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“Filled with Huff’s trademark action and threads of faith, this story brings to mind a cross between Jack Reacher and *Mission: Impossible*. It’s an adrenaline-laced adventure that will keep the pages turning with every twist. Highly recommended even if this is the first book of the series you pick up.”

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Praise for the Shepherd Suspense Series

“An action-packed nail-biter from beginning to end, filled with enough twists and turns to put *24* and Jack Bauer to shame! I couldn’t put it down. Many thanks to Andrew for hours of entertainment and frantic page turning.”

LYNETTE EASON, best-selling, award-winning author of
the Blue Justice series

“This solid debut novel presents a complex and likable man who knows he’s forgiven but still struggles to reckon with his life before meeting Christ.”

WORLD MAGAZINE

“*A Cross to Kill* is both a simply riveting story of suspense and the moral quandaries facing anyone choosing to follow the path of peace in a violent and hostile world.”

MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW

“In the tradition of Ted Dekker and Frank Peretti, *Cross Shadow* is a strong, taut thriller that retains a Christian sense of optimism and hope while acknowledging the existence of great evil in the world. Huff raises the stakes on every page all the way through the white-knuckle finale—like watching an action movie through the written word.”

KYLE MANN, editor in chief of *The Babylon Bee* and author of *How to Be a Perfect Christian*

“Andrew Huff’s writing is as fast-paced and tight as his enticing story lines. Masterfully balancing a well-developed plot with a cast of characters you feel like you’ve known forever, Huff creates one page-turner after another in his Shepherd Suspense trilogy. He may be a new author, but his talented word-spinning is anything but novice and will linger long in the reader’s subconscious.”

BETSY ST. AMANT HADDOX, author of *All’s Fair in Love and Cupcakes*

SHEPHERD SUSPENSE NOVELS

A Cross to Kill

Cross Shadow

Right Cross

A SHEPHERD SUSPENSE NOVEL • #3

RIGHT CROSS



ANDREW HUFF



KREGEL
PUBLICATIONS

Right Cross

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CHAPTER ONE

MILLIONS OF PEOPLE witnessed the arrest of John Cross, and not one of them stepped in to stop it. The video had been captured live during a campaign event in Pontefract, England, for popular but beleaguered Member of Parliament Spencer Lakeman. It played on repeat in Christine Lewis's mind over the twenty-four-hour period from John's incarceration to her arrival at Her Majesty's Prison Wakefield.

Apparent in the video, and confirmed by news outlets not long after his arrest, was John's intoxicated state as he attacked Lakeman from behind. The hammer he swung at the MP's head missed by a wide margin, uncharacteristic of the man who held all his country's highest marksman badges, and he wasn't given the chance to make up for it, as Lakeman's security detail wrestled him to the ground.

The second half of the crowdsourced video evidence of John's attempted murder was the most disturbing to Christine. His words echoed in her ears, a slurred monologue of dissidence and conspiracy theory mixed with prophetic buzzwords. To Christine he sounded hurt and confused, but to the rest of the world like a demented theocrat. How had he fallen so far so fast? Had his short stint as a devoted Baptist pastor been a ruse all along?

"New information today regarding the attack on a member of Parliament by an American extremist," announced every news program in the late hours following John's imprisonment. Christine's team received the same bits of information to report, though she was the only one

who knew the truth. John Jones was not his real name, auditor not his real profession, and Rochester, Minnesota, not his hometown. Even in a descent into madness, John still exhibited skill in hiding his identity under layers of verifiable lies.

By divine providence, Christine was already on a scheduled leave from manning the desk of her UNN weeknight newscast, *The Briefing*, her colleague Keaton Clark filling in as host. Her intention of a staycation focused on physical rest and spiritual rejuvenation was waylaid before it even began as the word came over the wire. Instead of a scheduled dinner with Park Han, the women's Bible study leader at her church, Christine arranged transportation to JFK and caught the first available flight crossing the Atlantic. It took long enough to arrange the visit with John through a contact of hers with Scotland Yard that she set a record for consecutive hours awake.

She hardly believed the video was the first time she'd seen John in the months following their separation in the Dallas/Fort Worth airport. Their agreement to pursue new paths alone, she in cable news and he away from ministry, was mutual, though looking back, Christine had assumed temporary. They'd traded a few phone calls, texted nearly daily, but never had a chance to reconnect in person. And weeks ago, John's texts had become sparse and bordered on bizarre. His last text, sent a month earlier, was a cryptic mixture of apology and apocalypse. Looking back, she wondered if the message had been a cry for help.

The quaint buildings of Wakefield disappeared, replaced by a stark yellow brick wall blocking the prison from view. Christine stared out the window of the taxi, though she cared little for the scenery. She had no attention to spare as she thought of John, Rural Grove Baptist Church, the attempted attack in Washington, the clearing her stepbrother of murder in Texas, and how, in the midst of it all, she'd missed any signals of John's descent into madness.

Recalling every past moment caused each subsequent step from the prison entrance to the visiting room to pass by in a blur. A loud buzz from beyond the door finally shook her from her trance, and for the first time she noticed both doors in the room were painted bright

green. The sandy walls and navy carpet did little to distract from the bold choice.

The eccentric design of the room's interior lost any meaning as the opposite door opened and John stepped through. If he had a guard escort, Christine didn't notice. Her eyes remained transfixed on his visage.

His hair threatened to fall back into his eyes without constant attention, and the hair on his chin could officially be referred to as a beard. His skin was in dire need of care. Sorrow etched wrinkles under his eyes.

Or was it anger?

John sat in the only other chair and placed his hands, bound at the wrist, on the table between them. The orange jumpsuit tightened against his chest as he took controlled breaths. He stared at her, or at least in her direction, his face devoid of any tells.

A full minute passed without a word between them. Christine assumed they were being recorded, so she'd come with prepared remarks. But now that she was in the room, she didn't know what to say.

"John, I—"

"Save it."

The coldness in his voice startled her. He wasn't angry, but worse: indifferent. She swallowed the anguish rising in her throat. "So you're not going to tell me what happened?"

"You work in news, so you already know."

"That's not what I mean."

John finally glanced away from her, the hint of a smile playing at the corner of his lips. "Oh, so now you care?"

His remark cut through her defenses, and she let out a surprised gasp as she dropped her gaze. Where was this coming from? No conversation or text sprang to mind that would help explain his animosity toward her. As far as she was aware, their separation had been amicable.

"I don't understand," she said before regaining his eye contact. "What about everyone back home? I mean, I know you stepped down, but I thought you would stay." She kept her references to Lori Johnson

and the other congregants at Rural Grove Baptist Church vague for the sake of anyone listening in.

“With those freaks?” He guffawed. “Get a grip, Christine. It was all a sham. And you know it.”

All of it? What was he saying? The reality of John Cross’s descent into apostasy was dawning. She frowned as she folded her arms. “No, John, I don’t know it. Why don’t you enlighten me?”

Scowling, he leaned over his cuffed hands. “The man you met two years ago was a fraud. You knew that. I used the opportunity to lie low, convince the agency I wasn’t a threat. This is the real me. The man who doesn’t buy into any of that Jesus Christ bull—”

Christine refused to succumb to her emotions as John, filling his words with expletives, ridiculed the ideas of true life change, meaning and purpose, and love.

She interrupted before he could add another colorful adjective to the list. “So it meant nothing? The last two years. Everything you’ve been through, everything you’ve done. And us. It was all a lie?”

His eyes narrowed. “Isn’t that what I do best?”

Christine flinched at the reminder of the accusations she’d flung at him. She’d grown in her walk with the Lord since then and now understood her expectations for him had lacked grace. But was it too late? Had the rift been large enough for the man she knew to fall through?

A loud buzz behind him prevented Christine from diving into the deep well of questions. A guard entered the room and hoisted John from the chair. Christine jumped to her feet and held out her hand. “John, I’m praying for you.”

The guard paused long enough for John to roll his eyes, then they both disappeared into the hallway.



“Cappuccino for Beth!”

A short woman wearing a knit cap respond to the barista’s call.

Christine's gaze bounced around the large café, noting other patrons and décor, but her mind retained none of the information as she replayed her conversation with John over and over in her mind.

None of it made sense. John had been so convinced of his newfound faith in Jesus Christ that he'd left the CIA and eventually found himself as the pastor of a small community of believers in Mechanicsville, Virginia. He'd stepped down as the pastor of Rural Grove only after realizing he'd accepted the position too early in his new life, slowing down to focus on his own spiritual and personal growth. How had he put it?

"I need time to get to know the new John Cross."

It seemed the time spent only let the old John Cross back into his life. And yet . . .

Christine couldn't help but ask questions. And not just "Why?" but the entire spectrum of information-gathering questions at her disposal. None of the answers she sought regarded John's attack on Lake-man but, rather, what she suspected to be the root cause of his actions: his denunciation of his transformed life.

There it was. The nagging question in the back of her mind. The one she wouldn't be able to shake until she tracked down the answer. The one she'd chased in the car ride from the prison to the café where she was refueling for her trip back to the States.

Was he completely gone?

John's malevolent outburst lacked two important details. He neither directed his vitriol at her personally nor made any specific denials of the Christian faith. Her mind burned under the weight of those two specifics.

Maybe the answer was no, he wasn't completely lost. This was only a valley, and perhaps the end result of this experience would be John's ascent back to where he was when they'd parted in Texas. She would certainly pray for it.

But then again . . .

Christine closed her eyes from wandering about as the left side of her brain took over. Speculating about a revival in John's heart was

fruitless. It didn't mean she wouldn't pray, but despite the lingering questions, she suspected the truth was standing right in front of her, as it was prone to do.

The John she knew was gone. The one she'd never known was back. And as of right now, nothing could change that.

"Flat White at the bar for Christine," announced a British voice.

Her eyes fluttered open, and she raised her foot to take a step toward the counter. Her body froze. All questions concerning John faded into oblivion, leaving only a single thought behind.

I know her.

The woman in the knit cap? No, not her. Christine dismissed each person in the café through process of elimination. None were familiar. It was someone else. Someone who just walked out the door.

Ignoring the barista's second proclamation of her readied order, she headed for the exit. The coffee shop occupied the corner of a cute brick building, matching another on the opposite side of the patterned brick walkway. Pedestrians milled about freestanding vendor shops in front of her. To her right, the sun glistened off the glorious tip of Wakefield Cathedral's steeple. To her left, the walkway carried on past the pair of buildings leading the way to a beautifully designed splash pad just off the major intersection of some of Wakefield's busiest roadways.

There. Walking away from her toward the recreational water display was a woman, every feature of her covered by a long black coat. Every feature but her Brunette hair. It flowed over the coat, bouncing ever so gently in the light afternoon breeze.

Christine would recognize those locks anywhere. All her questions became moot. She narrowed her eyes and, with command of the entire sidewalk, called out, "Guin!"

The name arrested the woman's gait. With caution she turned until Christine's suspicion was confirmed. Twenty yards away, with her hands buried in her pockets and resignation on her face, was CIA officer Guin Sullivan.

They stared at each other for a few seconds, the surrounding public

indifferent to their sidewalk showdown, until Christine finally dug her hands into her hips and said, “He’s back in, isn’t he?”

Guin’s sly smirk was the only answer she needed.

CHAPTER TWO

NO MORE WORDS were exchanged after Guin discreetly held a finger to her lips. Christine watched as her friend produced a phone and keyed in a short message. Christine's phone buzzed as Guin slipped hers back into a jacket pocket. She winked at Christine, then turned and walked away.

Christine, no stranger to this game, strode back into the café. As she grabbed her order from under the sign labeled PICK UP, she casually removed her phone from its home in her own jacket pocket and glanced at the screen.

"[UNKNOWN NUMBER] STREET HOUSE, WOOD & CROSS. RIVENDELL-G."

Guin's texts often arrived without an accompanying phone number, thus the single-letter signature to affirm the message's origin. Christine sat down at an available table and opened a digital map of the city. A block down the road, in the direction Guin disappeared in, was the intersection of Wood Street and Cross Street.

How appropriate.

Without delay, Christine exited and walked at a casual pace past the vendors and toward the fountain. A handful of families were enjoying the fountain's jets, though the children limited their frolicking to the outer edge of the spray to avoid a proper soak in the mild weather. Christine closed her jacket tighter, a touch of chill in the air around the shooting streams of water.

Guin's path took her left around the city center down Bull Ring to reach Wood, so Christine veered right to Northgate, Cross Street a mere three-minute walk. She imagined Guin's pride over Christine's precaution in traveling to what she presumed was a CIA safe house. Imagined since she would never point it out and was certain Guin would feign apathy regardless.

She was probably too soon. Maybe she should've waited longer in the café. It wouldn't be too late to circle the block.

Maybe two or three times.

Christine pushed her doubt aside and, at the last second, turned onto Cross Street. Guin had offered no additional instructions, and the questions burning in Christine's mind outweighed her desire to impress her friend.

She took in every detail in sight, special attention paid to those of a more suspicious nature. She and John might have gone separate ways, but the tactics and training he'd taught her from his years in the intelligence community had taken hold.

A cute bookstore called Brews, Bites & Books to her left boasted large, reflective glass windows that helped her scan the sidewalk behind her. A lone figure hunched over the keypad of a Royal Bank of Scotland ATM and only seemed to press farther into the alcove as she passed. A row of cars filled every available parking spot along the one-way street.

A tattoo shop, a tapas restaurant, and an audiology clinic filled out the storefronts to her left, but apart from a brewery and a clothing store, the bricked row of ground-floor retail space with apartments above appeared mostly vacant.

Another empty space with TO LET signs posted capped the building next to her as a narrow drive to a back parking area interrupted the sidewalk. Across the intersection stood an identical red brick with blue trim building, empty retail space on the bottom and two floors of apartments on top. At the corner of the side alley and Cross Street was a short set of stairs leading to a blue door, an awning above announcing the name WOOD STREET HOUSE in shiny silver letters.

Christine grinned as she marched up the stairs and reached for the call button on a weathered white intercom box.

Wait. What should she say? Asking for Guin Sullivan seemed too audacious. And she doubted the name of a cable news network host opened many Central Intelligence doors.

A burst of static accompanied a burly male voice stringing together syllables in an accent so thick, Christine couldn't begin to decipher it. Based on his tone, she assumed it was whatever the British equivalent of "Get off my lawn" was.

Christine paused, then leaned into the speaker. "Rivendell."

No response. Was this the wrong house?

A loud buzz from the door drowned out the click of the lock as the door cracked open. Christine pushed the door only wide enough to step inside and quickly pulled it shut. The metal clank of the latch assured her the door was secure, but she did a quick scan of the empty sidewalk through the window anyway to make sure an unforeseen tail didn't appear and attempt entry.

The street was quiet, appropriately so for the modest town. Satisfied, Christine ventured farther into the building, only to be greeted by the smiling face of Guin Sullivan.

"Oh." Christine couldn't stop herself from expressing surprise.

"I thought John taught you better than to be easily startled," Guin replied, her eyes beaming.

"Most people tend to make noise when they sneak up on someone. Are you sure you're not part cat?"

"Cat? Gross, no."

Christine laughed, no stranger to Guin's distaste of felines. It was a fact she frequently made sure to mention alongside any discussion surrounding her beloved Great Dane, Maks.

Cats weren't that bad. In fact, Christine had considered adopting one more than once and as recently as a few months ago. At least a pet would find more use out of her New York apartment than she did.

Guin waved Christine away from the entrance and up the flight of stairs behind her. "Thank you for being discreet," she said as they

climbed. “There’s no reason to suspect anyone would’ve followed you, but hey, the *C* in CIA might as well stand for ‘cautious.’”

Guin exited the staircase on the second floor and rapped on the door labeled “2.” The door opened, and a tall man with blond hair and blue eyes stood guard inside. Christine was taken aback not only by his handsome features but also how the dark-blue suit he wore was cut perfectly to his body shape. His white shirt was open at the collar and absent wrinkles. A dusty-blond beard refused to abate from a recent shave. He smiled, his teeth of course perfect, and said, “Password?”

Even his accent was perfect.

Guin elbowed past the man as she scoffed. “Pound sand.”

The man winked at Christine. “She’s a feisty one.” He extended his hand. “My name is Christopher Lane. Welcome to West Yorkshire, Ms. Lewis.”

As Lane cradled Christine’s hand, she thought it might melt in the smooth, warm embrace of his skin. What possessed Guin to be so disrespectful to a coworker? Christine decided to chide the woman later.

“Thank you, Mr. Lane.” Was she mimicking his accent? The flush in her cheeks spread. “I’m sorry, but who are you? I mean, besides your name. What are you doing here? What is Guin doing here?” As the allure faded, Christine couldn’t help but unleash her list of questions on the defenseless man.

“Please,” Lane responded, his hand beckoning inside and his smile kind.

Christine finally took her eyes off Lane and examined the apartment as they followed in Guin’s footsteps. It was modest but recently updated with fresh carpet, paint, and fixtures. Mismatched furniture filled the open living space in typical arrangements. Tabletops and counter space were devoid of the computer systems and weapons caches Christine expected to see.

She cocked an eyebrow. “Where’s the rest? I thought you’d be more settled in by now.”

Guin motioned to a back hallway with her thumb. “Oh, don’t worry. The gang’s all here. We just like to keep them away from windows. To

answer the real question on your mind, yes, John's back with CIA." She hesitated, then added, "Well, yes and no. He didn't come back on his own. It took a lot of convincing. Maybe even threatening."

Lane put his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. "It was at our request, really. Officer Cross was a perfect fit for our needs."

"*Ex-Officer Cross,*" Guin interjected.

Christine ignored her. "Our?"

Lane looked for affirmation from Guin before replying, "SIS."

Now it was Christine's turn to look at Guin.

"Secret Intelligence Service," she explained. "Better known as MI6."

So the Brits were in on it too. Whatever it was. Christine held her deluge of questions at bay and patiently waited for the appropriate information to be offered.

"I'm afraid I can't divulge the details of our operation," Lane continued, "but what I can confirm for you, at the behest of Officer Sullivan, is that Officer Cross is working undercover on a joint operation between your country and ours."

Christine gave Guin a smug smile. "Anything more you're allowed to say, Officer Sullivan?" She wasn't sure if she enjoyed the formality of the conversation more or less than Guin's obvious annoyance with Lane.

"Only that John's cover is deep. So deep he can't risk blowing it by being himself."

Christine's smugness faded as she considered John's position. Her decision to visit him, though probably expected, could have compromised his mission had he not lashed out like he did. At least that's how she interpreted Guin's response. The man Christine had visited was someone else, the real John Cross hidden away for the sake of the objective at hand.

What were the chances they'd share the objective with her? Probably whatever number was less than none.

Lane removed his hands from his pockets and adjusted the cuffs of his shirtsleeves under his suit jacket. "Honestly, I'm surprised Officer Cross accepted our invitation. As I mentioned, he was a perfect fit for

the role, but given his religious convictions, I wasn't sure if he would be willing to put himself in a situation where he would have to appear less than, shall we say, moral."

It was Guin's turn to appear smug. "Like I said, it took some threats."

Lane frowned. "Fortunately for us, Officer Cross understood the grave nature of our situation and committed himself to the difficult task." His eyes softened as he looked back at Christine. "He expected you'd come and said deceiving you would be most difficult of all."

Funny. She and John decided to put their relationship on hold precisely because of his struggle with telling the truth, yet she somehow felt proud of his deception in the prison visitation room. Lying was a virtue in this business, wasn't it? Whatever part he played, he played it well. And she assumed that meant a greater chance of success for his mission.

Guin waved her index finger at Lane like a magic wand. "Speaking of religious conviction, 007 here gets along quite well with John."

Lane shot more daggers in Guin's direction. "I realize you mean the Bond reference as an insult, but in truth it's quite flattering."

Christine wasn't sure Guin meant it as an insult, though she didn't recall religion being a key component of Ian Fleming's famous literary superspy. "Are you a Christian, Mr. Lane?"

"Yes, ma'am. Born and raised in the Baptist Union of Great Britain."

"I'm glad Guin finally has a positive role model in her life."

Guin's turn to shoot daggers.

Christine winked, then asked, "So are there really no more details? You just invite me here to admire the drapes, then send me on my way back to the States with a pat on the shoulder?"

Guin and Lane exchanged unspoken arguments with their eyes. Guin's placating smile was all too familiar to Christine. "John is helping us with an asset inside the prison. His incarceration had to be convincing to give him the leverage he needed to get close. Given the circumstances, assaulting a public official live on TV did the trick. At least, we hope." She paused, then said, "Oh yeah" and gave a light tap on Christine's shoulder.

Christine didn't feel like forming a playful retort. The CIA and MI6, or whatever they called themselves, had another thing coming if they thought she would leave Great Britain quietly. It would take an act of Parliament.

Wait. Could they do that?

Guin snorted, then shook her head. "I didn't think I could get rid of you that easily."

"What gives you that impression?"

"I can read your face as much as you can read mine."

Touché.

Christine folded her arms. "OK, so I'm not leaving. But you won't tell me anything. I guess that just means another coffee run."

Guin waved her thumb in Lane's direction as she grinned. "That's what he's here for."

Lane smiled. "Miss Lewis, I have to say I understand why Officer Cross thinks so highly of you."

"Here are the ground rules," Guin said, her hands on her hips. "You can stay in the country, but only where we want you to stay. I'll give you as many updates as I can, which won't be much. If John's mission is a success before you have to get back, I promise you'll get to see him. If it isn't, well . . ."

It would be.

"That's fine. What fine establishment do I get to call home for the next few days?"

Guin's eyes glistened. "You're going to love it. It's big and expensive."

Lane cleared his throat. "And Miss Lewis, there is one thing you can do."

Christine's heart jumped at the thought of participating in an international sting operation. She knew it wouldn't be anything dangerous, but perhaps using her journalistic skill set to track down leads. "Of course." She hoped the excitement didn't sound in her voice.

"Not to alarm you, but I think it would be prudent for you to pray for Officer Cross."

She didn't expect that. Her skin felt cold even though she hadn't

removed her jacket. “Yes,” she stammered. “Absolutely. I guess I hadn’t considered that he was spending a few nights in a prison and how hard that could be.”

Lane opened his mouth to speak, but Guin closed it with a glance.

Now there were shivers. Christine’s shoulders drooped. “What is it?”

Guin couldn’t stop him. “It’s not just any prison. Her Majesty’s Prison Wakefield is the largest maximum-security penitentiary in the UK and houses our country’s most violent offenders.” Lane hesitated, then with somberness added, “We call it ‘Monster Mansion.’”

CHAPTER THREE

JOHN CROSS WAS NO MONSTER.

At least, that was what he kept telling himself for an hour following his visit with Christine. Selling her on his renunciation of faith was critical to the appearance he was crafting, but not for her. The other inmates of HMP Wakefield might not have been present, but their network of information would paint a full picture of what he had said.

And he needed them to believe he was every bit as much a monster as they. The only way to stay alive in the halls of one of the most hellish environments on earth was to blend in with the demons who occupied it. The circumstances of his incarceration, though earnest in theatrics, didn't measure up to the level of violence the typical inmate reveled. Cross's arrest was only the prologue in his transformation to the psychopathic character required by the parameters of the operation.

"Disillusioned ex-patriot suffering a psychotic break" was Christopher Lane's summary of the John Cross who would secure a first-class ticket to Monster Mansion.

"Sounds more like what should've happened," Cross recalled saying in reply. He needed both hands to count the number of good men and women he knew who suffered mental trauma following service in both the military and intelligence communities. His heart broke for every single one.

The sorrowful reminder only added to the troubling requirements of the mission when the original request reached him. Seeing Christine

only forced him to go through the mental checklist of every decision he'd made with every prayer, study, and counsel sought along the way to remind himself of the peace he felt saying yes.

Who was he kidding? He hadn't needed to see Christine to have already repeated the exercise a dozen times since his arrival at the prison. It was strange to think it, but he knew God wanted him there, in the prison, to use his skills in service to his country.

Make that two countries.

Cross smiled as he imagined Lane arguing that the mission served "the nations." John didn't admit to Guin how much he enjoyed the MI6 officer. She would deny it, but he believed her to hold a mutual admiration for the man.

After his mental check, Cross spent the final half hour of the time in his cell praying, careful to appear as if he were only staring wistfully out the barred window. No folded hands or closed eyes, not if he were to succeed in his role as lead actor for the drama scripted by the strategists of his employers.

Temporary employers.

Guin might be otherwise convinced, or so she claimed, but Cross refused to consider a permanent return to his special operations role with the agency. His resignation as pastor of Rural Grove Baptist Church seemed to run parallel with his original resignation from the CIA, with one important distinction. He'd left the CIA as a nomad, but he'd left Rural Grove as a pilgrim.

Without a compass to guide him following the CIA, he'd landed among the small community and accepted their call to the pastorate without consideration. Reckless for such a new Christ follower, though he wasn't aware at the time.

For the months following his final Sunday with the church, however, his search was driven by the desire to understand how God had wired him and how his skills might best be used in God's kingdom work. Ironically, it was accepting Lane's proposal and diving into the work of the operation in Wakefield that capped the end result of that search.

He couldn't wait to tell Christine.

A crash from outside the cell broke his trance, and Cross turned from the window to investigate. Sudden bursts of violent clashes were an expected occurrence in the prison, he'd found, and while uninvolved inmates tuned them out, Cross kept an ear open in case the situation either involved his objective or endangered the prison personnel.

In either instance, he wasn't sure how he might intervene to protect, but that was what the training was for, wasn't it? The CIA was less a cast of actors and more an improvisational troupe.

The prison was missing many of its occupants to court appearances, continuing education, or labor assignments, but those who had no other commitments were allowed to roam the three-story network of cells connected by stairs and walkways. The majority of the time, there was idle conversation or friendly games of dominoes. But it was apparent early on that free time also meant time for the prisoners to size each other up.

Cross's door was unlocked and open, but he paused just inside the cell and formed a picture in his mind of the situation brewing somewhere near. His home was the second floor of cells, a row of a dozen on either side of an open view of the other floors in the center.

As boots scuffed across the floor and voices rose, Cross pinpointed the source of the noise to a cell on the ground floor, his side but a cell or two to the right of the one just beneath him. Sentences were broken by the sound of breaking glass.

"Open up . . . put you down . . . eh, bruv . . ."

Bits of coarse language were detectable between the strikes. At least, it seemed to Cross to be coarse language. Many of HMP Wakefield's clientele spoke in accents as strong as their dissent with authority.

The coarse language wasn't only coming from whoever had picked a fight with a window. Voices Cross identified with the prison's officers used a similar vocabulary as they demanded compliance.

"All right, all right!"

"Stand down!"

Cross detected movement on the walkway outside his cell door.

Some prisoners liked to perch and watch the fireworks, a bit of excitement from the monotony of incarceration. Cross aggressively rubbed his eyes to make them appear puffy and red, as if he'd just woken. He waited a few more precious seconds to promote an air of general disinterest, then walked out.

His neighbor, an older man named Lee, leaned against the railing and picked at his teeth with a fingernail as he observed the conflict below.

“Oh, looks like the fresh meat is getting a warm welcome.”

Cross didn't offer a reply, his preferred disposition that of a brooding mute. Sharing few words served his desire both to appear antisocial and to use as little foul language as possible, though he was sure to pepper enough into any conversation to keep from arousing suspicion.

He let one such word slip, marking a mental tally for a later reckoning with his conscience, then peered over the rail to finally get a glimpse of the unfolding crisis.

A shirtless man with dark skin, muscles bulging atop one another, swung a piece of metal piping at the narrow, tempered glass window of a closed cell door. The man shielded his face as bits of shrapnel exploded outward, but the glass refused to yield save an irregular hole in its center.

The attacker spewed a barrage of insults and oaths through the hole as a pair of uniformed officers descended on him with batons. The fight was short lived as the man dropped the pipe and relaxed within the viselike grip of guards at both wrists and the base of his neck.

Lee whooped, then stuck two fingers into his mouth and emitted a high-pitched whistle. “Always thankful for a little excitement every now and then. Knew things would pop off with a new Four Ten in the mix.” He peppered a subtle giggle between sentences, though Cross came to understand it more as a subconscious tic than an expression of genuine amusement.

Cross had predicted the confrontation as well when the new inmate arrived. Members of rival gangs all across the country called HMP Wakefield home, but this particular wing boasted a handful of young

adult men from either side of a deepening gang war imported from London. The crew known as Four Ten were desperate to add to their strength to push back against the dominance of their rivals the Woolwich Boys, both sides spending much of their time recruiting from the lot of prisoners without sworn loyalty to any particular criminal organization.

He'd been wooed by both, but Cross preferred to keep to himself. He wasn't the only one. The asset was among those who distanced themselves from the warring factions, and since the uncommitted comprised over half the population of this block, Wakefield's director didn't feel the need to separate the gang members.

That or he was deep inside someone else's pocket. Cross formed several theories in his mind, but those were the two he deemed most likely.

The guards escorted the muscled man, a Woolwich Boy enforcer by the sound of it, away from the damaged door and down the hall toward the wing's exit. Cross sighed heavily, then left Lee's side and headed for the stairs.

"Go get 'em, Johnny."

Anyone else would pay for calling him "Johnny," but there was a certain whimsy to the way the old man said it.

A single guard stood at the bottom of the stairs, a broom in his hand and a sneer on his face. He watched Cross's descent, and as Cross reached the final step, the guard extended the broom as a greeting.

No reason to exchange words, for the order was clear. As the newest member of the prison's cleaning crew, Cross knew he was first in line to tidy up after unexpected messes. At least this time it was glass and not matter of the more biological type.

Cross set to work collecting the shards into a neat pile to the side of the new inmate's door. The guard who had handed him the broom knocked on the door and gestured for the inmate to back down from his makeshift barricade inside.

"Oi, your friend's going to be spending a little time with himself, mate. You hurt? Might want to have the nurse take a look."

A handful of other prisoners stepped out from inside their cells and watched as the guard opened the door and disappeared inside. Cross kept an eye on the open cell door as he scanned the gathering crowd.

Where was he?

“I’m fine,” Cross heard the inmate stammer. “I don’t need attention.”

The guard didn’t argue, instead appearing back in the main hall and adjusting his utility belt against his bulging paunch as he walked past Cross toward the exit. Cross thought he detected a sneer from the guard’s lips, but he only caught a fleeting glimpse as he pretended to be distracted by the broom.

The guard was gone too soon. In fact, it dawned on Cross that the man had been the only guard left behind in the wake of the removal of the Woolwich Boy member. He straightened his back and tightened his grip on the broom handle. He didn’t need to look over his shoulder to know what was happening behind him.

The wing now devoid of security, the Woolwich Boys faction of the prison was forming a mob on one side of the main hall while the pledged Four Ten crew gathered to protect their newest colleague. Shoes scraped across the concrete floor. Heavy breaths were drawn. And several joints cracked.

Cross sighed, then looked from one side of the wing to the other. The two gangs paid no attention to him, but his heart still sank. There, a reluctant member of the outnumbered Four Ten unit, was Thomas Rake.

The asset.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHAT WAS THE kid thinking?

At five feet, ten inches and roughly 145 pounds sopping wet, the twenty-four-year-old Rake was a sure bet as one of the first casualties in the riot. And that meant only one thing: it was Cross's fight now.

He was only ever going to avoid it for so long in Monster Mansion. The trick was being in the fight without taking a side.

The self-proclaimed ringleader of the Woolwich Boys, a man Cross only knew as Bull, was exactly the amount of big, ugly, and mean one might expect of a repeat violent offender. As he stared down the nervous Four Ten members, he revealed missing teeth with a wide grin.

Bull extended a chiseled arm and leveled his pointer finger at the open cell door. "Get 'em," he ordered, the words escaping through the teeth alongside an animalistic growl.

The Woolwich Boys charged.

Members of the Four Ten were overwhelmed as they attempted to block passage to the cell. Just as the first man neared the cell door, Cross swept the broom and scattered the shards of glass across the floor. The man lost his footing and tumbled against the doorframe. Two of the others charging couldn't stop their momentum and tripped into him, causing a pileup.

Bull and the rest of the Woolwich Boys ignored Cross's intervention as they targeted the Four Ten defenders. Rake backed away from the onslaught, but a gang member elbowed him into the fray.

Fists flew with little finesse. The Four Ten were outnumbered and outweighed. The Woolwich Boys paired up to better inflict pain and injury.

Cross jumped a Four Ten member crawling across the floor to escape just as another Woolwich Boy attempted to enter the cell. Cross ducked a wayward swing by a set of knuckles, then kicked at the cell door. The Woolwich Boy yelped as the door slammed into his body.

John's primary objective was Rake, though he also wanted to mitigate the attack on the new inmate as much as possible.

Not to mention preventing any serious injury to himself.

A Four Ten thug, a dim man Cross knew only as Powder, grabbed at the broom handle. There seemed to be no cognizance in the man's eyes as to who his opponent was. Cross saw only rage. He jumped and stepped hard on Powder's feet with his own while simultaneously elbowing the thug in the gut.

Powder cried out and loosened his grip on the handle enough for Cross to shove him aside. A mass of grappling men separated them.

Cross found Rake just as a bald-headed Woolrich Boy, not surprisingly nicknamed Baldy, lunged at him with a makeshift knife. Cross dropped the broom and grabbed for Baldy's extended hand. He yanked back on the man's wrist just before the tip of the knife could pierce Rake's top shirt.

A quick twist of Baldy's wrist released the knife from his hand and sent it crashing to the floor. Baldy recovered from his initial shock and, with a ferocious growl, punched at Cross's head with his other fist.

Cross parried with his forearm, but Baldy still managed to stun him with a partial blow to the ear. They traded swings, though neither could get a clean shot to a vital area. Cross ducked another punch and spotted the broom lying next to him, the handle propped above the floor by the thick bristles of the broom's head.

With speed and precision, Cross used one foot to kick the broom handle in a full circle around his opposite leg. The handle connected

RIGHT CROSS

with Baldy's shin and hit so hard it splintered into two pieces. Baldy yelled, then jumped up and down on his good leg as he stumbled away to lick his wounds.

Cross caught Rake's surprised expression for only a moment when a flash of movement diverted his attention to the exit door just down the hall. The door swung wide open, and a squad of prison officers charged the scene with batons high.

While anyone else would've cheered on the arrival of the cavalry, Cross knew Monster Mansion was unique. The riot wasn't about to be quelled, by no means.

The party was just getting started.

As if to affirm Cross's fears, Bull bellowed in psychotic pleasure as he both beckoned the officers into the fray and clobbered a Four Ten member in the head with his forearm. The first officer arrived and swung his baton only to have Bull lift the dazed Four Ten man into the air and toss him like a hay bale. The listless man's body collided with the officer, and they tumbled onto the floor.

Another officer stepped between a pair of competing gang members and threatened harm but failed to see the shiv held by one of the inmates. Cross leapt and wrapped his arm around the officer's neck. He twisted the man's body away from the shiv, then released his hold and shoved the officer in the back.

The inmate sliced but found nothing to cut. He stepped back in wide-eyed confusion, then snarled at Cross and took aim.

Cross readied for the skirmish, but his arms became paralyzed when an unidentified person wrapped his own tattooed arms around Cross's torso from behind. The man squeezed, causing Cross to grunt through clenched teeth in exasperation.

His joints cracked. Breathing became difficult. And the shiv was on a trajectory through his chest and into his heart.

Gathering what strength was left, Cross pushed off the floor with his feet and brought his knees up toward his chest. He kicked out and connected with the attacker's abdomen. The force of the kick sent the inmate flying.

The brute with a stronghold on Cross also lost his footing and slipped. As they both fell backward into another pair of fighters, the brute released his grip and extended his arms to catch himself.

Cross rolled free and jumped back to his feet. His chest ached. It felt like he couldn't get enough air in his lungs.

Ignoring the pain signals, Cross took a quick survey of the riot. The Woolwich Boys and the Four Ten appeared to have joined forces in beating back against the prison officers, but their fists were no match against batons and riot gear.

More officers rushed from the exit to contain the chaos. The fight was waning.

And he couldn't find Rake.

Cross's fear was losing the asset to the monsters of Wakefield before he had a chance to make his move. A fear that might have just morphed into a reality.

Tuning his senses, Cross pinpointed a faint cry to an orange jump-suited body curled into a ball on the floor. A long-haired Woolwich Boy stood over the body and pummeled it with strikes from a baton he'd taken off a dazed officer.

Cross weaved his way around prisoners and guards in the throes of battle. As he neared, the man beating Rake paused and took note. Cross dodged the baton as it swung out and countered with a chop to the man's neck.

The strike bought him the seconds he needed to grab the man's head and wrap his legs around his waist. Cross tucked and rolled, lifting the man off his feet into a somersault. The man landed on his back, pinned to the floor with Cross on top of him. Cross yanked the baton from the man's hand and knocked him unconscious.

Cross tossed the baton away as he stood and headed to check Rake's vitals. A thundering roar prevented his feet from moving.

"You!"

He hadn't been in the prison long, but just enough to recognize the voice. Cross squeezed his fists tight as he spun and saw Bull stomping toward him.

RIGHT CROSS

The confrontation seemed inevitable, but Cross had hoped to delay it long enough to complete his mission.

Bull shoved one of his own men out the way as he neared. The white in his eyes drained, leaving a marbled mixture of red and black. His mouth was open, baring his teeth like a predator in the wild.

Cross regulated his breathing and hoped his training and tenacity were enough to make up for the disparity in strength and fury.

Just as Bull came within striking distance, a pair of guards clad in riot masks and vests rushed past Cross on either side. One swung at Bull's head with a baton. Bull lifted an arm to deflect the blow. The second officer took advantage of the distraction and shoved a baton into the thug's exposed neck.

The heavy black tube was similar to the other batons, with one noticeable difference. Its tip glowed blue, and as it made contact with Bull's skin, the glow flickered in a brilliant, repeating fashion.

The veins in Bull's neck stretched taut, and he bit down on his teeth. A third officer joined the fray and sent more voltage coursing through the man's body with a shock from another stun baton.

Amazingly, the Woolwich Boys' leader wouldn't yield until additional prison officers locked his arms down and he was tased a couple more times. As Bull fell to his knees, the riot ended.

Cross took heavy breaths as he watched the prison officers deposit half the men back into their cells and organize the worst offenders for transfer to the segregation block to reconsider their life choices. He spun back to check on Rake in time to see the young man being helped to his feet by a female officer with amber-colored hair.

Dazed by the attack, Rake swung his arms in protest and hid his face in the crook of his shoulder. The officer batted his arms away and pulled up on his jumpsuit. Rake finally turned to face the woman and unleashed a stream of spittle from his mouth directly into her eyes.

The officer cried out and backed away as she wiped the moisture from her face. Rake's mouth dropped, and his eyes grew wide, perhaps surprised to see a guard instead of an inmate, and he fumbled the word "Sorry" as he stood and reached for her.

It was too late. Another officer saw the transgression and brought his frustration down on Rake in the form of a blow with a baton across the young man's brow. A second guard appeared alongside the first, and together they secured Rake's arms behind his back and escorted him toward the exit.

Segregation.

Maybe if. . .

A quick prayer sprung in Cross's heart as he searched for the nearest prison officer. A freshly inaugurated redhead stood an arm's length away and at the ready should a more seasoned officer need backup. The young officer's eyes met Cross's.

With a smirk on his lips, Cross balled his fist, swung, and broke the man's nose.