

Prologue

Beneath the cold waters of the Channel lurked the hunter.

A malignant creation, stalking its victims and choosing its moment. Something unseen that could slice through a dinghy with barely a whisper, sending its occupants into the brine, leaving frigid chance alone to decide who survived.

Prayers and screams fell silent as the swell engulfed open mouths. Most disappeared without trace, while a handful clung to life with numbed fingers and salt-burned lungs, oblivious to the architect of their misfortune.

Nothing existed but whispers in the dark – rumours of sea monsters, red eyes in the water, or had the Channel itself grown teeth? Rumours suppressed by fear or by design, but rumours are like ghosts – they seep into the air like smoke in the dark, taking root where they land and expanding to fill the void.

Those responsible slept fitfully in warm beds, minds racked over decisions they could justify in daylight but not in darkness, telling themselves it was for the greater good. Lovers felt betrayed, and relationships stretched beyond breaking point in the name of duty and survival.

Survivors thought they knew what awaited them on the other side, but none could foretell the perilous twists and turns of the road ahead, or even know which of their companions to trust – were they saviours or something altogether more dangerous?

Those with foresight chose a different path, but could they escape the consequences? Criminal networks rise and fall, as do governments, but desperate measures only delay the inevitable, always at the cost of lives, careers and relationships.

*Never trust calm waters
But don't expect them either*

Chapter 1

Week 1: Sunday 2:03 a.m. East London

The safehouse reeked of bleach, petrol, and fear: a derelict meat processing unit behind a fried chicken outlet in Canning Town, gutted and converted into a basement war room. Blacked-out windows and a steel door with three locks and a magnetic deadbolt sealed it shut. A flickering strip light buzzed above the scarred metal table, casting light like a fly trapped in an empty fridge.

Declan “Dex” Mullen stood at the head of the room, hands clasped lightly behind his back. His boots gleamed, his sweatshirt was immaculate, his expression unreadable. He was a man you didn’t interrupt, especially not here. This was his turf, the nerve centre of a network stretching from the Chinese coast to the beaches of Kent.

Around the table sat five men: his inner circle, his logistics crew. Vasko, the Bulgarian, leaned forward, forearms on the table, fidgeting with the enamel on a chipped mug. Lennox, in a grey hoody, avoided eye contact, staring at a stain on the floor. To Dex’s right sat Lars, tall, Scandinavian, silent. He didn’t blink unless necessary. The other two, drivers turned managers, watched Dex like prey eyeing a predator: afraid to speak, yet afraid not to.

Dex tapped a small remote. The projector on the far wall flickered to life, displaying a grainy, grey-toned thermal image: a rubber dinghy on a night sea, packed with too many heat signatures.

“One boat. Twenty-six units,” Dex said.

His voice was soft, almost delicate, as always. It made his words hit harder in the gut.

“Twelve made landfall. Three drowned. Eleven were picked up by the frogs and handed to the English taxi service.”

He scanned the room. No one reacted.

“That’s fifteen grand out of my pocket. And fifteen grand in this room means fifteen failures. So...”

He tapped the remote again. Another image appeared, passport photos of the three who drowned, their names in red. Not real names. Real ones didn’t matter anymore.

“They didn’t pay upfront. Who vouched?”

A pause. Then Lennox, his head still lowered, said, “Pascal. Calais side.”

Dex tilted his head slightly. “Pascal who was already on warning?”

Lennox nodded once. No defence, no excuses.

Dex turned to Lars. “We’re done with him.”

Lars didn’t blink. “By Tuesday?”

“Sooner’s better. Make it obvious. Let his team feel it. I need you back before Tuesday.”

He turned to the projector and pulled up a new image; a chart with clean lines and cold logistics, outlining the organisation’s current structure.

EAST LONDON, DECLAN MULLEN

- Control

AFRICA (Nigeria, Libya) – Sahel pipeline via “Pastor K”

- Recruitment and funnel

CHINA (Guangdong, Zhejiang)

- Manufacture of inflatable boats, lifejackets and marine gear

EUROPE (Hamburg, Bremen, Dunkirk)

- Storage & transit of dinghies, outboards, jackets

FRANCE (Calais, Gravelines, Boulogne)

- Launch zone, French fixer network

UK (Kent, Gravesend, Slough)

- Reception, debt-labour placement, employer brokerage

“We have a working network, systems and bodies.”

But these were nothing without targets and results.

Dex grabbed a dry-erase marker and scrawled across the whiteboard:

WEEKLY REVENUE TARGET – £150,000

“That’s thirty grand per head for the five of you. Miss it, and someone else steps up.”

Vasko looked up. “Weather’s turning. Hamburg’s tight. Customs flagged a Bulgarian crate. The Germans are twitchy.”

Dex let the news sink in. The buzzing of the strip light filled the silence.

“Then move stock faster. Strip identifying stickers. Rotate drivers. It’s not hard.”

He dropped the marker and moved to the corner. Unzipped a duffel bag. Pulled out a lifejacket, cheap, grey, flimsy.

“Chinese. Buoyant to eighty kilos. Non-reflective. Twelve quid a unit. We sell at seventy-five. Better margin than coke.”

He tossed it onto the table. It landed with a clatter, nearly falling apart.

“This isn’t about people. It’s about movement. Increase margin, maximise scale. We run boats. We run debt. Numbers times margin equals profit.”

He turned to Lennox. “How many in repayment?”

“One hundred and twenty-three. Mostly Nigerians, Eritreans. Thirty-two working Gravesend farms, some in kitchens. A few in Croydon, still waiting.”

Dex frowned. “We don’t wait.”

“They’re ill. One’s coughing blood.”

“Then invoice his corpse. What about Tunde? Arrived two weeks ago.”

“Still unplaced.”

Dex nodded once. “Fine. New rule: forty-eight-hour turnaround, or I assume deadweight. Deductions apply.”

No one argued.

He switched off the projector. The room darkened, lit only by the flickering the strip light and Dex’s silhouette by the whiteboard.

He spoke again, more slowly.

“We’re hitting a bottleneck. Weather’s turning. The Channel’s will be red flagged for a week, maybe longer.”

Grim nods circled the room.

“Boats stockpile. Labour backs up. African suppliers get restless. French fixers threaten to go independent.”

A longer pause.

“I don’t care,” Dex said.

“You’ll keep the pipe open. You’ll move bodies inland. No excuses. And if any of you start leaking or lagging, ask Pascal what happens.”

He turned to Lars. “Make sure the French get the photo.”

Lars gave a slight nod. He always relished an excuse for an overseas trip at the Company’s expense, especially with a bit of action to liven things up.

“Once the weather shifts, we’ll be back in France. You’ll need to chase your own routes again, keep them warm. If it’s not moving fast enough, I’ll go over myself to take control.”

The air in the safehouse thickened. No one had stirred since Lars rose from his chair. He didn’t need to leave quickly; he wasn’t the sort of man you followed out.

Dex watched the door close behind Lars, then turned back to the table. His crew waited: silent, tense, straining to read the next shift in pressure.

He tapped the projector. A spreadsheet appeared: columns of names, reference numbers, placements, repayments.

“Now,” Dex said, “while the Channel’s shut, we restructure.”

He circled the word REPAYMENT at the top of the screen.

“I want all outstanding labour accounts reassessed and recoded by Tuesday. No more passive debt. We shift to active reclamation.”

He turned to Lennox.

“You’ll create three repayment bands: ‘Green’ for compliant workers, minimum twenty hours a week, clean deductions; ‘Amber’ for partials, any missed shifts or unexplained delays; ‘Red’ for debt-slackers.”

“What do we do with Red?” Lennox asked.

“Strip their ID. Pull placements. Reassign them to night rota or warehouse double shifts. I don’t care if they drop. Just don’t waste hours.”

He flicked to a new tab. A column titled NON-COMPLIANT EMPLOYERS scrolled past.

“And while we’re at it, this lot.”

The list named a dozen small-time contractors, farm foremen, and cleaning firms who’d stopped paying their cut.

“When the crossings are down, labour supply shrinks, so we charge more. Scarcity drives prices, but some might argue. If they do remind them who they’re dealing with.”

“How hard?” Vasko asked.

Dex stared at him. “Hard enough for full compliance and a second payment for the trouble.”

Vasko’s finger traced one name on the screen.

“That kebab place in Luton’s been late three weeks running. And there’s talk they’re bringing in underage girls after hours.”

Dex’s face remained neutral, but the pause spoke volumes. He leaned on the back of Vasko’s chair, eyes fixed on the list.

“Cut them. Today. No more staff, no more supply. They can hire their own. We’re not that kind of business.”

Nobody spoke. In this crew, silence wasn’t uncertainty; it was agreement.

He paced slowly behind the seated men, stopping at a magnetic board near the entrance. He pulled off a card labelled Medway - Transit.

“Vasko will sort this unit tonight. Make an example. It’s been underperforming - half the workers are fake Red Banders gaming the hours. No more flexibility. From now on, every arrival is logged and assigned within thirty-six hours. No ID? We make one. No placement? They clean toilets.”

He looked directly at Lennox.

“You’re in charge of rebalancing the Kent-Gravesend-Slough route. Rotate labour every two weeks. Don’t let the same faces get too comfortable. We’re not breeding loyalty, we’re managing turnover.”

Lennox nodded. "What about the sick ones?"

Dex shrugged. "Keep one for show. Send the rest to Croydon. There's a warehouse clinic there. Put them on six-hour packaging shifts or cut them loose."

He tapped a new file on his tablet and turned to Vasko.

"I'm opening two new inland branches: one in Peterborough, one in Stoke. Romanian firms are on board to handle placements. They'll need a weekly headcount of twenty per site. You'll vet drivers: only ones who keep their mouths shut and schedules tight."

Vasko grimaced. "That's a long run. Fuel costs..."

Dex raised a hand. "Offset it with the ten percent uplift. We're increasing repayment deductions by ten percent this week. No exceptions."

He let that sink in.

"If anyone complains, remind them they're still breathing. Then remind them what that's worth."

The projector flicked to a new image: a CCTV still of a kid, maybe sixteen, handed a mop bucket outside a fast-food outlet in Gravesend. Exhausted. Hollow. Dex stared at the image for a long moment, saying nothing.

"Look," he said finally, "we're not a charity. We're not a gang. We're infrastructure. The boats stop? Fine, we don't."

He drew a thick red line through the word STORAGE on the whiteboard and wrote above it: UTILISATION.

"Inventory builds pressure. That's leverage. Migrants waiting in Calais? Start charging holding fees. Migrants already here? Increase shifts, rotate placements, double up accommodation."

He leaned close over the table now, voice lowered.

"We've got ten days, maybe two weeks before the Channel clears. That's ten days to bleed out the backlog. No fresh supply? Fine. We increase extraction from existing stock."

Lennox coughed. "Some employers will push back."

"Then rotate them out too. Replace them with hungry ones. The black economy's endless. They're always hungry. Same goes for our labour. You can starve someone into gratitude faster than you can train it."

He tapped the tablet again. An audio file played, grainy - French - muffled. A woman's voice, Angelique from Calais.

"I've got forty more waiting. They're packed into two containers. The boat's stuck and the engines aren't coming from Hamburg until Wednesday."

The message ended.

Dex paused.

"Containers mean rot. Rot means loss. Call her back and tell her to feed the strong ones. Let the weak ones go. No point wasting calories."

He added, almost as an afterthought, "Tell her Pascal won't be collecting his usual share."

Nobody spoke.

Outside, the first pale light of Sunday morning seeped through the gaps in the shutters. Somewhere in the street, a fox knocked over a bin, the crash echoing in the quiet. The city remained half-asleep.

Dex stood still, letting the silence build.

“This lull cuts both ways,” he said. “The crossings are down, yes, but the numbers already here aren’t moving. Hotels, hostels, overflow shelters, all full. That’s cost to the government. That’s headlines. MPs will start screaming for action by the month’s end, not because boats are landing, but because nothing’s shifting.”

He paused, noting the quizzical looks around the room, then continued:

“When the government cracks down, amateurs will panic, routes will dry up, and demand will spike. That’s when we set the price and take the cream.”

He circled the final word on the whiteboard: LEVERAGE.

“Now go tidy the debt. Call the employers. Burn the slack. The storm’s the opportunity. Use it.”

He walked to the door, opened it halfway, and turned back.

“If any of your workers mention freedom, rights, or hope, remind them they’re in the wrong country for that.”

Monday 8:42 p.m. Gravesend

Lennox hated this part.

The car wash had closed early. Rain hammered the corrugated roof and hissed off the concrete forecourt, washing oily puddles into the street drains. Inside the back unit, four men sat in silence on plastic crates, half-dressed in sodden high-vis jackets. The youngest coughed into his sleeve. None of them spoke English.

Lennox flicked through the clipboard, a damp printout with names that didn’t match the faces. Tunde was still there. Thin, sickly, eyes like wet glass. Lennox avoided his gaze.

“You didn’t clock in today,” he said, eyes fixed on the sheet.

No response. Just a wheeze.

“You missed your shift yesterday too.”

Another silence.

Lennox tapped the sheet with his pen. “That’s two red marks. You know what that means.”

Still nothing. One of the older migrants, perhaps Sudanese, muttered something to Tunde in another language. Tunde nodded, barely.

Lennox glanced towards the office door. Vasko was outside in the van, waiting to collect. They'd brought plastic sheeting this time. Cleaner that way.

He crouched slightly, lowering his voice.

“Look. I don't get paid extra for this. I'm just here to manage the books. You work; you stay. You don't, you go. That's the rule.”

He handed Tunde a slip of paper. It read: Medway – Transit. Report: 22:00

Tunde looked at it. Didn't take it. Just stared at Lennox.

For a moment, something flared in his eyes, resentment, perhaps, or pleading. But Lennox had already stood and turned to the others.

“You three, new shifts start tomorrow. Double block. Six in the morning. And if you're smart, you'll show up without needing a visit from Lars.”

He walked back through the door into the rain. Vasko was still in the van, engine idling, heater blasting.

Lennox climbed in and tossed the clipboard onto the dash.

“All yours,” he said.

Vasko didn't reply. He just pulled away from the kerb, rain lashing the windscreen.

No one spoke during the drive.

After a while, Lennox muttered, “That kid's gonna die in Medway.”

Vasko shrugged. “Then there'll be a bed free.”

Monday 11:46 p.m. East London

Rain lashed the windows in horizontal sheets, rattling the thin glass like a threat that hadn't yet chosen its target.

Dex sat in a flat above a disused boxing gym he had commandeered from an employer unfortunate enough to owe him money. One window, one sofa, one kitchen that smelled faintly of bleach and toast. A blacked-out TV flickered with reflections from a laptop screen open on his knees. On it, a security feed rolled silently: thermal footage of the Channel. Even the sea looked angry tonight, bloated, black, and heaving.

He lit a cigar, leaned back, and studied the data.

No boats. Not tonight, not tomorrow, possibly not for the rest of the week.

Across the flatscreen, his system blinked quietly: names, numbers, boat codes, placements. Some files glowed red. Others pulsed amber, a few flickered green for now.

A storm outside, a system inside, and him dead centre.

He closed his eyes and remembered:

Seventeen years old, in the back of a stolen van, face bleeding, palms shredded. An uncle wiping him down with a KFC napkin.

“You get in, you hold the wheel, you don’t look scared.”

He hadn’t looked scared. He’d looked forward.

That was the year his old man dropped dead in the street, collapsing mid-shift outside a warehouse in Rainham. His heart gave out before payday, but his debts didn’t.

The council came for the van, but Dex took the keys first.

The next twelve months were lessons in territory, silence, and risk. He ran weed across borough lines, switched to pills then vans, then forged IDs and passports. Each trade a step further from the estate and closer to something that felt like control.

Control became the drug. Systems became the obsession. Boats were just one more channel.

He opened his eyes. The feed still ran. Calais was dark. The German depot had switched to low-res. French customs were parked up in Boulogne, like dogs waiting to be let off the leash.

The storm had bought him time. But time was a double-edged sword. Too much of it, and the wrong eyes started looking.

He picked up his secure handset and scrolled to a contact labelled K.

K wasn’t a name, it was a marker: MI5 washout, ex-digital forensics, now freelance and Dex’s insurance.

He typed a short message:

VOIP dead zone flagged. Too clean. Double-check eastern pings. Calais server, Turkish route.

Hit send and waited.

The reply came four minutes later.

Possible scrape from US end. Route traffic shows static masking - could be an NSA pattern trace. Not confirmed.

Dex exhaled through his nose.

A scrape - from the Americans!

The UK authorities he could read like an old ledger: reactive, political, addicted to headlines. The French were simpler still; half their ports ran on favours and backhanders. But the Americans? They didn’t leak, they didn’t bluff, and they didn’t care about saving ministers’ faces. If the NSA was watching his line, they weren’t chasing headlines about boats. They’d be building a silent map of his routes, his warehouses and his contacts. They’d follow the veins back to the heart, and when they struck, it would be to dismantle the entire organisation.

He flicked to a news report on the TV. A backbencher in a high-vis jacket was blaming “foreign actors” and “systemic criminal networks” for the Channel deaths. No names, no policy, just noise.

Dex muted volume and stared at the screen.

They were always late, these people. Always reacting after the leak, never before.

He stood, walked to the window, and cracked it open an inch. Rain hissed against the sill.

Across the street, a kid on a moped was sheltering from the weather under a bus stop roof, headphones in, head bowed. Dex watched him for a full minute, lost in thought.

“The politicians and the press still think this is about boats,” he whispered. “The Americans never did.”

He stubbed the cigar into a coffee mug and returned to the laptop.

Then he picked up the secure burner again and typed another message to K:

If it's them, I need two days' warning. No more. Two.

After a moment, he added:

And find out who sold the routing plan last August. French side. I want a name.

He didn't need to say what would happen next.

Tuesday 4:12 a.m.

The phone vibrated once on the table.

[K]: Confirmed NSA scrape. Low orbit relay, bounced through Belgian telecom node. You've got three days, maybe two.

Dex didn't blink. He was already standing, already moving.

His coffee was still warm.

He dialled a contact stored as “Archives”. It rang twice. A man answered, no greeting.

Dex said, “They're live. Full trace.”

The man sighed. “Channel route?”

“Yes.”

Another sigh. “All right, we'll freeze the SIS review panel. That'll slow metadata to Europol for seventy-two hours. You're on your own after that.”

“I won't need longer.”

A pause.

“This never happened,” the voice said.

“It never does.”

Dex hung up and called Lars.

“Get the second shift moving. Drop the Peterborough route. Move all Gravesend placements to Walthamstow under the Romanian front. New vans, no repeats. If they’ve been seen once, they’re off the board.”

“On it.”

“Also, pull Lennox. Bring him to Shoreditch, quietly.”

6:38 a.m. Shoreditch

The lights flickered in the converted basement below a vape shop. Lars stood against the wall. Lennox sat in a chair, hands on his knees, sweat already soaking his shirt.

“I didn’t leak anything,” Lennox said. “I don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

Dex stood across from him, silent.

He looked tired, but not weak. There was something in the way he lit his cigarette without looking up, as if he’d already decided everything that mattered.

“We got traced,” Dex said. “Through a Turkish relay we were told was airtight. Only two people on this side had the routing keys, you and Sophie.”

“I didn’t...” Lennox began, but Dex raised a hand.

“I want to believe you.”

Lennox blinked.

“Just in case, if I’m right, you’ll be back on placement oversight next week. If I’m wrong - you won’t be missed.”

He nodded. Lars stepped forward and zip-tied Lennox’s wrists.

“Until then, you’re off the board, just in case.”

Lennox didn’t scream. He just looked stunned, like someone who’d spent years watching the flames and only now realised anyone could get burned.

9:12 a.m. East London

Dex stood on the rooftop of the old meatpacking unit, smoking again. The wind had picked up, carrying helicopter noise in the distance. Routine, but it still made his spine stiffen.

Below, three new vans idled. Different plates, different drivers. One didn’t speak English. Perfect.

The reorganisation was nearly complete.

He'd shut down the Wissant beachhead entirely, buried the Turkish VOIP relay, rerouted incoming boats to the Dutch coast for holding. Most importantly, he'd launched Directive Fennec, a total identity reset for two key Calais logistics fixers and one UK tech handler. In forty-eight hours, they'd no longer exist on paper. Dex didn't build systems without escape valves.

The NSA angle was getting under his skin. They usually didn't move for drugs, nor for a dozen boats or a hundred migrants. If they'd targeted him, it meant they thought he was feeding something bigger or could be.

He watched the vans pull away and thought, not for the first time, that guns travelled lighter than people. Less food, less noise, higher margins, but also the kind of business that put you in the Americans' crosshairs permanently.

10:30 a.m. Slough

Tunde was back on shift.

They hadn't sent him to Medway after all. A last-minute van swap had kept him here. Instead, he was mopping floors in an empty distribution depot outside Slough. His hands ached, his chest burned, and his legs could barely hold him up.

He didn't know who the men in the new jackets were. They didn't speak. They just handed out slips and pointed.

Someone had said, "Keep your head down. Don't talk. Work means life."

He couldn't recall who. Perhaps one of those who'd vanished last week.

At break, he sat on a crate, staring at the grey metal wall.

There were no windows, only the distant hum of machinery. A smell of plastic and bleach lingered, and a cold emptiness filled his chest as if all feeling had drained away.

He tried not to think of the water, the cold, or that terrible night crossing.

He just breathed.

1:03 p.m. Barking flat

Dex sat alone once more.

All the doors had been secured.
Files wiped, staff rotated, levers pulled, noise redirected.

The system remained intact.

He glanced at the dry-erase board on the far wall. Red markers circled: *Calais cell, NSA relay, Dutch route OPEN.*

Everything was accounted for.

Yet he stood, crossed the room and opened the window to check.

The rain had passed. The street below was still, sunlight glinting off wet tarmac, quiet for now.

“They think this is only about boats,” he said aloud.

“They’ve no idea what’s coming next.”

He closed the window, lit a fresh cigarette and began planning the next phase.

Unbeknown to Dex the Americans weren't the main threat to his operation. He was already on the radar of certain spooks in British Intelligence, but significant steps were unlikely to be taken until public opinion forced the politicians to consider drastic measures. Unfortunately for Dex, the government's approval ratings were crashing and those in power would soon be sufficiently desperate to unleash the spooks. His organisation was international and virtually untouchable, but could he become a victim of his own success?