she was wearing jeans and a plain white T-shirt that hugged her slim figure. She looked as good as she always did, but today Ben thought he could see a frown on her face, a certain self-consciousness in her body language. She looked down at her feet a couple of times as she followed Shannon across the yard towards the office building. Seemed to be trailing behind, holding back. It wasn’t like her.

‘Why is Brooke here?’ Ben murmured. ‘She’s not needed for this course. This is purely practical. Shannon doesn’t need lectures in hostage psychology.’

Jeff didn’t say anything.

‘And what’s she doing with him?’ Ben added.

Jeff gave a derisory snort. ‘Can’t you tell?’

‘They’re—’

‘Yup. Looks like it. They’re an item.’

‘Since when?’

‘Not sure. Since the last course, I think. I’d noticed they were spending a lot of time together. I was going to tell you. Must have slipped my mind. Or maybe I just didn’t want it to happen. Denial, or something.’

Ben watched her approach. Dr Brooke Marcel. Expert in hostage psychology, with an alphabet of letters after her name. Based in London, she’d spent years as a consultant to specialised police and military units, but was recently spending more and more time lecturing at Le Val. She was thirty-five, maybe thirty-six. He suddenly realised that maybe he didn’t know her as well as he’d thought.

‘No reaction?’ Jeff asked, watching him closely.

‘Not my business,’ Ben said.

‘Come on. There’s always been something between you

two. All those nights sitting together in the kitchen, drinking wine, listening to music. Going for walks. Don't act like you don't care.'

'There's never been anything going on between me and Brooke. Only in your head.'

'I don't know what she sees in that pumped-up twit, anyway. You're more her type.'

Ben ignored that. 'He is what he is, but he's paying a lot of money for this course.'

'I get it. You want me to be nice to the bastard.'

'Too much to ask?'

Jeff kept his eyes on Shannon as he chewed it over. 'It just might be, yeah.'

'Remember what we agreed, Jeff,' Ben said. 'At Le Val we always respect our clients, no matter what. OK?' But he didn't like the lecturing way it came out.

'Even the arseholes.'

'*Especially* the arseholes.' Ben walked over to the door, opened it and stepped out just as Shannon reached the building. Jeff followed him outside, muttering something that Ben didn't catch.

Shannon's grin broadened as he greeted them. He was a big guy. At six-three he was four inches taller than Ben, probably fifty pounds heavier, about five years younger. He raised his hand to his face and whipped off the shades.

'Ciao, Jeff, ciao, Benjamin,' he brayed at them. 'How's it going, boys?'

'It's Benedict, not Benjamin. And you can call me Ben.' Not a great start, he thought.

Shannon grunted with a dismissive gesture. 'Whatever. Benedict, Benjamin, Ben, it's all the same to me.'

Ben could feel Jeff bristling beside him. He threw him a quick warning glance. *Respect the client, no matter what.*

Brooke came up behind Shannon. ‘Hello, Ben,’ she said softly, and smiled.

‘Hi, Brooke.’ Ben patted her arm affectionately, like he always did. Shannon noticed it, and cleared his throat.

‘The rest of the guys should be arriving soon,’ he said.

‘Fine. The accommodation’s ready for you all.’ Ben pointed over at the trainees’ block, across the yard from the main farmhouse.

‘I won’t be kipping here,’ Shannon said. He put a big arm around Brooke’s shoulders and pulled her tightly against his side. ‘Us two are booked into the Cour Du Château. This little lady deserves a bit more luxury than this old place has to offer.’

‘That’s miles away,’ Ben said.

Shannon grinned. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll be here bright and early in the morning. Always punctual.’

‘Nice wheels, Rupert,’ Jeff said dryly, motioning towards the Porsche.

Shannon’s eyes twinkled. ‘Oh yes. I’ve hit the fucking jackpot this time.’

‘So this would be the contract you were telling me about,’ Ben said.

Shannon nodded. ‘You don’t know the half of it, Benjamin. Steiner Industries. Protecting the head honcho himself, Maximilian Steiner.’

‘Kidnap threat?’

‘One attempt so far,’ Shannon said. ‘Failed, but only just. What d’you expect? The guy’s a billionaire, for Christ’s sakes. Have I hit paydirt, or what? He’s paying one point two million for this gig. And there’s a shitload more to come. You should see the place we’re going.’

‘Congratulations, Rupert,’ Ben said. ‘Looks like this new business venture of yours is really taking off.’

‘You bet your arse it is. And this is just the beginning, pal. I’ve been looking at new offices. Docklands, right on the river, three floors. PA, receptionists, you name it, the works.’

‘Here’s my advice, though,’ Ben said. ‘I know you’re flush from getting this Steiner contract. That’s great. I’m pleased for you. But take it easy. Don’t go mad with it. This is a tough business, and you never know what’s round the corner.’

Shannon reddened. ‘Listen to this guy. Are you for real, Hope?’

‘I just meant, be careful, that’s all. Don’t go spending it all at once, before you’ve even earned it.’

Shannon laughed and slapped him on the arm. ‘You sound like my fucking nanny. You know what your problem is? You’re getting old and slow.’

‘Forty next birthday,’ Ben said. ‘Be dead soon.’

‘Fucking forty,’ Shannon guffawed. ‘Five years from now you’ll be just another flabby-arsed, ulcer-ridden businessman sitting behind a desk.’

‘You might be right,’ Ben said. Now he could sense indignation radiating from Jeff in waves. Couldn’t say he blamed him.

Shannon grinned down at Brooke and squeezed her to his side. ‘Now why don’t we see about heading back to the hotel and grab some nosh?’

‘Any plans for tomorrow?’ Ben asked her.

She shrugged. ‘Not really.’

‘We’ll be doing kidnap simulation exercises in the morning. How’d you feel about coming along and playing the principal?’

‘Sounds fun,’ she smiled. ‘Looking forward to it.’