

Jason Willow

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Prologue

‘Get down!’ Dad yelled and hurled Jason and Miranda to the floor.

Jason tucked into a roll and flowed to his knees pressing tight against a concrete pillar. Mum and Dad darted behind parked cars as the blacked-out van squealed to a halt and three armed men burst out.

Miranda leapt on Jason from her prone position and flattened him to the floor. ‘Keep down, you idiot!’

Gunfire exploded through the multi-storey car park as bullets ripped concrete from the columns all around them. Jason slapped his sister’s arm away and jerked his head up.

Dad crouched behind the next pillar, with a pistol somehow in his hand. One of the gunmen suddenly appeared, leaping across the bonnet of a 4x4, his black overcoat billowing out behind him like gigantic bat wings.

Dad shot his heart out with a single bullet. As the dead-eyed head smacked onto the floor, Dad surged to his feet, gun blazing. He thrust his empty hand out in front of him and stepped out of cover.

Miranda caught Jason in a headlock and pulled him flat again. ‘Stay down, they’re agents. There’s nothing you can do.’

Jason fought against her expert hold. ‘Dad needs us - it’s three against one...’

Suddenly the shooting stopped. Silence slammed down around them.

‘Not any more,’ Miranda whispered and eased her grip.

Jason broke free and scrambled to his knees. Dad stood just a couple of metres away, scanning the cars with his gun still out.

‘Where’s Mum?’ Jason asked.

‘I’m so sorry...’ Dad said, his voice quiet. He didn’t look at them. ‘She’s gone.’

What was he talking about? Jason pulled himself to his feet – numbing panic pulsing into his head. Miranda stumbled passed him like a zombie and lurched to a halt next to Dad. She stared at the floor on the other side of a lurid yellow car then silently sank to her knees.

Jason was next to her a second later. Their mother lay there, unmoving, a single dark patch staining the cream blouse she had bought especially for the theatre tonight.

This couldn’t be happening – not after they had survived for so long.

He forced himself closer and a hint of the perfume that had always been part of her reached him. He stretched out his shaking hand - her cheeks were still warm and soft. She couldn’t be dead.

Police sirens faded in from somewhere. Jason looked up. A few stricken faces were staring at them – normal people with normal lives. One man held his mobile phone inches away from his mouth - frozen.

Dad dropped to one knee beside Jason and cupped Mum’s cheek in one hand. He was absolutely silent but the tendons down his neck bulged almost out of his skin.

Jason’s eyes began to burn from the inside and the car park blurred down to Miranda’s silent tears dropping onto the concrete. Jason felt her slip one arm around him.

‘We have to leave,’ Dad said, his voice cracking. ‘Kiss your mother – you need to say goodbye properly.’

Miranda hesitated for only a second then fell forward, clinging on to Mum’s limp body. Jason couldn’t move. Warm blood soaked into his jeans...

Jason's mother had been murdered almost a year ago now. The following day, he, Dad and Miranda had let their faces be caught on CCTV running for the Eurostar to Brussels. They had switched back through France, driving at night on tiny roads, and lost themselves working the farms and vineyards all around rural Spain.

Now they were back in Britain, flown in under the radar by private plane and en route for yet another change of life and identity. Dad always insisted they keep their real first names which was annoying as Jason didn't like his very much. Anyway, this time he was called Willow - Jason Willow.

He was fifteen now – more than old enough for Dad to finally explain why these agents had been hunting them all his life. Who keeps sending them... who exactly had ordered their deaths?

It was time the hunters became the hunted.

Chapter 1

‘That man keeps staring at us Dad.’ Jason whispered.

Miranda stopped trying to read her magazine and looked up at the Easter holiday crowds churning noisily around them.

‘Dad...’ Jason repeated

‘Yes, son, I heard,’ Dad said, gazing around the airport check-in area without seeming to take an interest in anything. ‘Don’t stare but tell me which man and where,’ he mumbled.

Jason made a slight nod towards a tall, slim man standing at a magazine rack. ‘In Smiths – long coat, big camera.’

There was something compelling about the man. Unshaven, greased back hair and sallow skinned, he should have come across as unsavoury at best, but something about the confident way he held himself made you want to watch him.

‘That doesn’t narrow it down very much,’ Dad said.

Jason glanced over again. At least half a dozen scruffy men with expensive, big-lens cameras were milling around that area watching the arrivals board above them.

‘Oops,’ Jason said, ‘I might possibly have been over-reacting.’

‘Probably,’ Dad smiled thinly, ‘paparazzi are always on the lookout for the next shot. All the same, which one was it?’

‘Black T-shirt and jeans – see him?’

Miranda turned to stare into the newsagents but the man drifted further into the store.

‘Looks like you scared him away, Sis,’ Jason said, ‘he’s probably worried you’d crack his lens.’

‘Don’t try being funny, Jason,’ Miranda smiled sympathetically, ‘it doesn’t work for you.’

‘Now, now children,’ Dad said, ‘be nice. You go into departures on your own and I’ll meet you in the lounge after I’ve checked out our reporter chappie. Why don’t you grab us a table for some brunch - okay? Get me something big with bacon, please.’

Dad ushered them away with their boarding passes as Miranda tried to walk and look backwards simultaneously.

‘Definitely no photo opportunity for little old you,’ Jason said, grinning.

‘I bet he’d rather snap me than you, Adonis.’

‘Maybe, but that’s because I’m not a blonde bimbo wearing skin tight jeans and a pink fluffy jumper... again.’

‘You’re only jealous because I didn’t let you borrow them.’

‘Fair enough,’ Jason said, looking over Miranda’s shoulder. The photographer had disappeared and Dad had merged into the shuffling crowds. ‘I feel a bit stupid now – pressing the panic button and everything.’

‘You are stupid, but not for that,’ Miranda said. ‘Shush now.’

They joined the queue and passed through into departures.

‘I think you should order Dad a Stella - help him chill out for our little holiday on the sun-drenched Isle of Mawn,’ Jason said.

Edging their way through the Easter holidaymakers they spotted an eighties retro-bar with small trees growing out of chrome plant pots and neon lighting. Amazingly, there were still a couple of

tables free - probably something to do with Dad's unusual choice of time to have a meal - half past ten in the morning.

They collapsed into the red plastic seats and a spotty young waiter hurried over grinning inanely at Miranda. Jason chose the house special bacon burger for Dad and himself. Miranda of course ordered the ever-so-healthy slimmer's char-grilled chicken salad.

'It'll be good to see Grandfather again,' Miranda said, as the waiter disappeared.

'I'm not sure a week in sun-drenched Mawn with the old sod will quite match up to working our way around Portugal,' Jason said, relaxing back and pulling off his baseball cap.

Miranda caught his hand and whispered. 'Leave it on.'

Jason chewed at his lip in frustration but put the hat back on. After being on the run for fifteen years he still occasionally forgot the rules Dad had drilled into them. Good job his perfect big sister was always there to save the day.

He glanced around at the crowd with a twinge of envy at all the normal families who could travel through airports or railway stations whenever they liked without having to keep peaked hats on and faces turned down from the CCTV.

The spotty waiter weaved through the tables with their drinks. He dumped the Coke and lager on the table before fussing about undoing Miranda's mineral water and pouring it carefully into her glass over a double helping of lemon slices. Finally he left them, bumping into another table as he glanced back at her.

'Looks like you've picked up another love-sick puppy,' Jason said.

Miranda nodded but didn't flash her usual smile. 'I can't see him wanting to buy into our life though, can you?'

Jason took a slow sip of Coke. 'We might actually stay in one place this time - moving to Alan Brash's little empire and everything.'

'Maybe.' Miranda shrugged.

'And you're getting off school until September.'

'Yeah, great. I'll have to re-start the sixth form a year behind with a bunch of immature boys and cliquy girls.'

Jason raised an eyebrow. 'Oh my heart bleeds for you, Sis.'

Miranda licked the lemon juice from her fingers, a smile pulling at one side of her mouth. 'Hey - you might finally get a girlfriend at school without your big sister's utter gorgeousness intimidating them.'

'Yeah, yeah,' Jason mumbled, pulling his Coke back towards him again.

Miranda touched his arm. 'You will be careful there, won't you... just keep out of trouble.'

Jason looked across at her, waiting for the lecture about not using Dad's martial arts training on anybody. However, Miranda had stopped - she wasn't going into nagging session. Jason grunted. Miranda wasn't meant to be nice to him unless one of them was really upset about something.

They were quiet for a time, drinking their drinks and watching the stressed-out holidaymakers bustling around just at the edges of the café's sad brown floor tiles. Dad had been gone for maybe ten minutes - he always checked everything out really thoroughly - no matter how trivial.

Miranda broke the silence.

'This'll be the first time up in Scotland without Mum...' She stopped, swallowing back her next words.

Jason took a slow breath and he fixed his gaze on an electronic flight information board at the far side of departures. Miranda was scrabbling around in her bag and he passed over a napkin without looking at her. She never had anything useful like a tissue in any of her half a dozen handbags.

'Thanks,' Miranda said. He knew she was staring at him and that her eyes would be all sparkly with blinked-back tears. He didn't want to look back at her, not yet.

Luckily, he saw Dad slipping through the crowds to join them.

'I need a drink,' he said, shrugging his long raincoat on to the back of his chair.

'Did you find the photographer?' Jason asked.

'Yep - I spotted him and a couple of the others skulking about outside an emergency exit...' He frowned and wiped a thumb gently across Miranda's cheek but she smiled back reassuringly.

‘Anyway,’ Dad continued, ‘being a good citizen, I shopped them to a security guard but he didn’t seem bothered. Some reality TV star’s flying in “secretly” with her new baby and they’ve been hanging around all day apparently.’ Dad settled back into his chair. ‘Now, where’s my beer?’

Jason shook his head and slid Dad’s lager over to him. If his hyper-paranoid father wasn’t worried about the greasy photographer then why should he be?

Chapter 2

‘There she is,’ Dad said, ‘our very own, real-life castle.’

Jason smiled. Eila Doone hadn’t changed - it never would. Like something from one of his favourite old horror films, the squat turrets and thick walls rose straight out of a misted loch.

They had been picked up an hour ago from the station in the small town of Strayfele – the end of the line in so many ways. Old Duncan was their chauffeur as he had been for all of Jason’s life. He’d driven them into to a deep sea-loch valley where the small island of Mawn hunched down in an iron-grey lake surrounded by jagged, wind-ripped mountains.

As usual, they’d had to leave the first Land Rover in a ruined cottage to board an ancient ferry skippered by the equally ancient, white bearded, Frederick who made Old Duncan seem like a grinning loon.

Docking in Mawn’s tiny harbour had been hard on Jason. Ever since he could remember, he, Miranda and Mum had crammed themselves inside the tiny waiting room there to shelter from the inevitable storms while Dad had played the hero, waiting outside and making pathetic faces through the window.

Now it was only the three of them, Dad wouldn’t have to wait out in the rain any more.

‘Snap out of it,’ Miranda said, elbowing his ribs, ‘we’re here.’

Old Duncan pulled the island’s battered green Land Rover Defender into the cow shed that served as the castle’s garage. As he reached for the keys, a loud voice crackled from the cab radio.

‘Are ye there, Duncan...? There’s a man here for ye here at the station. He’s wanting to stay at the castle.’

Short wave radio was the main means of communication with Mawn. Mobile phones had no signal in the mountains and laying a land-line had never been worth the cost.

‘He could have shown himself when I picked you lot up from the train, couldn’t he?’ Old Duncan grumbled, banging the steering wheel.

‘That’ll be another sun-worshipper up for the weekend then,’ Miranda said, staring up at the thick cloud. ‘Another shamelessly bare body waddling in and out of the loch all day.’

‘We should drown them all,’ Duncan grunted.

The Willows clambered out as rain began to hammer down on the tin roof. Dad quickly pulled the bags out of the back while Old Duncan drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. Almost before Dad was clear, Old Duncan reversed out of the shed, winding down his window. ‘Mr Darillian will see ye in the High Hall,’ he shouted, ‘I’m away back for this blasted late-comer.’

Darillian was Grandfather’s surname. It used to be Jason’s of course - about four lives ago, but they’d changed their surname each time they’d moved, together with bank accounts, passports and everything else that recorded who they were.

As the Land Rover roared away, Jason and Miranda stared up at the castle through the driving rain.

Eila Doone had always been a pause, a safe haven in which to hide whilst their next new life was put into place by the “fixer” from Dad’s past - Alan Brash.

This was the only real home they’d ever known.

‘Watch the bridge,’ Dad shouted over the wind gusting in through the shed’s empty windows, ‘- it’ll be slippy.’

‘Dad, you’ve made us walk along the edges of icy planks since we were five,’ Miranda said without turning around, ‘I think we can manage the...’ Without any warning, she pushed Jason backwards and sprinted outside.

‘Cheat,’ Jason yelled and tore after her.

Miranda was too fast for him to make up for the head-start and she leapt onto the bridge first. It was no more than two metres wide, low walled and slick-stoned with rock-frothed waters churning below. Miranda streaked across it with Jason just a steamy breath behind.

On the tiny island, the second of two Himalayan Cedars was the traditional finishing post. The instant they were off the bridge, Jason flicked his right foot out and caught Miranda’s left. She tumbled forward but tucked into a tight roll and came up running at Jason’s side as he tried to pass her.

They swung semi-contact blows and trips at each other as they ran, each one blocked or dodged. Three metres from the finish, Miranda feigned a punch to Jason’s head and simultaneously shot her foot out to trip him.

Jason fell, just managing a roll but to the side, away from the tree. By the time he flipped back to his feet, Miranda was waving to him with one of the lower branches, her breathing almost back to normal.

‘You cheated,’ Jason said, kicking a bit of mud up at her.

‘I don’t think your grandfather is very impressed, cheating or not,’ Dad said, joining them under the branches. Rain ran from his hair onto the three cases he carried. He nodded towards the castle.

Jason knew exactly where to look. He swung his eyes up to a small window on the fourth floor – the High Hall. There, staring down at them through the rain-streaked glass, was the dark silhouette of their grandfather.

‘Well you trained us, Dad,’ Jason said, ‘it’s your fault if our Jakra isn’t up to scratch.’

‘I thought it might be,’ Dad grumbled.

‘It’s all right, Daddy,’ Miranda said, giving a joyful wave up to the window, ‘Grandfather’s smiling.’

‘Yeah, right,’ Jason groaned. After fighting dirty and nearly breaking his neck, Miranda was now going to put on her ultra-sweet, granddaughter act.

‘Come on, let’s say hello to the old... man,’ Dad said. ‘Remember...’

‘Best behaviour,’ Jason and Miranda chimed in unison. He’d been telling them that ever since he and mum had raced a pushchair each to the second cedar.

They each ducked their heads against the building storm and walked into the shadow of Eila Doone.

Ten-foot high, six-inch thick double doors studded with iron barred the entrance as they had done for about nine hundred years. Dad pushed them open easily enough though and they dashed inside. As Dad shut the doors behind them, the cold and silence of the castle closed in on them.

Eila Doone had given up very little of herself in becoming a hikers’ hotel. Worn tapestries, pole arms, shields and claymores were still lashed to the walls from centuries gone by. The only sign that the ancient hall they stood in was now the reception area was a small desk in one corner. As usual it was unmanned.

Dad started humming “Home, home on the range” as they dumped their cases at the reception desk and started towards the main staircase. Brett Darillian, Grandfather, didn’t like to be kept waiting.

The staircase split and they took the right hand fork into a much smaller stairway spiralling up through a turret. Cold, grey stone screwed around Jason as he trotted up steps worn smooth by centuries’ of footfalls. Twice, the echoing walls broke open onto a narrow corridor and then sealed them in again before they approached the private fourth floor.

Jason smelled the fire in the High Hall long before he left the stairwell. It was one of the few family rooms Grandfather heated regularly. He stepped out onto the landing after Dad and Miranda and came face to face with the ogre himself.

‘You should have recognized Miranda’s feint, Jason – there was no power in it.’ Brett Darillian stared steadily at his grandson through dark, double doors opened wide. He stood at the far end of the long hall, framed by the rain lashed window and with a twelve-seat, mahogany table stretched

between him and his family. Tall, powerfully built and with cropped gray hair over a face chiselled from stone, Grandfather might have been part of the castle itself.

‘We were only messing about,’ Jason said, attempting a smile.

‘There’s no “messing about”, not now ye’re coming of age. One day, seeing the difference between a feint and a real blow might save your life.’

Miranda let the sage advice fly over her head as she strode past the table and threw her arms around the old man’s neck.

Grandfather didn’t flinch from his lordly stance behind the Laird's Seat as she draped herself over him. Jason winced – Grandfather must be as comforting to hug as a rock. Still, Miranda usually managed to crack the ice a little and today was to be no exception. Awkwardly, Grandfather patted one bear-like hand against her back then eased her away.

‘That’s enough girl - ye’re no longer a bairn.’

‘There’s no age limit on cuddles, Grandfather,’ Miranda said, smiling up at him sweetly.

Jason crossed the hall to greet him with a little more decorum. Men didn’t hug each other in Grandfather’s world. He shook hands with his grandfather, putting all his strength in returning the old man’s cold, iron hard grip.

Grandfather gave a barely perceptible nod. ‘You’re getting somewhat stronger.’

‘Hello, father,’ Dad said. He’d remained between the open doors.

‘Where are ye running to this time, Richard?’

No one spoke. This was the only thing Jason hated about Mawn – there was such contempt in Grandfather’s eyes and it laced everything he said to Dad.

The two men stared at each other. Dad stood tall, not looking in the least bit intimidated but he dropped his eyes first, to give a sad smile to his children. ‘Do you want to unpack while I have a chat with your grandfather?’

‘Okay but no arguing, you two,’ Miranda said, in a particularly air-head sort of way.

‘As if...’ Dad said, winking at them.

Jason grabbed his sister’s arm and pulled her out, closing the double doors behind them.

‘Your running away has cost too much, this time...’ Jason heard Grandfather begin as he and Miranda pressed their ears to the thick wood.

‘Father, will you lower your voice - the children...’ Dad cut in.

‘They’re no longer children, Richard. You still haven’t told them have you, even after having their mother shot in front of their eyes? They need to know – Jason will be coming into his...’

‘Will you lower your voice or do we have to leave now?’

Surprisingly Grandfather did what Dad asked and his voice faded out of hearing.

‘Bugger,’ Jason whispered, and the two of them started back down the spiral stairs. ‘What do we need to know? What am I coming into?’

‘Your inheritance?’ Miranda guessed. ‘Perhaps Grandfather’s going to leave sun-kissed Mawn to you when you grow up... which will be in about another thirty years I’d say.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Jason grinned. ‘But really – d’you think it’s just the same old argument?’

‘Aye, laddie,’ Miranda said, dropping into a terrible impression of Grandfather’s Scottish accent. ‘It’s your duty to tell them everything, Richard – you can’t expect *them* to run for the rest of their lives as well.’

Jason nodded. This was the reason they’d never moved to Mawn permanently – Dad had always told them that he’d protect them from the dangers of his old life and that included telling them virtually nothing about it until they were “grown up”.

‘Sometimes I wish Grandfather would just tell us – get it over and done with.’

‘I wouldn’t listen to him, and nor would you,’ Miranda said, ‘it would be like betraying Dad’s trust. Anyway – what’s he going to say that we haven’t already come up with – Dad’s an ex-spy, or MI5 or on some witness protection programme? Just let Dad tell us in his own time.’

‘I suppose,’ Jason grunted. ‘I hate it when Grandfather has a go at him though. D’you think they’ll end up sparring again?’

‘I should think so but Dad can look after himself. Anyway, he needs someone good to train against. We don’t really push him.’

‘Speak for yourself, girlie,’ Jason barged his sister out onto the second floor as they passed it. He ducked as she threw a punch at his head.

They clattered down the stone steps into the still deserted reception area. Their cases lay where they'd left them. Miranda wrinkled her nose. 'Sod the unpacking, let's go to the village.'

Jason groaned, looking out through narrow windows. 'But it's pouring down.'

'We're in Mawn - what do you expect?' Miranda said.

'Nothing will be open,' Jason mumbled, pressing his face against the cold glass and misting it up.

'You want to stay here and wait for them to finish arguing?' Miranda said, reaching for a bright yellow oilskin coat and hat hanging on the 'for guest use' hooks on one wall.

Jason shrugged but turned away from the window. 'Mmm, attractive,' he said, nodding appraisingly at her.

'Mmm, dry,' Miranda said.

Jason grabbed some waterproofs down for himself. 'That's a very practical, un-Barbie thing to say, Sis.'

She ignored him and pulled open the front doors then shrieked as a wall of freezing rain burst in.

Jason shoved her out and they both crossed the bridge then started up the hill leading to the village in the next dip. They trudged resolutely passed a small stable block. They were both excellent riders but taking out a couple of horses now would mean at least an hour's rubbing down and grooming afterwards.

About half way up the hill Jason heard the throaty growl of Grandfather's Land Rover. A moment later it struggled over the crest then came hurtling down towards them, veering from side to side on the rain-slicked track.

'Run for it,' Jason shouted, scrambling into the heather above the road. 'Quick, Old Duncan won't stop until he feels your head crunch.'

Miranda followed him, without the dramatics. 'He's got the latecomer with him, hasn't he?' she said, trying to peer through the rain streaked, misted up windscreen.

'Looks like it... easier to see if Duncan understood new technology like de-mister switches.'

'Oh goodie - someone apart from Grandfather for me to play with at dinner.' Miranda waved, smiling brightly with rain running down her face.

Old Duncan crashed the gears and roared passed without a sideways glance. They hadn't been able to make out the new guest at all.

Jason pushed his still-waving sister back down towards the track. 'He won't fancy you looking like that, whoever he is,' he said, nodding at her shapeless yellow oilskins and wide-brimmed hat flopping down over her straggly wet hair.

'Well I thought I just might change for dinner.'

'Into what - a half-decent sister maybe...?'

'...and you've said that one how many times now?' Miranda feigned a laugh and jumped back down onto the road.

Miranda fell quiet for a while as they walked. Jason chewed his lip - quiet meant Miranda was either worried about something or plotting. Finally she spoke.

'Will you be asking Laura back for dinner tonight?'

Plotting then, obviously.

Jason just grunted. He knew he should never have told his sister about fancying Laura McKenzie last year.

'Well?' Miranda nudged him.

Jason nudged her back, resigning himself for another attack of the cupid sister.

Sure enough, Miranda hit him with a relentless storm of advice as they walked. Even though he kept his head-down and only mumbled nonsense in reply, the chatting-up lesson didn't stop until they reached the village.

It was almost six o'clock and the place was deserted. The rain had eased off to a drizzle.

'Don't you just hate rush hour?' Miranda asked.

'Shall we see if The Star's open for once?' Jason mumbled, trying to push back his dripping hair into some sort of order beneath the hood.

'Oooh, now let me think...' Miranda said, 'there are so many other hot clubs we could try... oh go on then - the Star it is.'

Jason started forward, his heart starting to thump. The Northern Star was Mawn's one and only pub. It had a 'family room' where Les, the landlord, let the island's youth hang out, play pool, eat crisps and drink Iron Bru or Coke. If Laura was out anywhere this wet Saturday afternoon, it would be in there.

They pushed on past Mary Moore's general store/bakery/post office/chemist with its old bay windows then stopped.

'Typical,' Jason said, staring at a scribbled note, placed inside a plastic bag and hung by string from the Star's main door.

Open at 7 for the football

'I'm not hanging around for an hour,' Miranda said.

'Straight back to the castle, then,' Jason mumbled and began to walk. 'Whose master-plan was this?'

They were less than a mile out of the village when he realised they were being watched.