

FALLING APART AT THE EDGES

Chapter 1

It was a night when bad things tried to take over.

John Blake took a cab over to South side where warehouses butted onto the river and out dated Laundromats sat side by side with hippy boutiques whose stock didn't look much changed since Woodstock,

The cab dropped him off outside a brownstone apartment block that slumped exhausted on the riverside. It was getting dark and already there were small clumps of youths gathered on the street corners. Vying to out-cool each other with their studied movements and slang.

A small group of men dressed in tattered rags were warming themselves around a fire they had going in an old trash can.

Mothers sat on front steps with children hanging off them. Bewilderment that life had deposited them here sang in their eyes.

Blake knew where he was headed. He had an appointment that was well away from the prying eyes that were following his slow and measured walk along the road. He had an appointment that wasn't entered in his police log, and wouldn't be when his business was concluded.

The person he was meeting was already waiting for him in an abandoned warehouse that opened out onto the old docks.

Blake knew the location, had been there before. He'd met the person there before, and people like him before that. This was a regular appointment.

Walking slowly and with confidence, Blake took a left and saw the warehouse ahead of him. There was a dark Chrysler out front. Careless. Anyone could have seen it and, even in a part of the city where few would volunteer information to the police, it was a risk Blake didn't appreciate.

Ignoring the front door, which was pressed steel and in need of painting, Blake moved to the right and pulled down a ladder that was fixed to the wall and led him to the fire escape. It was rickety but it took him up to the first floor. The appointment was on the ground floor, which was one large open space where trucks and cargo filled pallets had once stood. Blake always went by the maxim that surprise was best delivered one level up from your opponents. The appointment was booked but it wasn't like a doctor's appointment or a visit to the dentist.

The men he was meeting would be opponents and Blake would need the element of surprise on his side.

For a large powerful man he was light on his feet when he needed to be. The muscles that studded his arms and upper body extended to his legs so that the control over parts of his body was tight.

The fire escape brought him up to an opening that would have housed a winch in years gone by. He squeezed his body through and crouched on the narrow walkway that encircled this first floor area.

He could hear voices.

There was just the one vehicle so he guessed no more than four men. Easy odds.

Keeping his back to the metal wall he soundlessly moved around the perimeter until the voices became clearer. They were below him. The accents were East European. He knew they were from Ukraine. Once part of the Soviet Bloc and now an independent state with its own economy and its own brand of crimes.

He could see Gregorio, the one he had met before. He was short and squat like a man

with no neck, a wrestler's body and physique. He was sitting on a plastic garden chair picking at his fingernails with a knife.

There were two men standing casually near Gregorio. They both held machine pistols but they were held loosely, not like they expected to have to use them. The appointment had been made for a while; they had met this American before. The transaction would go smoothly.

Blake couldn't see the fourth man but he knew he would be similar in build and mindset. Gregorio was in charge here even though he was not the intelligence behind the organization. Blake was working up to him.

This was an appointment he was keeping to himself. He hadn't told his partner, Kimball, and he would certainly not tell his wife, Suzy, or even Sara. He hadn't defined Sara quite yet.

There was a narrow metal staircase down from the first level and Blake took it slowly. At the bottom he turned and faced Gregorio who looked over and lifted his hand in a greeting.

Then Blake met the fourth man. He was standing at the foot of the stairs almost as if he anticipated this was where Blake would appear. He grunted something in a language Blake didn't understand. Blake shook his head and showed the man the palms of his hands in a gesture of not understanding what he was talking about.

Blake looked over at Gregorio and shrugged and began to walk across to him. The fourth man made his first mistake. He put his hand on Blake's arm to restrain him.

"Tell him to remove it in five seconds or I'll break three bones in the hand." He found that specific threats sounded more real than general ones, and he had every intention of keeping the threat.

Gregorio called over to the man in their language and the man looked at Blake and smiled. The hand left his arm but only moved to the barrel of his Uzi that he brought up level with Blake's chest. He unleashed a torrent of words that Blake didn't understand but their meaning was clear in any language.

Blake looked at Gregorio and shook his head. When he turned back to the man his movements were deceptively fast for such a big man. He snapped one hand over the barrel of the Uzi and forced it down. With his other hand he punched hard to the nose, the chin and then the throat. The man staggered and Blake wrested the gun from him. Turning it round so the stock faced away from him he rammed it into the man's face until bones cracked. As the man fell to the ground Blake made sure he chose the correct hand, the one that had held his arm, and stamped on it.

Then Blake, the Uzi casually dripping from one hand, walked over to Gregorio who hadn't moved throughout the incident. The other two men would have intervened only if they had received the orders to do so.

"He irritated me," Blake said.

"I must remember not to cause you any irritation myself."

Blake watched the two men and noted they were holding their Uzi's tighter, their eyes were alert.

"You do not appear to have the money."

Blake pulled the front of his leather jacket apart as if checking. "Where is the merchandise?"

Gregorio barked out an order and the two men dipped into a shadowed corner of the warehouse. When they came back into the light they were dragging three women with them.

The women were young, two of them no more than girls, maybe not even sixteen. They were dressed in shapeless gray smocks.

One of the men held the other's gun while he lined the women up in front of Blake.

The man stood in front of the women one by one and raised their dress so that Blake could see what he was buying. The women didn't protest or try to stop him. Their eyes didn't leave the ground at their feet. Their eyes didn't register anything apart from resignation. Fight, fear, fire, had long ago been beaten out of them.

"Good merchandise?"

"I don't need the skin show," Blake said. "You know why I'm buying them."

"Ah, yes. The philanthropist. You are setting them free. Giving them a new life in the West."

Blake reached slowly into his inside pocket and pulled out a thin buff envelope. He handed it to Gregorio. "It's all there."

"Like before. And like before I will use your money to buy more merchandise in Europe. For what you pay for the freedom of these three whores I can buy another ten in Kiev. You help my supply chain, Mr. American."

The man holding the two machine pistols laughed. He obviously understands some English Blake thought, unless they had discussed what they were going to say.

The other man pushed the women towards Blake. They came compliantly and stood behind him.

Blake half turned to look at them, the movement masking what he was doing.

What he was doing was taking out his Glock. Without haste or undue movement he turned to the man holding the two guns and shot him between the eyes. The second man flapped his hands in front of him as if willing a weapon to appear. Blake shot him in the neck and the right eye.

Gregorio was not slow but he wasn't quick enough to beat Blake. He leapt from the plastic chair and tried to reach a weapon. Blake shot him in one leg and then the other.

"These ladies are not merchandise, they're not whores. They are someone's daughter, and you've stolen them from their families on promises of a better life only to violate and beat them into submission and then sell them to the highest bidder like unwanted product on eBay."

Blake shot him twice in the stomach. "Gut shot. Slow and painful. The insides bleed for a long time before the heart realizes it's a lost cause and packs up."

Gregorio was writhing in the dust of the floor.

Blake looked at the three women. The two younger ones were shaking, scared and without the ability to do anything they weren't instructed to do. The one who was a bit older, maybe early twenties though she looked younger, was staring at Gregorio with the stirrings of hate in her eyes.

Blake walked across to her and handed her his knife. She took it and nodded.

He made sure he was guiding the two young girls away when he heard the knife start to do its job.

"I'm calling my friends in Care. They're expecting my call." He could tell the girls didn't really understand what he was saying.

Behind him he heard light footsteps and his knife was placed back in his hands. He looked at the women. She had streaks of blood down the side of her dress. The knife was clean as it could be.

"Do you understand English?"

"A little."

"I am calling people who will come and look after you. People from the American Government. They will take care of you. If you want to go home they will arrange it. If you want to stay they will make sure you have permits and they'll house you with other girls who have had similar...with girls you'll get on with."

He pulled out his cell and dialed a number he had grown to know well.

“I’ve got three. The warehouse in West. There’s some tidying up to do.”

He left the women knowing that help would arrive shortly. “Someone good is coming to help you.” He told them “khtos harnyy ye maybutniy do dopomoha vy.”

Outside the warehouse night had fallen and lay where it fell, dark and dangerous. The car keys he had taken from the side of the plastic chair, together with the envelope with his money, would come in handy.

The Chrysler was still parked outside. It was a new model 300, big and ostentatious. It suited his mood. He climbed in and put it into drive.

He didn’t give a thought about the work he had just done.

He had been recommended to the Federal agency by his police captain, Carlyle. This was the seventh batch of people he had prevented being taken on the last lap of the trafficking journey that for most of them had started in Eastern Europe though on two occasions it had been Asian girls. It wasn’t always either women or girls either; twice he had rescued small groups of youths whose ultimate destination he didn’t dwell on too closely.

Kimball knew about this sideline of his, his special assignments, and obviously the Captain but no one else in the police force. He hadn’t told Suzy. Or Sara.

He had never asked Carlyle why he had been selected. He treated the jobs as an extension of his normal work. He always worked alone, despite Kimball offering each and every time. He worked alone on these ones and that was the way he liked it. There was an element of undercover work when he had to infiltrate the US side of the gang. He found it easy to gain the trust of men he despised. It was all an act but it didn’t slow him down when he had to finish the job.

Now this particular job was finished he really should go home.