

# Vengeance

Based on "UFO" the science-fiction TV series created by  
Gerry and Sylvia Anderson and Reg Hill (1969-1970)  
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## Chapter One - 1985

Commander Edward Straker, supreme head of SHADO and Omega, looked up from the letter he was holding in consternation. The letter had been sent to Ed Straker, movie mogul, head of Harlington-Straker Films, and arrived in his office with a stack of other mail items, courtesy of Miss Eland, his trusted aide and secretary.

There was no return address on the envelope. Miss Eland, suspicious as usual (and he was grateful for her attitude!), had opened the letter and even had it fingerprinted before handing it over. The fingerprint trace revealed nothing - whoever sent it was not in "the system" It was sent unsigned, and the contents were such that Miss Eland opted to show it to Straker because it contained personal information.

"Dear Mr Straker," it started, "I should have apprised you of this information many years ago but I was selfishly concerned for my own safety. The person involved in the situation I am about to describe to you threatened me once quite seriously with bodily harm, when I objected to his actions," the silver haired commander kept reading, "As you are likely aware, your ex-wife, Mary, ended up divorced from her second husband Ralph Rutland, several years after your son's death. She moved quite a distance away from her original home with him - her parents had both died in the interim and she really had no place left to go. The divorce was predicated on her fear for her own life. What you may or may not have known is that she was a victim of domestic violence. *Worse yet, so was your son.*"

A terrible pain spread from Straker's chest down his abdomen. In the years following his divorce from Mary, he tried to see as little of her as possible and the creation of SHADO and Omega had occupied the lion's share of his time. Then Mary bowed to her parents' demands that she wed again and that's when

Rutland came into the picture. Straker had never liked him - and not just because he was Mary's new husband. There was something...else...that didn't feel right, and Straker, too busy, didn't pay much attention. Rutland made it all too obvious that he didn't like Straker coming to the house to collect Johnnie, or even speaking to Mary. Straker tried to see Johnnie as much as his schedule permitted. Thinking back, he had seen old scars and bruises on his son, but he attributed them to the life of an active boy, playing sports, rough-housing, et al.

The letter continued, "Ralph Rutland abused Mary from the time of their marriage, and Johnnie was also victimized. He was hospitalized a number of times for broken bones - they were not accidents. I was an unfortunate witness to one of those incidents and it was at that point Rutland threatened me if I went to the authorities. I'm ashamed to say I didn't speak up sooner. After your son was killed in that road incident, I thought it best to keep quiet. But, once Mary filed for divorce, I knew the worst - that Rutland had not stopped abusing *her*."

There was a time, how long had it been? when Mary's suffering would have moved Straker. Once he had loved her. But both of them had different expectations of marriage and that was in part what had gone wrong. If heading up SHADO and Omega had not become the focus of his life, would they have ended up divorced anyway? And although he might deny it, he was for a time upset Mary had wasted so little time tying the knot again, mostly for Johnnie's sake. How would a stepfather treat the child of another man?

The last paragraph read, "Perhaps it is too late now, my coming forward with this information. But I felt I had to get it off my conscience. I cannot help feeling responsible in some way for the abuse - I didn't report it at the time. I should have at least called the police."

Straker sat staring down at the hand-written letter. He didn't recognize the writing at all. Was it real? Was it some sort of hoax? He had to be honest - he remembered how nervous Mary was of her husband when he used to go to the house to pick up Johnnie. He didn't connect it in any way to abuse. *But, he should have*. All the signs were there. Not only was Mary being abused, but so was his son. *His son*. He had sacrificed them both to SHADO and Omega. His mind was so totally engaged in higher things that he couldn't even see his ex-wife and his child were being terrorized and hurt.

At this point, what could he do? Johnnie was dead. Mary screamed that she never wanted to see him again the night Johnnie died. He made certain he never called or crossed her path in the years since. More than anything, the pain in his chest rose up into a cloud that blanketed his whole body. Tears formed. He brought his right fist down on his plexi-glass desk, but it didn't make a very

satisfying sound. Then he saw Ralph Rutland in his mind...that bearded bastard who lorded it over Mary and injured his son - the same man who wanted to claim Johnnie as his own by registering his name in the hospital as John Rutland, not John Straker.

Anger didn't come easy to Ed Straker. He'd spent so many years controlling his own emotions and funneling his brains into the war against the aliens that human considerations had been brutally pushed aside. Alec Freeman had often accused him of being as inhuman as the aliens because he didn't think in human terms.

But, anger was welling up in Ed Straker now. Anger, regret and something else unfamiliar to him. A desire for vengeance...

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Straker decided, just out of curiosity's sake, to have Omega's security people track down both Mary and Rutland. Nobody asked any questions about his request. If the boss wanted something done, it was likely for a good reason. Most of them had no clue Straker had ever been married or divorced, had a child.

A young Canadian, attached to Omega's security branch, sat down in front of Straker's plex-glas desk to brief him, "We've located both the individuals you asked about," Allan Leslie started off, "Mary Rutland is livin' in Manchester, she moved there after her divorce from a Ralph Rutland," he looked up and tilted his head at his commander, "The same Ralph Rutland you asked about is still here in the local area - both addresses are in this file," he passed the plastic covered documents to Straker.

"Maybe I shouldn't mention this," Leslie started uncertainly, "But we turned up information that Mary Rutland's first marriage was to... you... an' you had a kid..."

Straker stood up and crossed his arms over his torso, turning away so Leslie couldn't read the emotions in his face until he was more controlled. "That's right. This is a personal thing. I'd appreciate it if you regarded it as such." The blue eyes were cold and stony when he turned to face the Omega operative.

"Yessir," Leslie waited until Straker nodded towards the door, and then left.

Opening the files. Straker noted Mary's Manchester address and phone number. He had no intention of contacting her. Anything that had passed between them was long water under the bridge. Over. Ended.

Ralph Rutland, though, was another issue altogether. The files gave his address, the old house he had once occupied with Mary and Johnnie, and the phone number. It gave his place of work and the phone number there as well.

Straker lit one of his cigarillos. He sat back in his chair, thinking. Thinking about the last time he'd seen Johnnie, in the hospital, after the car accident. The frail little body, the silvery blonde hair so much like his own. It had ripped his heart out to see his son that way. Worse yet, he had gambled on using SHADO's resources for personal reasons, and Johnnie had died anyway. Could he dare use SHADO and Omega's resources once again for a personal mission?

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In the file folder Allan Leslie had provided was information on where Rutland worked. In fact, no longer married, Rutland worked a night shift at the meat processing plant where he'd been employed for several decades. Instead of moving up the ladder of company leadership, Rutland had stayed on the slaughtering floor - was he some sort of pariah there too?

For some strange reason, Straker felt compelled to take himself to the meat plant just at the time Rutland would be getting off. He watched as dozens of night shift workers emptied out of the building. And there he was - Rutland. Still bearded, somehow menacing - or was it just that Straker was seeing him now through eyes made more aware?

He watched the man get into a battered-looking truck, gun it into reverse, and scream out of the parking lot. Straker, driving a loaner from the Harlington-Straker film lot, followed Rutland at a discreet distance, taking care to keep pace but to appear unobtrusive. Besides, Rutland had no reason to fear anyone following him. He was secure in the knowledge that nobody really knew about the abuse he meted out to his former wife and his step-son. This bastard actually slept nights!

Straker passed the driveway as Rutland turned into the old house he used to occupy with Mary and Johnnie. The garden had grown up into a wild tangle. The yard looked unkempt and uncared for. Johnnie's tree fort was a shambles - pieces of it now on the ground. The house itself looked scarred by weather and ill-fortune.

Parking carefully in a spot usually used by car-poolers, Straker walked back towards the house. The sun was coming up with iridescent hues in the sky - it had rained overnight. Spiderwebs hanging off tangled vines and plants glistened in the new light. What was he doing there, he thought to himself?

Crouching under the kitchen window, Straker watched Rutland take a bottle of beer out of the fridge, snap off the lid and tilt it high. He belched and patted his stomach, before settling into an easy chair, and picking up the remote to turn on the telly.

He crept off back to his car. What had this little foray done but to stoke his

anger? Straker felt impotent at that moment. He could command the most powerful people and hardware on the planet to kill aliens, but what could he do against the insidiousness of this man, Rutland?

## Chapter Two

Alec Freeman entered his boss' office, helped himself to a shot of whisky from Straker's bar, and sat down facing him to light a cigarette, "I hear you've been having some personal research done lately."

Straker blew several puffs of smoke before responding, "What makes you say that?" he was careful to keep his voice level, even amused.

"Oh, I have my sources..." Alec leaned forward and pointed his ciggie at Straker, "Just why are you interested in Mary Rutland after all these years?"

"Who says I am?" Straker parried, an almost insolent smile on his face.

"That doesn't matter - now tell me why you'd want to open up that wound at this point in time?"

"No, Alec, I just wanted to know she was getting on ok by herself. I haven't personally contacted her and I don't intend to. I can find out things by other means."

"She divorced Rutland years ago, didn't she?" Alec asked, disingenuously.

"Yes, I believe so."

"You *know* so!"

"I can't help it if information of that sort comes to me occasionally..."

"Or is ferreted out for you by Omega's security people."

"Rarely do I ever utilize organizational resources for myself..." Straker started to say.

"And we all know how well the last time worked out, don't we?" Alec's face was grim, referring to the time Straker tried to divert an Omega aircraft directly to England with the rare vaccine for Johnnie.

"If you have no other reason to be in my office than to harass me, you can just take yourself off to where you'll do more good," Straker pursed his lips, "And that's an order!"

Alec rose from his chair and stubbed out his ciggie in the large glass ashtray on Straker's desk, "Who else around here is going to keep you from hurting yourself?" The office doors swished open and he was gone.

He was almost about to pick up the phone and blast Allan Leslie for ratting him out, when he realized it didn't have to be Al who had a big mouth. Alec had

tons of contacts with all kinds of staffers in Omega, and especially their security teams. Any one of them could have advised Alec... the point being that Alec thought the reason Straker had asked for the information in the first place was because of Mary. He didn't mention Straker's interest in Rutland...

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The phone was in his hand several times, and each time he put the receiver back on the cradle. Straker looked at the clock. He had memorized Mary's new phone number in Manchester and was debating mentally whether to call her or not to grill her about the abuse both she and Johnnie had taken from Rutland. Why hadn't she told Straker himself? Didn't she trust Straker to do something to help them? Or was she afraid to admit the truth - that her second marriage had failed even more than her first. Pride was a powerful silencer, he knew. His own pride was partly what was keeping him from actually punching that number in and calling her. After all these years, could he face the anger and pain in her voice about Johnnie's death? Could he face his own pain about the son he barely knew - and admit he not only didn't know Rutland was beating Johnnie, but hadn't spent sufficient time with the boy to realize what was going on?

He sighed and got up from his desk. He pounded his own fist against his temple in frustration and grief several times. All he had for proof was that unsigned letter. Omega's security branch had tried very hard to trace it down but had no luck at all. Whoever sent it was totally off the security radar screen - fingerprints, DNA, et al had come up with nothing. If he could only talk to the writer and determine how much opportunity they had to know there was family abuse going on in the Rutland house years ago. Was it a neighbour, a family member, someone who worked with Rutland - who?

That he had personally disliked Rutland made it easy to suppose him guilty of the accusations in that letter. But, logical man that he was, Straker couldn't help being suspicious. The letter had been addressed to him in his capacity as Ed Straker, the film mogul. Was someone out there hoping for him to take that information at face value and do something about it? Like what? What *could* he do about something that had taken place so long ago? There was no proof, certainly not the kind of proof that a court of law would require to make accusations and have Rutland arrested. Not unless Mary came forward and said there had indeed been abuse and her divorce had stemmed from that. And why would Mary, even if it had all been true, come forward now, when she hadn't charged Rutland with such crimes at the time of the divorce. Was she too ashamed to admit what had been happening? From her attitude the last time Straker had seen her, helping him in any way, even to make trouble for her

ex-husband, would be unlikely. She hated him. Had hated him from that day forward. Had left him to suffer Johnnie's loss on his own, while she took what lousy comfort Rutland had offered her.

Straker hadn't kept a picture of Johnnie up anywhere. The pain had been too fresh at the time of the boy's death, and somehow he just never seemed to bother when some time had passed. He realized that his ex wife and his son had been a very small portion of his life once the divorce had become official, and he was content to have it so - SHADO's main drive to get hardware up and running, Omega's offices being set up across the world - all those things were far more important. Had to be more important - what were one woman and one child against the possibility of an alien invasion that could potentially wipe out millions of women and children globally?

Guilt wasn't an emotion Straker could ever call his own for the most part. Like many military commanders, he had become more than a little hardened to the fact he had to send his people into dangerous situations every day. In a sense, his command called upon him to decide who lived and who died - and the deaths he wanted to see the most were the aliens'. He didn't like to hear that his people had been killed in operations, but it was a reality impossible to avoid. Straker knew for his own mental health and sanity, he couldn't spend too much time worrying about those things. SHADO needed him for bigger considerations.

But to see evidence of his son's possible abuse and pass it off because he really couldn't take the time to question the bruises and red marks, that there was something more vital than his son's well-being, filled him with a guilt and a self disgust that wasn't easily swept away. Johnnie had been his own flesh and blood. The boy had deserved more in every way - and yet for the ten years of his life, Straker saw him as a pound note figure in his cheque book every month - and not much more. He didn't even really see much of Johnnie until he was toilet trained - not wanting the bother of such troublesome things in his life - even for the few hours he took him out once a month. Talking to a child was not something Straker did easily. He had no silly sound effects, no funny stories, no family of his own to share him with. Besides, the visits were usually sandwiched between SHADO and/or Omega business and his mind wasn't really on the boy. He was fixated on what was happening at the office in his absence. So Johnnie never got the full measure of his father's attention or love even during those occasional court mandated visits. Straker had no idea if his son had been a good student, had buddies, watched TV shows, was involved in certain sports, or spent time with Mary's parents. He hadn't known his son at all. The shame and guilt of all that consumed him. Mary knew very well Straker wasn't taking the personal side

of his relationship with Johnnie very seriously - no matter how promptly deposited the alimony and child support cheques had been.

Straker stood up and hugged himself. He'd been doing that a lot, ever since the letter had arrived. He headed for the bathtub, doffing his cream coloured jumpsuit, mock turtleneck and underwear as he went along. They landed at the foot of his bed in a heap...

What was he going to do about this? The hot water felt good. The thought of Rutland, working, eating, living - business as usual - seemed to mock him. If the accusations were true - Rutland had made life a hell for those Straker should have loved the most. Johnnie died as a victim of Rutland's abuse, but also as a victim of his own father's lack of interest. Why would Rutland abuse Mary and Johnnie? What was it about them that he felt he could abuse them with impunity? Straker started thinking about "victimology" - the profiling of the innocents to determine what made them the targets of criminal violence.

Straker knew Mary herself could be a handful. She was childishly immature, had a hair trigger temper, was capable of intense jealousy, and she seemed to have the idea that any husband she married should put her before everything - even his job, his own family - the works. Mary, he realized, had been a spoiled only child with doting parents. He grew up alone, in a motherless home with an alcoholic father and a succession of housekeepers. Once he left home to study for his undergrad degree, he didn't bother going home - and he didn't think that offended his father anyway. It was only in later years that Straker came to understand his father's own drivenness - when it surfaced in himself. In a very similar way, Straker Senior had sacrificed *his* son the same way Straker Junior had sacrificed Johnnie.

Even so, Mary's personal faults did not warrant abuse. Nobody did. He also knew many women were still ashamed to come forward to the police and lay charges on abusive spouses. Such things were still considered private issues and the police didn't like to get involved in them. It was supposed that the families should be able to work things out themselves - but of course the newspapers were rife with terrible stories of husbands beating their wives to death, or parents killing their own children for one reason or another. Until these incidents hit the headlines, they were kept behind closed doors - to keep the private shame from becoming public - and alas - to keep social services from interfering where they weren't asked. The bloody truth was: a child's worst enemy could be a parent or a step-parent, not the unknown stranger on the dark street.

What reasons would Rutland have had to abuse Johnnie? Although Straker didn't spend much time with the boy, he found him reasonably well behaved and

intelligent. Mary had been so damaged at Johnnie's birth that she was rendered unable to have more children. Maybe Rutland resented raising a child that was not his, and not able to have any of his own with Mary. Surely it couldn't have been an issue of money? Straker sent big cheques for both Johnnie and Mary - all Rutland had to do was utilize the money to pay the bills. There had even been a college fund for Johnnie started by Straker himself - what had happened to *that* money once Johnnie was dead? It was worth thousands of pounds and Mary was the personal administrator of the fund. Did Rutland feel she should have shared the money with him?

Had Johnnie resented Rutland? Had he blamed Rutland for the fact his parents were no longer married? The second wedding had taken place only a year or two after the divorce, when Johnnie was too young to understand anything about it. What, in fact, had Johnnie known or understood about why his parents were not together? Children were not always able to wrap their heads around divorce and such. Because their visiting times were so short and so far between, Straker didn't like to discuss anything unpleasant with the boy, and Johnnie never asked embarrassing questions. Maybe Johnnie was rude to Rutland, maybe they didn't get on. Maybe Johnnie saw Rutland abuse his mother and tried unsuccessfully to help her. Was he simply collateral damage in the abuse Rutland meted out to Mary? After all, a ten year old boy was no match for an enraged man Rutland's size.

Had Mary failed to tell Straker about the abuse because she would have had to share the same guilt - that she'd been unable to protect Johnnie? Once Johnnie was dead - the whole point was moot. There would be no more support payments coming from Straker and she would be able to rely only on what Rutland brought into the house. She had never worked outside the home - indeed she really didn't have any marketable skills beyond being a good cook and a mother. The last transaction Straker had made to her was to pay for Johnnie's funeral and internment. It was handled through the lawyer. He hadn't attended the funeral, preferring to go to Johnnie's gravesite a few days later to say his own farewells. He couldn't stand to see Mary's eyes - and perhaps she couldn't stand to see his, either.

What happened to a couple who had for a time loved so passionately and then ended up hating each other just as passionately? It was a question Straker never bothered with. It meant introspection and he didn't have time for that in his life. His work kept him from going through some of the more normal after-effects of divorce and loss of a child. He kept his eyes on the prize, so to speak, and everything else just faded into the background. Maybe there was more of his

own father in him than he had ever wanted to admit!

## Chapter Three

After a very poor night's sleep, Straker got up and made himself some instant coffee. Ewww. He told himself he'd get to work and have some decent java there. He stood in the shower for many minutes, just letting the hot water flow painfully down the back of his neck. The specter of Rutland beating Mary and Johnnie had occupied his mind for most of the night.

Part of him wondered if he should face Rutland man to man and throw accusations in his face to see what he'd say. Was Rutland the kind who'd own up to it, or would he lie to protect himself? Any man who beat on a woman and a defenseless child was a coward in Straker's point of view.

Was there anything he could do to Rutland in terms of pay-back that would be appropriate? What if he found a way to have Rutland fired from his job? Could he have him investigated, even belatedly, by the police? Was any of this even remotely worth thinking about? The letter was not proof - in a court of law - it would be considered hearsay and not even admissible as evidence. After all, anyone could have written that letter...

After all that thinking, he'd worn himself a little mental rut in his brain. There was no proof of the abuse, Mary hadn't charged Rutland, not even at the time of the divorce, and too many years had passed by since Johnnie's death. Straker had ceased to be a functional part of their lives once the marriage between them had ended. Mary chose to wed Rutland (although to some degree with her parents' insistence) and she'd "made her bed". Why should Straker concern himself with what happened in that second marriage? Except, a small niggling finger kept poking him in his heart - had his son really been mistreated - and should he have noticed and taken action? Somehow he felt ill at the thought he hadn't handled the situation well at all - when he'd had the chance. His own son...his own son.

More and more, Straker wanted to confront Rutland, to accuse him, to hear his admission of guilt or denial of the crime. Part of him knew it wasn't a rational desire, and part of him wanted to beat the truth out of Rutland and enjoy hurting him as he'd hurt Mary and Johnnie. But what if the abuse hadn't happened at all? What if the letter detailing the abuse was some sort of red herring meant to set him off to precipitate retributory action on an innocent man? What if the letter-writer was aiming to get Ed Straker, the film mogul, in some sort of trouble? He

couldn't take any unnecessary risks because Ed Straker, the film mogul, was also Commander Straker, supreme head of SHADO and Omega.

If he was going to confront Rutland, it had to be in a fashion that was to his own advantage and on his own terms. Rutland was a slightly larger man than himself, although with his own martial arts training, he was Rutland's match in every way. Brute force against thoughtful tactics, rarely if ever, won. Plus he had every intention of carrying a weapon. It would be a last resort; he hoped to use it only to make Rutland confess if necessary.

But, supposing Rutland *did* confess to the abuse, what then? What was Straker's next move? Reporting him to the authorities wouldn't do any good. There was no real evidence, unless he could wear a wire and record his meeting with Rutland, getting a confession out of him. No time Rutland could do in prison would repay the misery he'd meted out to Mary and Johnnie.

For the first time in his life, Straker was running on emotion, and he didn't like it, but he still felt compelled to pursue it. The very thought his son had been abused by this man, outraged him, but down inside was another emotion - shame. Shame for the fact he'd ignored the obvious. Why hadn't Johnnie told him about the abuse, even if Mary hadn't? Or had Johnnie been threatened not to tell anyone? That was a common tactic used by abusers. Shame was driving him mad...

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It was still dark when Straker approached Rutland's house by car. He hadn't used his own car of course - he'd appropriated one from the studio's car pool with an untraceable license plate. There were lights on in the house and Rutland's vehicle was there. This surprised Straker because Rutland wasn't due home from work for another fifteen minutes. Had he called in sick to work? If so, why was he up at that hour?

Parking the car out of sight as he'd done before, Straker quietly made his way up to the window he'd look into on his last foray to the house. He saw Rutland through the glass, seemingly asleep in his chair, facing the television. There was an opened beer sitting on the table beside him. But no movement. And the TV was driveling on mindlessly about haute couture, a subject Straker couldn't imagine Rutland being interested in.

Patting his jacket, inside which his weapon rested, he pressed his finger to the doorbell, and waited. Rutland did not move from his chair. The volume on the TV didn't lessen. The beer bottle was sweating. Why didn't Rutland answer the door? Straker leaned on the doorbell again - it rang stridently enough to wake the dead. But the big man in the battered armchair did not move.

Something was not *right*. Straker's original anger was now overcome with alarm and frustration. He put his hand on the door handle, and the door creaked open easily. It was not locked. Was there any way Rutland could have known he was coming to confront him? That seemed absolutely impossible. Rutland hadn't seen Straker in years...

Slipping inside, Straker drew his gun from his jacket, and padded over to the figure in the armchair. He looked down at Rutland. A bloody hole was evident in his forehead. Gunpowder burns stippled the bullet's point of entry. Pressing his fingers to a pulse point, Straker realized Rutland was dead. Very dead. And just recently dead, judging by the warmth of the body.

Before he could even think of making a phone call or exiting the house himself, he was startled by a tiny sound. Senses now on high alert, Straker craned his head and tried to locate where the sound had come from. There was a closet in the room across from the armchair and the now dead Rutland. And its door was ajar...

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Holding his weapon at the ready, Straker grabbed the closet doorjamb and flung it open. There was a movement under the clothes hanging, and he reached in to grab whoever was there. In the light, he could see blonde hair...

A familiar face from the past looked up into his...dazed and holding a 9 mm Glock in her right hand. Several gobs of back splattered blood decorated her overcoat...and her hair was disheveled...

"My God, *Mary!* What are you doing here?" Straker demanded, pulling her up to her feet.

Her eyes seemed to see him and yet not see him. She looked up at him, bewildered and hurt. Mary flung his hand off and staggered - Straker caught her, disarming her as he took the weight of her body against his own.

"Mary, did you shoot Rutland?" Straker couldn't believe he was asking the question as he gently shook her, trying to force some sense of reckoning into her blurred eyes.

She looked up at him mutely, her mouth working, until finally a hoarse bleat exited her mouth, and she passed out. Mary fell against him completely and he dropped with her to the floor. Unable to get her to respond, Straker's mind raced: *What in the name of God should I do?*

There seemed only one possible answer: get her and himself out of there before any police showed up. How he got her out of the house and to the passenger seat of his car, he later could not remember. He jammed the car into reverse, did a U-turn, gunned the vehicle forward and cursed the fact this loaner

had no car phone. What could he do with her? It seemed obvious that Mary had killed Rutland. And hadn't he even wondered at the possibility of doing just that himself? He had come armed, after all, to his confrontation with the man.

Where could he take her? Where would be safe enough to hide her until he could decide what to do next? He couldn't take her to the studio! Not knowing what else to do, Straker headed the car in the direction of his own home...

## Chapter Four

He slipped the car into his own driveway as quietly as possible. It was dawn, and he hoped his neighbours were not up yet. Straker opened the passenger door and encircled Mary's inert body with an arm until he could get her out of the seat. She wasn't really conscious, but he managed to get her to the back door. Balancing her while he got his keys out was the worst trick of all.

Once inside, Straker ungraciously dropped Mary on the living room couch, and realized he had done so because he himself was shaking. He lowered himself to the floor beside the couch and pulled out the two weapons - his own and Mary's. What to do with Mary's? One of them was certainly the murder weapon. It had to be disposed of - carefully. His own was licensed. Straker never once considered turning Mary over to the police - but why not? She was no longer his wife. He held no responsibility for her. He no longer even loved her - he knew that to be true. But she had been the mother of their child, and something in his long-hardened heart told him he owed her for that, if nothing else. And she was in no condition to talk to the police or even participate in her own defense.

Scrabbling up off the floor, he made some quick decisions. First off, he had to keep Mary under wraps until he could get some help for the situation. He stripped her of the blood-spattered overcoat and washed her face. Straker then went into his bedroom and hauled an old animal skin coverlet off and brought it out to spread over Mary on the couch. Then he turned to the phone. Who should he call? Who could he trust? Not Alec - Alec would have too much to say and Straker didn't want to deal with that. His thoughts chased each other around his brain for a couple more moments and then he picked up the receiver - he'd call Omega security man Allan Leslie - he'd know what to do.

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It was amazing how quickly Allan Leslie arrived at Straker's home in an unmarked car. He came in, looked at Mary passed out on the couch, and asked

for her weapon.

“What do you need that for?” the silver haired commander asked, his blue eyes looking haunted.

“Gotta get rid of it, right? Gotta dispose of the murder weapon for good. Don't want it turnin' up when the cops start their investigation. I'll get some guys over to Rutland's place and wipe it down, get ridda prints, find her purse and her rental car. What's *yer* plan? I take it yer not gonna turn her over to the cops?” Leslie replied.

“Guess I hadn't thought that far ahead,” Straker looked at Leslie gratefully - he knew he was so shaken himself he wasn't firing on all thrusters. At least Leslie had a cool head for this. He took Mary's weapon out of hiding and handed it over.

Leslie whistled softly, “Big gun for a lady to use...,” he took out a hankie and wiped it down, handgrip, barrel etc. Then he carefully took out the clip and wiped it too. He dropped the weapon and its clip into separate plastic bags he took out of his jacket pocket, “Gotta make sure we have no discernable prints on this thing, else the cops might be able to get somethin' usable.”

“What are you going to do with them?”

“I'll take 'em back to the studio an' dispose of 'em there in the incinerator. Same with 'er bloody overcoat - I'll take that too and get rid of it fo ya.”

“And what about her?” Straker indicated Mary, “I can't keep her here for long.”

“It's already daylight. Ya don't want your neighbours seein' either one of us tryin' to move a woman outta the house. Ya gotta keep 'er here at least until the sun goes down, when I can come back and get 'er out quietly and under over of darkness,” Leslie sprayed Mary's hands with a wet substance and looked up at Straker, “Gotta get the GSR off 'er hands.”

“I can't leave her here alone...”

“Nope, an' in *your* shape, you can't be seen at work, either. Ya look like hell. Better stay home.”

Straker caught a glimpse of himself in the plate glass of the front window and knew what Leslie had said about his appearance was true, no matter how brutally he'd said it, “Alright, I'll stay here. I'll stay home. I'll call Alec and tell him I'm... not feeling well... I'm down with some bug...”

“Right. Good man. When I come back tonight, what's yer idea on where she has to go?”

“She was living in Manchester before this... happened... I think under the circumstances we need to get her back there and make it look like she never

left.”

“That's for sure. When the cops investigate a case like this, the first suspects they canvass are family members an' ex-spouses. She'd be a prime person of interest for them. Gettin' her outta town is for the best.”

“How can we do that?”

“When I pick ‘er up tonight, I can use an Omega vehicle and drive her back up north. You can give me the address. If I can get people outta places, I can also get ‘em inta places. No sweat.”

“It's not just getting her out of town, Al. I don't know how she got her - plane, train, rental car - we need to remove evidence of tickets or whatever.. And we need to... need to remove any memories she may have of committing the crime...”

“Yer thinkin' amnesia drug? No probs. I can pick some up easy. Should wipe out the last twelve hours of her memory. I'll have my guys hack into the computer systems o' all those transportation options an' erase her name, if they can find it. It'd be easier if she registered under her own name, rather than some made up one. ”

Straker sighed heavily, “OK, then, when can you come back here?”

Leslie looked at his wristwatch, “I'll get back around ten tonight. Have ‘er ready to go. We can administer the drug here, if ya want, an' then drive ‘er back to Manchester.”

“Yes, that seems for the best...,” he grasped Leslie's arm as he turned to go, “I want you to know I appreciate everything you're doing to help me - can I continue to count on your discretion?”

Leslie shrugged, “Yer in a jam - jams just happen to be my speciality,” he grinned back mirthlessly.

\* \* \*

While Mary still seemed unconscious, Straker took the opportunity to ease out of his soiled and rumpled clothes and get in a quick shower. He dressed again in simple items he felt would be appropriate for muscling Mary out to a waiting vehicle and off to Manchester. He knew that Allan Leslie was regularly involved in extraction missions - getting SHADO and Omega personnel out of tight spots - and that he could also get into places that were seemingly tighter than Fort Knox. His branch of Omega's security forces were special and they trained all the time for odd circumstances and events. But this one had to be the oddest...

Mary had thrown off the heavy fur coverlet on the floor and was starting to move a bit. Straker went to the kitchen and fetched some cold water for her and

sat down for a moment. The last time he'd seen her, Johnnie had just died, and he would never forget that accusing look in her eyes, or the venom she had spewed at him. Hadn't she known he too was in pain over losing their child? Why was it that Mary only and ever thought of herself first and others last? He learned too late into their relationship that Mary was a classic narcissist and divorce was the only means by which he could free himself of her. Granted, she instituted the proceedings against him at the behest of her mother, but Straker knew in his heart that he could not deal with her on any level emotionally. She was like a psychic vampire, bleeding him dry of feelings.

That she'd been pretty and catered to his male ego in the beginning, at least, had been his undoing. Living his whole life with no mother and no important female in his life, he'd snapped like a trout at Mary's sweet bait. But it seemed once the ink was dry on the marriage certificate, all he could think of was how he could get out of it. When Mary announced her pregnancy, Straker opted to stay with the marriage, hoping against hope that having a child would bring more balance into Mary's topsy-turvy emotional world. And the promotion to start up SHADO had been the final lynchpin to end the marriage - Straker was almost grateful to have something else to pour his emotions and heart into.

Her blue eyes met his as she sat up, still a little dazed. She looked about her, took in her surroundings and looked back at Straker, suddenly recoiled from her former husband. It was something about Mary he'd always disliked - as though anything out of the ordinary was instantly bad. He handed her the glass of cold water and said, "You've had something of a shock. Maybe you should lie back down."

Mary clutched at the fur coverlet as though she suddenly felt naked in Straker's presence. She eyed him suspiciously and seemed afraid to even take the glass from him.

"Take it," he said quietly again, "I won't bite you - I promise."

Almost unwillingly, Mary reached out and took the glass, slopping some of the water over the sides - her actions reminded Straker of an animal in a petting zoo who wanted the treats offered by the humans but was too scared to take them.

"Why... why am I *here*?" she couldn't have said the word 'here' with more distaste than if Straker had brought her to a brothel.

"You needed to be somewhere, after the shock you had," Straker had made up his mind that he wouldn't tell her anything about Rutland's death and her part in it - unless she asked or remembered doing it.

"What shock?...I don't remember... how did I get here from Manchester?"

“I don't know, Mary. Maybe you took the train, or a rental car...”

“But, why would I come to...*your* house?”

“We had to bring you here for... protection...”

For some reason, Mary reached inside the jacket of her dress suit. She looked dismayed and then she eyed Straker suspiciously, “I had something with me...”

“You didn't have a purse, at least we didn't find it,” Straker forbore to say “at Rutland's home”. He kept using the pronoun “we”, hoping Mary would relax and not consider herself at Straker's mercy.

Suddenly, Mary sat up straight, “Did you get my letter?”

“Your letter? No, I don't think I got a letter...,” then a terrible realization swept over him - the letter he'd received detailing Rutland's abuse of Mary and Johnnie - had *she* sent it to him herself? “Uh, which letter was that...?”

“I thought I'd hear from you when you got it...,” her eyes were turning from wary to manic, “I sent it weeks ago... you never called or replied... I was sure you would... want to know... the truth...”

Straker decided to risk finding out what she knew and what she remembered, “Which truth was that, Mary?”

“Well... the truth... about... about what Ralph did to Johnnie and me...”

There was a madness in her eyes that shocked Straker but he replied, “Yes, I did get *that* letter...”

“Then why didn't you do something? Why do you always fail me? And Johnnie?”

“You didn't tell me that you wanted me to do anything specific in that letter - in fact I honestly didn't know it was from you... you didn't identify yourself as the writer of the letter... I had no proof that anything explained in that letter really happened...”

“Oh that's you alright - always needing *proof*... never taking me at my word...”

“What was I suppose to do, Mary? What did you want me to do? You and I were over long ago, and poor little Johnnie is dead. You divorced Rutland too, remember? I had nothing to do with that.”

“Poor little Johnnie,” she mimicked him, a sneer forming on her face, “How could you not see what was happening to us? How could you not rescue us? How could you just leave us there to face his brutality?”

That was the \$64,000 dollar question he'd been asking himself now ever sense the letter had arrived, “I didn't know...”

“You *should* have known! If you loved us, if you loved our child - you should have come and taken us away with you!”

“You were married to another man... I tried not to get involved...”

“Oh, not even when we were married did you want to get involved! You always held us at arm's length - there was always something much more important than your wife and child!”

There was a great deal of truth in what Mary was saying, but Straker could not face her anger. Finally he said, “Mary, once you and I divorced, we were ancient history. I thought you had a new life and I gave you enough money to care properly for Johnnie...”

“Money! As if money ever meant anything! We needed *you*!”

Shamefacedly, Straker conceded, “I thought you were someone else's responsibility once you remarried.”

After a few silent moments, Mary took up the cudgels again, “Why am I here, Ed. You still haven't really told me. You keep referring to me having had a shock...”

“You don't remember?”

“Remember what...?”

Slowly, choosing his words as carefully as possible, Straker decided to explain at least part of the situation, “I found you at Ralph Rutland's house. I think you may have witnessed a murder.”

“Murder? Who? Ralph?”

“Yes, Ralph. He's dead.”

Mary looked at him incredulously for a moment, and then she started to keel and wail, rocking back and forth on Straker's couch. In an effort to quiet her so the neighbours wouldn't hear, Straker moved over to the couch and tried to put an arm about her, but she pulled roughly away. He noticed she made a lot of noise, but there were no tears in her eyes.

“Who killed him, Ed? Did you kill him? Did you finally do what I asked you to do after all these years?”

Thunderstruck, Straker pulled away and got up off the couch. Was that what her letter was all about - she had hoped to inflame his anger to the point he would go out and kill Rutland *for* her? Had she gone mad? Why, after all these years, had she thought she could use information about domestic abuse to coerce Straker into killing the man she must have hated - perhaps hated more than Straker himself? What had pushed her over the edge? Why was she thinking this way?

The phone chimed suddenly and Straker picked it up. He was relieved to

hear Allan Leslie's voice on the other end of the line, "Can you come immediately" he asked anxiously.

"She awake?" Leslie asked.

"Yes, decidedly so," Straker answered carefully.

"She say anythin'?"

"Lots."

"She remember killin' Rutland?"

"I'm not sure..." Straker was trying to make his replies seem innocuous to the listening Mary.

"Tellya what - I'll get right over there asap - I've got a dose o' the amnesia drug we can use and then we can get 'er ready to go back to Manchester."

"That's sounds great, Al," Straker hoped his voice did not betray too much relief.

"Who's Al?" Mary queried suspiciously.

"Oh... just a friend of mine."

"Since when did you have any friends... well... except for that skirt chaser Alec Freeman..."

Trying to change the subject to one less contentious, Straker said, "Mary, you should really go back to Manchester, you know. I can help you do that"

Mary smiled, but there was no humour in her face, "Poor Ed Straker, always trying to get rid of me..."

"I just think you should be home... to... recuperate..." He was hoping to stall Mary until Leslie got there - then they'd take her down, dose her with amnesia drug, and shunt her to Manchester to sleep it off. Straker did not want to be connected to Mary's crime in any way, but he also felt sorry for her - enough not to want her to remember what she'd done - who knew what recollection of killing Rutland might do to her already fragile mental state?

It was an interminable twenty minutes before Straker got Mary to lie back down and just be quiet. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed movement coming from the kitchen and realized Leslie had let himself in the back door. He was carrying what looked like a small medical bag with him.

Mary sat up, "Who are you? How did you get in here... Ed?" her eyes accused Straker of something he couldn't identify.

Straker tried to smile, "This is my friend... Al... remember? He's a doctor, he's here to help you." How many lies had Straker told Mary over the years?

"How's that knock on the head?" Leslie tried to make futile conversation as he used a small penlight to look into Mary's eyes, pretending to check her vitals like a real physician.

“What knock on my head?”

“Ed here said you'd suffered a blow to your head - thought you might need some meds...”

Mary was too occupied with giving Straker the hairy eyeball to see Leslie's right hand slip up against her neck and press against it. The drug took effect almost immediately. The two men gently laid Mary down on the couch again.

“Now what?” Straker asked.

“We bundle ‘er up and get on the highway to Manchester.”

“The drug will take her last twelve hours of memory, I know that, but what if she eventually recalls that she killed Rutland?”

“That's a chance we're gonna have to take. Would you rat yourself out to the police if you thought you'd killed someone in cold blood? Besides, our guys found out she rented a car and drove here from Manchester - she didn't fly or take the train or any other means of transport - they wiped her ticket purchase out. There's now no record of ‘er comin' here.”

“I'm just worried that something back at that house is going to point to her...or me...”

“Our guys went in and cleaned everything up, remember? Even got her purse outta there and the rental car she used. Wiped everything down that might've had prints on it. The police aren't even there yet, but they're not gonna find a damn thing when they do arrive. Take my word for it. Now let's get on the road - it's a long drive and we only have so many hours til daylight again.”

\* \* \*

The long nightmare that had been Rutland's death and Mary's removal back to Manchester was finally over. Straker had to admire someone like Allan Leslie, who could drive every back road, waylay elevators in apartment buildings, and sneak an unconscious woman back into her lodgings, all without being seen by anyone but himself. And he definitely appreciated Leslie's matter-of-fact approach to the whole thing - like it was just another Omega training exercise...

How many hours had he been without sleep? He almost wished *he* could take a draft of the amnesia drug and just forget the whole sordid matter. Leslie had dropped him off at his house on their return trip from up north and he'd slipped in the back door unnoticed. Many of his neighbours worked out of the area and the road on which Straker's house was located was a quiet one.

As exhausted as he was physically, his brain was kicking in extra adrenalin and he couldn't sleep. He kept seeing Rutland, with the bullet hole in his forehead, and himself dragging Mary out of the closet, the Glock in her hand. He

turned all the events of the last 24 hours over and over, wondering if there was anything else he could have done, or done differently.

What had tipped Mary over the edge to the point that she came down south and put that bullet in Rutland's head, especially after all these years since the divorce? The way her letter had been written, it never occurred to Straker that she had been the writer. And how had she managed to write the letter and send it to him without leaving some sort of DNA on it? Or prints?

Where had Mary acquired a 9 mm Glock? Had she purchased it from a gun shop, or mail ordered it? He doubted very much if it was licensed. At least the gun was destroyed, but he worried there might somewhere be a bill or sale somewhere that the police might use to cast Mary in the role of chief suspect yet.

At least by utilizing the amnesia drug on Mary, Straker had wiped clean the worst of things, and perhaps protected her from the trauma of it all. He kept returning to his fears for Mary's sanity, and wondering if she was in the grip of some illness so severe that she might actually require medical supervision or incarceration.

Well, there was no going back. He and Leslie had managed to deposit her back in her Manchester apartment, in her bed, as though she'd never left town. She would have a memory gap, but that was a small price to pay in order to keep her from either remembering or incriminating herself in the crime.

Most of all, Straker was searching his heart and mind for reasons why he'd gotten himself this involved in this business. He could have thrown the letter in the trash the very first day it arrived and chalked it up to some crank looking for attention. Or he could have realized it had indeed been written by Mary and contacted her, maybe even stopped her from killing Rutland. Maybe he could have talked with her rationally and tried to make her see why murder was such a poor choice. How much anger and resentment had grown in her to bring her to committing murder?

That he had played some role personally in Mary's angst would never stop bothering him. Their divorce had not been pleasant and Mary had felt betrayed on several levels. But marrying Rutland had been *her* choice, and Straker had merely stepped aside and let another man take responsibility for her and for his son - almost too happy to let someone else shoulder the difficulties.

Replay it all mentally as he might, Straker knew that nothing he could have done once Mary became Mrs Rutland would have made much difference for her. Her issues with Rutland were not his concern. But, he could not banish the fact that he'd avoided seeing that Johnnie was being victimized and that guilt he'd take with him to his grave...

# Epilogue

The next few days at work passed quietly - the aliens were probably busy coming up with some new scheme before returning to earth. Straker avoided Freeman to some degree - Alec was too astute not to notice his commander was preoccupied with something and Straker didn't want to spill to Alec simply for his own comfort.

A series of reports came from Allan Leslie on the QT - Mary seemed to have settled back into her life as though nothing had ever happened. Straker wished he could do the same. He felt burdened with things. He got up from his plexi-glas desk, sighed, and filled his battered old briefcase with some papers. There was just enough daylight left to visit Johnnie's gravesite...

**The End**

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