

# PART 1

*'May your strength give us strength  
May your faith give us faith  
May your hope give us hope  
May your love give us love'.*

**"Into the Fire"  
Bruce Springsteen**

## CHAPTER 1

Karski opened his eyes and tried to breathe. He couldn't. Something was blocking his throat and nostrils. Fighting for breath, he felt his heart beating. His limbs flailed. Ineffective. Useless. He surrendered to it and drank it down. Slowly allowing himself to become one being and one essence. And all of it was liquid and choking darkness and then it was nothing at all. Fear grew within his chest and the world seemed to slip away.

Karski saw glittering shades of blue, purple, yellow, and orange within the clear liquid, which was also the closest thing to air in this place. The ripples of coloured light and warm bubbles of luminescence were the imperfections in something that was absorbing and being absorbed by his body.

And in an instant it was all over and he was plunging beneath the surface of a liquid that was much more familiar. The water was freezing but he hardly felt it at all. His earlier struggle had already weakened his body, if not his spirit. He was exhausted and drowning again until two hands grabbed his arms and pulled him up onto a river bank.

He was barely conscious but, as the light gradually returned to his eyes, his mind went somewhere else entirely. Images went flashing through it like a parade of horror emanating from the future and the past at the same time. He was shown a great city in ruins; a blonde woman in a red dress; exterminating angels with black wings and eyes filled with flames; and three sad indentations in three empty mattresses. He didn't recognise or understand any of what he saw.

"Are you all right, friend?" he heard someone say.

The voice cut through the disorder and brought his mind back. By then, the water had been absorbed by his skin and he got to his feet feeling nothing. There was no cold, no warmth, no pains, cuts or bruises. Only emptiness remained.

"Yes I think so," he replied, without looking at the man who had just saved him.

Instead, he looked everywhere else. The most noticeable thing then was that there seemed to be no sun in the sky. What remained was a low-powered light in the form of a misty blue haze that was coating the entire world around him. It was a haze that was only distorted by small ripples he saw every time he blinked his eyes.

It briefly looked like the only other source of light was the glistening silver lava shining on the snow covered ground and trees. Except that it only lasted until Karski blinked his eyes again. Just another distortion in what wasn't quite the air.

Suddenly, a bullet buzzed past his right ear and he instinctively threw himself onto the snow.

"GET UP QUICK!" the other man shouted, grabbing him roughly by the arm and dragging him onto his feet.

More bullets followed them as they ran into a more densely covered part of the forest they were in. As they ran deeper into it, vast oak trees towered above them; their trunks becoming embedded with ricocheting bullets as the two men passed; darting between them, looking for cover.

"This way," the man said, turning towards an even thicker line of trees and emerald undergrowth.

Karski followed without question. As he ran, he picked up his knees to avoid being tripped by the longer grass on the ground. He quickly looked back to check on their pursuer and only saw trees and greenery.

"Here," the man said sharply, causing Karski to look at him directly for the first time.

All that he saw was the fear in the man's darkened eyes. It was a look he understood and it was enough to concentrate his mind in the moments that followed.

"Stand completely still and try not to struggle," the man told him.

"What?"

The question was unnecessary. Karski was already sinking. The ground rapidly reached his ankles and then his knees. The feeling of pinpricks travelling and numbing their way up his body went with it. He looked over to the man who had put him into this situation and saw that he was also sinking.

Both of them were soon covered all the way up to their shoulders. The man looked at Karski again and told him, "Try to stay as still as possible and just breathe... Be calm."

There was no time for any other words before the ground covered both his mouth and Karski's ears. Everything was silent. Karski's breathing remained normal, his heart rate was steady, and he did exactly what he had been told. He kept his eyes open to peer through the grey earth at the vast network of roots from trees and grass, that delved deep down, perhaps even to the core of the world.

He looked at the other man and found he wasn't looking back at him. Instead, he was staring up at the surface of the ground, at a winged creature, as big as a man, which had just landed on it. Karski followed his eye line. The creature had its back to him and he watched as its wings folded down. Not covered in feathers, these wings had a harsher simplicity to them; more like the wings of a bat, black leather, stretched and taut over muscle. They had a raw power that made him feel truly afraid.

Its short legs were completely covered in light brown hair and it had hooves that stepped rather uneasily over the ground through the long grass. It was only when it turned around that Karski

got to see its full fearsomeness. The combination of a pale human torso, powerful arms, blonde hair, and horns protruding from just above its temples were undoubtedly a fearsome sight. But it was the flames and deadness within its eyes that scared him most. At that moment, Karski believed it was a creature which was almost unstoppable.

His breathing quickened and so did the blinking of his eyes, although he didn't shift from where he was until long after the grotesque soldier had opened its wings and flown away. When he turned his head to look at the other man again, he found that half of his body was already above the surface.

Karski lifted an arm and slowly rose up out of the ground; pushed upwards by unseen hands. The hand of the other man reached down to take hold of his and helped speed up the process.

"We should be safe for now," he told Karski, once they were standing on the ground again.

He smiled and Karski finally managed to look at him a little more closely. He was a tall man with broad shoulders and short dark hair, receding a little at the temples. His eyes were deep set and he had a thick protruding nose. The odd thing to Karski was that, while he was dressed smartly in neutral colours, his appearance managed to be both memorable and forgettable at the same time.

He gave the impression of being a man who walked without any kind of fear. He certainly seemed to know exactly where he had to go, and where he needed to be. And without question, Karski followed him through the thickest, darkest area of trees, where there appeared to be almost no light at all. He wasn't afraid, although he would have liked to know what was going on or at least where it was they were heading. It made no difference and the other man made no attempt to stop and explain.

Karski decided not to argue. There wasn't much choice. He had no idea where he was, so he could hardly travel alone. It seemed more sensible to wait. They had to stop at some point and when they did he could ask all the questions he wanted.

They went on in virtual silence. The only sound being their shoes stepping over the long grass. That swiftly turned into steps on earthy ground and then into the crunch of snow as the two men reached another icy clearing.

Pale nothingness was all around them and for the first time Karski was able to see the mountains that surrounded the forest on three of its sides. He immediately understood that these were the cause of the forest's permanent misty vagueness.

"We should rest here," the man told him.

Karski wasn't tired but didn't disagree. He decided not to sit down on the soft snow. Instead, he walked towards a vast lake that was half lost in the fog. He strained his eyes and was able to see the effects that the stillness and cold had upon its surface. Ice had formed into wafer thin islands broken up by the little remaining heat of the still water surrounding them. Karski couldn't help

gazing at them with a strange sense that these islands were waiting for something; for warmth or the sun to return, and only so they could finally be allowed to disappear.

He walked to the edge of the lake for a closer look and found that the water there wasn't as icy. He looked down and caught a glimpse of his reflection. It was enough to send shockwaves racing through him, from his mind, and into every single muscle and fibre of his body. He turned his eyes away and then back again but what he saw didn't change.

It wasn't horror or even fear that he felt at that moment. It was simply that the face looking back at him wasn't a face that he remembered.

## CHAPTER 2

Short, dark blonde hair and pale blue eyes peered a little too long at their own reflective glory. He straightened his tie and looked at the small amount of grey in his hair. A sigh escaped his lips.

David Gombrowicz couldn't even try to pretend that the beauty of his youth wasn't very much in the past. He ran his right hand through his hair and left the bathroom. Everything was quiet as he went into the bedroom. That wasn't unusual. Even after five years, his flat was still an empty, soulless space that had never felt like home. Picking up his shiny black leather briefcase, he walked to the front door; mentally running through everything he had to do that day, as he locked it behind him and walked to his car.

He was travelling to the train station, which was just across the river from where he lived. He always drove even though he could quite easily have got a bus or taxi. The reason for that was simple enough and David understood the irony in feeling safest in a car; cocooned from any unwanted noise or silence.

He opened the door and got inside, not noticing the May sunshine and fresh early summer air. After only a few deep breaths he felt completely calm. Turning the key in the ignition brought the engine to life and barely a second later the CD player started and drowned out the car's impressive growls.

Normally, he listened to *Born to Run* in the car. That day was different though, and he switched off 'Thunder Road' before it had a chance to truly get his blood pumping. He didn't normally watch or listen to the news in the morning but this was different. It was the day after a General Election that had no winner and that seemed important enough to make him want to hear about it.

He swiftly discovered that on Radio Four there was an awful lot of talk without many conclusions; just distracting and possibly inspired guesswork designed to deal with what was pretty much uncharted territory. All that anyone was able to declare with any certainty was that a Hung Parliament was unavoidable.

It didn't take long for David to question the sense in him listening. He was self-aware enough to realise that he was too old to listen too closely to anything that challenged his political opinions. It was far better, and simpler, for his thoughts to be confirmed, no matter what the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments. And as a result, the only thing these programmes ever did was make him angry and annoyed.

It was a mentality that had come to reflect his voting habits over the years. He was a Labour man and always had been. Every few years he would go and put a cross next to their box, no matter how detached and disaffected he might have become with the party. It was just something he did and he didn't really know why anymore. He'd always told himself that he simply couldn't vote for anyone else and, by then, that had become the truth.

He was the son of an immigrant, brought up in a poor neighbourhood. He thought that had to count for something. But there was something else at stake. David had an unshakeable need to believe that the party were like him. That they might both have been compromised in a lot of ways, but, in principle, they were still the same as they'd always been.

On that day though, he couldn't help wondering if he was just lying to himself; perhaps the act of voting was all that was left of the person he'd once been. He certainly couldn't deny that the distance from his past and even to his family had grown horribly wide during the comfortable course of his life.

He sighed again, and switched off the radio. Already at the station, he took his briefcase, locked the car, and walked inside the darkened glass terminal. With ticket in hand, David went through the barriers without any difficulty. He was a little bit early and so he went and bought a newspaper, sat down on one of the benches, and waited.

His confusing array of thoughts turned to Charlie Mejdek; another Polish immigrant's son. He was thirty years younger than David and he was about to go to prison for at least six months. David was the man defending him in court and he increasingly found the entire case utterly depressing, not least because he knew that Charlie was an innocent man.

It appeared to be a simple breaking and entering case with no witnesses and very little material evidence linking anyone directly to the crime. This should have meant Charlie was completely above suspicion. And then everything changed due to one key piece of evidence: Ten days after the crime was reported Charlie had walked into Alveston police station and admitted to everything.

Until that moment, he hadn't even been considered a suspect and there was something about that which didn't feel quite right to David. That feeling only grew when he found out that the police's main suspect had previously been a young man named Peter Gillespie.