

OCCUPIED

by

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Novel. Political thriller

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CHAPTER ONE

Kathleen Mackenzie and Death weren't exactly lovers. But even so, after all they'd been through together, here she was again, back for another date. This time, however, she wouldn't allow him to take without asking. This time, this very final time, it would be on her terms.

She peered at the busy car park below. The hospital stood several storeys high. Such a great height made her head spin. She scuttled back from the roof edge and sucked in a skyful of air to relieve the vertigo. Plucking a neatly folded tissue from her sleeve, she dabbed her tear-stained face and graced the cloudless morning sky with her attention, as if turning to God for answers.

The lone woman seemed somewhat out of place on the roof with nothing but air conditioning ducts, defunct analogue antennae and feral pigeons for company. She was no nurse or doctor. In fact, she had no connection with the hospital whatever in a vocational capacity. But what she did have was the absolute mother of all reasons to be there.

Kathleen.

Fifteen minutes earlier.

At the hospital bedside of her twelve-year-old son.

Hooked up to a million beeping, hissing machines, the boy lay covered from head to foot in bandages. She yearned to hold his hand, for her own comfort as well as his, but knew this could not be. One hand was encased in rigid plaster. The sheer force of the bomb blast had blown the other hand clean off.

Kathleen had spent the day of the incident shopping in London's West Zone with friends. Her son had phoned to let her know the school was releasing pupils early. Some old gumpf about a teachers' strike and not enough pro-State non-union staff to cover. Not wishing to cut short her long-overdue spell of retail therapy, she'd tempted the boy with the offer of the

greasiest, unhealthiest fast food if he agreed to a rendezvous with the parent. Oh, why hadn't she let him head to the house instead? He would have only been home alone for an hour, maybe two. It wouldn't have mattered. The lad was old enough to look after himself without burning the whole street down. He was twelve years of age, for God's sake. Another four short years and he could legally have sex. And six years from now would see him gracing the bars, casinos and brothels of the Leisure Zone with his newfound adulthood. Instead, she'd forced him to alter his usual route.

A variation which included walking past Hotel Superior in the city's Central Zone.

Just as the car bomb went off.

Boom!

The death toll of the terrorist attack had now risen to fifteen. A great many bystanders had been seriously injured by the blast, Kathleen's son being no exception. The shockwaves of the explosion had sent the schoolboy flying through the plate glass window of a department store. As anticipated, many of those wounded during the bombing were now falling victim to their injuries. Permanently.

Since the boy's hospital admission, Kathleen had overheard the medics utter a million trillion times it was a miracle he'd not been killed instantly. This marvel alone gave her the will, the strength, the stubborn determination to keep going. However, hope was fading fast. She knew this all too well. Whether she'd let herself admit it was a different matter altogether.

'Mrs Mackenzie, your son sustained a great many injuries in the bomb attack,' announced a poker-faced doctor. 'I'm afraid it's only life support keeping him alive.'

Kathleen's eyes began to leak tears. She knew exactly where this was leading. 'You want my permission to turn the machines off.' A pained grimace contorted her pallid face. 'I'm right, aren't I?'

‘His condition is not going to improve. I’m sorry.’

Kathleen could hold back no longer, a loud bark of emotion, followed by frenzied, stammering sobs. She palmed her mouth tight in an attempt to fight back further yelps. It didn’t work. The woman’s anguish sliced the surrounding air.

Denial then struck. ‘No way, this can’t be happening,’ she whimpered. ‘You’ve made a mistake. My son will be fine. Really, he will. He’s sleeping. Yes, that’s what he’s doing. He’ll open his eyes in a minute. Just you wait and see.’

The doctor did as he’d been trained, appearing to share her grief. ‘I’m so sorry.’

Upon entering the hospital this morning, she’d been advised to expect the worst, but prior knowledge of an inevitable outcome didn’t make her decision any easier. Kathleen was his mother. She was supposed to protect him, care for him, nurture him, comfort him, not pull the bloody plug on him. She would forever hate herself for this terrible sin. Terminating life support meant terminating her only son, her pride and joy, her own flesh and blood. How could the doctor ask this of her? Did he have children of his own? Would he do the same if he was in her position? Well?

Reality began to sink in. Yes. Of course he would.

It took all her inner strength to emit just two little words. ‘Do it.’

The doctor tipped a grave nod and flicked the switches one by one. The breathing apparatus was the first to fall idle, one final laboured hiss and then nothing. The rhythmic beep-beep of the heart monitor continued for the longest time. Glowing hope returned to the woman. Maybe her son was fighting it. Maybe he would survive after all. Maybe he –

The piercing, continuous whine of the flat-line tore through her soul with the ease of a freshly sharpened blade. A flick of another switch eradicated the noise, but the haunting, ice-cold scream continued to resonate deep inside her brain. She would never free this nightmare from her torn, tattered mind. Her child’s final moment would stay with her for ever.

Rivers of tears spewed out, zig-zagging in chaotic tumbles down the contours of her wavering face. A sharp pain shot through her abdomen, as if she'd been delivered the knock-out punch of a heavyweight boxer. She felt numb. Deadened. Empty. Killing her son had essentially killed her too.

There was nobody left to share such a gut-wrenching burden. The woman was barely into her thirties, yet she'd already lost both parents to that bastard Death, one to cancer, the other a few months down the line to a broken heart that failed to mend. And her husband? Hah! He was long gone. The two-timing bastard had caught the early train with a leggy work colleague to Godknowswhere eleven months, two weeks and three days ago. Yes, she kept note of the exact time since the sleazy rat's middle-fingered departure with obsessive accuracy.

Kathleen now found herself alone in the world. Nobody to love or be loved by. It was all so pathetic when she thought about it. In a way, almost laughable. Only, there was nothing to laugh about. And here she stood on a breezy hospital roof, clutching nothing more than a well-used plastic carrier bag for comfort. Funny how things turned out.

She watched as a black chauffeur-driven limousine pulled into the car park, boasting flags of stars and stripes. Kathleen's cold and resolute eyes clearly indicated her role as a woman on a mission. The driver stepped out and opened the rear door. General Stratton emerged with concrete discipline from the vehicle, dressed as always in full US Army attire. He was never seen without a uniform. It was widely anticipated that the man even slept in it.

As he proceeded to head for the main building, a storm of reporters appeared from nowhere, wielding microphones and cameras like tribal weapons. Stratton offered a resigned sigh. He would have preferred to park directly outside the front entrance to avoid such unwarranted attention, but the area was strictly reserved for ambulances only. Even a man of

his notable influence couldn't relax a regulation so set in stone. England had changed beyond recognition, yet anal jobsworths were still going strong.

Like hungry birds to breadcrumbs, the journalists all jabbered at once, an urgent mish-mash of squawking and chirping, eager for fresh snippets of information about the recent bombing. However, they were wasting their time. Such an unsolicited bombardment fell upon deaf ears. Stratton failed to respond to their barrage of questions, face rigid, mouth shut, eyes fixed forwards, not once giving them the time of day. He was booked to open a new hospital ward, not front an impromptu Q&A session.

Kathleen had expected Stratton's arrival. The new ward, a special emergency care unit for injured US soldiers, had been talked about on the early morning news. It was essential for Mrs Mackenzie to be here at this precise moment. This female had something important to get off her chest and so thus needed an audience with credentials. TV crews from almost every network were in attendance. Good. Her greatest moment would be fully documented.

The woman produced a white linen bedding sheet from the plastic bag and hastily unfurled it. It sported the bold red lettering she'd painted onto the fabric a couple of hours earlier. A few loose bricks aided the anchoring of the material. She then hung the makeshift banner over the edge for the world to see.

It was a passing member of the public who first spotted Kathleen's handiwork. He pointed upwards, egging on bystanders to take a peek. General Stratton and the reporters followed his point. They stared in open-mouthed bewilderment as they read the text on the banner.

“GO HOME. YOU CAUSED THIS.”

This had been her original plan. Create the banner, get the message on TV and hope the US Army would realise its occupation of England had ultimately led to the hospitalisation of

her darling boy, her only born, a young and innocent child. But now things had changed. Her son was dead. Mere text on fabric was nowhere near enough. The event would soon be forgotten. This time tomorrow, it would be yesterday's news. The memory of her boy was worth far more than just one day of coverage. No, no, no, something else was required. Something big. Something memorable. Something extreme. An act which would beat a simple slogan hands down.

Kathleen stood upright and stepped forward. With the faultless poise of an Olympic gymnast, she raised both arms high above her head. The woman offered a quick glance up at the sky. A lone white cloud appeared overhead. She posted a warm smile, believing it to be her son looking down on her with the double thumbs of approval.

She closed her eyes. Took a deep breath.

And jumped.

Stunned onlookers watched in horror as the woman plummeted south and landed with a deafening bang on the roof of a parked ambulance. Then came a cold and deathly silence. Nobody moved. Not a soul said a word. What could they possibly do or say?

Kathleen lay broken and lifeless, both arms thrown open and wide, as if about to offer her son the biggest hug ever recorded. Her glassy, unmoving eyes gazed eternally at the heavens above. One corner of her mouth was curled upwards. It could easily be mistaken for a satisfied smile.

Her point had been made.

Her work here was done.