



John Bailey has a history of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The former war correspondent has been kidnapped and tortured – twice. Finally he’s living something that resembles a normal life. But all that changes when a terrorist murders a woman in front of Bailey in London.

The mastermind behind the attack is Mustafa al-Baghdadi – No.1 on the FBI’s most wanted list – and the man who tortured Bailey in Fallujah a decade ago.

Mustafa has a deadly axe to grind with Bailey. He taunts him with threats of more attacks in other cities, closer to home. Back in Sydney, the people who matter most to Bailey have become targets.

Bailey turns to the only man who can help – ruthless CIA veteran Ronnie Johnson – to bring down the world’s most deadly terrorist.

**‘Utterly compelling and terrifyingly timely.
I could not put it down.’**

Pip Drysdale, bestselling author of *The Sunday Girl*

**‘As a correspondent, I lived this world.
Tim Ayliffe has written it.’**

Stan Grant, writer and broadcaster

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THRILLER

CHAPTER 1

London

‘Any questions?’

John Bailey was standing behind a podium looking out warily over the packed conference room.

‘Anyone?’

Bailey had been invited to Chatham House to give a speech about Islamic terrorism because his experiences as a former Middle East Correspondent were unique. He had been kidnapped and tortured by extremists in Iraq.

Some of the people in the crowd looked even more relieved than he was that the speech was over. Most were already on their feet, heading for the exit where his editor from *The Journal*, Gerald Summers, was schmoozing with a woman from British intelligence.

He stepped down from the podium and started weaving his way towards the back of the room. By the time he got there it was clear that something was wrong.

‘What’re you doing? Move!’ A man rammed his shoulder into Bailey’s chest. ‘Don’t go outside, it’s not safe!’

‘Take it easy, fella.’ Bailey patted the guy on the shoulder, trying to calm him down. ‘What’s happened?’

The guy was already gone, pushing his way towards the other side of the room.

Bailey turned his attention towards the commotion at the door. The people who'd left Chatham House were streaming back inside. Panicked, running from something, or someone.

Bailey went against the tide, heading for the big blue door. Old habit.

'Excuse me. Excuse me, please.'

He made it to the entrance and hugged the doorframe until he spotted a gap, slipping outside into the dim afternoon light. A misty rain was falling, bathing the ground in a shiny slick, reflecting the grey sky above.

'Get back! Get back!'

A policeman was standing on the edge of the footpath, his hands outstretched, ordering people to move away.

'Everybody, get back! Get back, now!'

The cop was barking orders at the crowd while keeping one eye on the cause of the commotion on the edge of St James's Square.

A man dressed in a black hoodie and jeans, a woman kneeling at his feet.

The man was holding her by the hair, yanking it backwards, and waving a large knife at the people who had decided not to run. His audience. Some of them had mobile phones, filming the violent scene unfolding in front of them. Others stood with mouths wide-open, feet frozen to the concrete, their fear sailing through the crowd like a rampant ghost.

'Please . . . please. No.'

The woman was desperately pleading for her life.

'Shut up!' The man screamed at her, before turning his attention back to the crowd. 'For the bombs, the bullets and the occupation of our lands!'

He had a thick North London accent. Bailey couldn't quite make out the colour of his skin because of the shadow of the hoodie on his face.

‘Put down the knife.’ The policeman stepped towards him. ‘It doesn’t need to be this way. You don’t want to do anything stupid.’

‘You’re the criminal, not me!’

Bailey recognised the woman on her knees. She had been at the conference, one of the earnest faces that had watched him deliver his speech. She looked like she was aged around forty. Black overcoat, navy suit, scarf torn away, lying on the road beside her.

‘Please, don’t do this. Please! I have children. I have –’

‘Shut up!’

‘Don’t!’ The policeman edged closer. ‘Don’t do it.’

The man raised the knife again, pointing it at the sky. ‘The war is here! Allahu Akbar!’

He plunged the knife into the woman’s throat, sending a spray of blood onto the road, cutting deep, until the blood was rushing down her chest, transforming the colour of her dress from blue to purple. She slumped to the ground, a large pool of blood gathering around her head and shoulders in a dark, contorted halo. Bailey studied her face, her vacant stare, as the dark pool expanded, slowly, on the bitumen – the life flowing out of her – eventually touching the foot of her killer.

The policeman turned back to the crowd of horrified onlookers, his face the colour of ash.

‘Get back, all of you!’

He looked like he was fresh out of the academy. The poor bastard didn’t even carry a gun. Hardly any British police did. His only weapon was the heavy baton that he was clutching, tightly, in his right hand.

He turned back to the man in the hoodie. ‘Put down the knife! This is your last chance. Put down the knife!’

The man in the hoodie pointed at the small gathering of people on the steps at Chatham House. ‘You want to know about terrorism? Look at yourselves!’

A grey BMW four-wheel drive skidded to a stop on the northern corner of St James's Square. The doors flew open, four men jumped out, dressed in black with helmets, ballistic vests and semi-automatic rifles. Members of the London Metropolitan Police's Counter Terrorism Command known as SO15. The rapid response team whose sole purpose was stopping terrorists. Bailey knew these guys. He'd seen them take down a cell in London back in 2005. Within seconds, they were fanning out across the street, the butts of their rifles locked on their shoulders, fingers on triggers, muzzles pointed at the man in the hoodie.

'Put down the weapon!' one of them yelled.

The bloke with the knife turned his head towards the guns now trained on him, then back at the people on the footpath.

'You will all see! You will pay for what you do!'

He was waving his knife at the people watching, some of them still filming. Videos that would later be used as cheap, effective propaganda by terrorist recruiters online.

'For the last time, put down the knife!'

The man lowered the blade, stepping over the woman's body, moving towards the crowd.

'You're all slaves!'

The armed police edged closer, their hundreds of hours of training ensuring that they moved as one.

The man took another step towards the footpath, pulling his hoodie back off his head. Bailey was less than ten metres away. He had a clear view of his face. Young. Anglo. Red hair. Freckles. Barely a man. A crazed look in his bloodshot eyes. Bailey had seen eyes like that before. Militia fighters pumped up on amphetamines. Another place. Another time. The same hateful ideology.

'Don't do it, mate,' the policeman with the baton in his hand said. 'Just put down the knife.'

‘Don’t do it!’ Bailey heard himself call out.

The young man looked at Bailey, like he knew him, holding his stare. Smiling.

‘Don’t,’ Bailey tried again. ‘It’s not worth it.’

The man turned away, surveying the crowd until he found what he was looking for – a kid holding a smartphone, filming the show. He lifted the knife again, shoulder height, and ran directly towards him.

POP! POP! POP! POP! POP! POP! POP! POP!

The police opened fire, their bullets pounding into his chest, the impact slamming him to the ground. They moved in quickly, one of them kicking away the knife from his hand, sending it scuttling across the road. There was no resistance. He was already dead.

The policeman with the baton ran over to the woman on the ground. She still hadn’t moved. Down on one knee, he touched her neck, desperate for a way to bring her back to life. It was useless. Both carotid arteries had been severed. She was gone.

‘Bailey!’ A hand landed on Bailey’s shoulder and he spun around, startled.

Gerald.

‘What on earth just happened?’

Bailey said nothing, turning back to the two bodies on the road.

The crowd started building again. People were coming back outside from Chatham House, the East India Club, the London Library and the other buildings that surrounded the square. He could hear the sounds of sirens in the distance. Getting louder. Closer.

A policeman was talking to the kid with the smartphone, asking him about the video and if he had broadcast it live. The kid was nodding his head. He had. He didn’t know why.

A teenage punter with a smartphone, the unwitting producer of a terrorist snuff film.

‘Bailey?’ Gerald tried again. ‘Bailey, are you okay?’

‘Another one.’

‘What?’

‘Another lost kid, brainwashed by these bastards.’

‘It’s a bloody –’

‘And that woman.’ Bailey pointed at the body a few metres from where the young man was lying, riddled with bullets, on the road.

‘She was here for the conference. I remember seeing her inside.’

‘Bloody hell,’ Gerald said. ‘You’re kidding.’

‘No. I’m not.’

Poor woman, thought Bailey. One of her last experiences was having to sit through his crappy speech on one of those uncomfortable red chairs.

‘I’ve got this covered, guys.’ Candice Simmons appeared beside them.

Simmons was the young reporter Gerald had sent to London to replace Bailey after his breakdown. He knew her type and he didn’t like her.

‘I’ve already fired off a tweet and spoken to the desk.’

‘Thanks, Candice,’ Gerald said.

‘What’d you see?’ Bailey said.

‘Enough.’

Simmons was ambitious. Bailey didn’t have a problem with that, as long as it didn’t get in the way of the truth. Not everyone was looking for the truth these days.

‘Like I said, I’ve got this,’ she said.

‘You can take the aftermath. The investigation. I’m going to tell people what happened.’

‘Now, hang on!’

Bailey stared at her. ‘Where were you?’

‘Inside.’

‘Then you didn’t see what happened.’

‘No, but videos will be online within seconds.’ She pointed at the crowd of people, many of them with heads bowed, staring into their phones. ‘I’m the correspondent and –’

‘And what?’ Bailey looked at Gerald, waiting for him to intervene.

Gerald Summers was *The Journal’s* editor. It was his call.

‘What did you see, Bailey?’

Too much.

‘Everything.’

Bailey looked Gerald in the eyes, taking a moment to reassure his old friend that he had this.

‘Candice,’ Gerald turned to Simmons, ‘Bailey does the lead. The blow by blow on the ground. The first-person about the shit show that he saw.’

‘But –’

‘Decision’s made. Get moving.’

Simmons nodded her head and shot Bailey a fuck-you glare. There wasn’t time to argue. A policeman was preparing to say something to a small gathering of reporters who were already yelling questions from the footpath. Candice headed in their direction.

‘You sure you’re okay with this, Bailey?’

‘Why wouldn’t I be?’ Bailey didn’t like what Gerald was suggesting. ‘What do you want? A thousand words?’

‘Whatever you need. Quick as you can.’ Gerald looked at his watch. ‘It’s the middle of the night in Sydney. I’m going to organise another print run for metros.’

STATE OF FEAR

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