

# PROLOGUE

You never forget your first kill.

That's what they told me when I joined the Elite. Nothing compares to the sweet rush of adrenalin you get when you wipe somebody out of existence forever.

You forget all the hard work, the hours spent hunched in front of a screen stalking your prey, hunting them down. The long days tracing every step that they take, shadowing their every action. And when you make the final move to end it all, time seems to slow to a crawl as you watch their life drain away in a blizzard of zeroes and ones.

Don't worry, I'm not talking about a knife in the back or a bullet to the head. When I make a kill, there's no blood on the floor. It's all much cleaner than that. I can erase someone completely and they won't even feel a thing.

Confused? Let me explain. Think about what you really need to live. The money in your bank account, the contacts in your phone, the life-support system you plug into every time you go online.

Now think about the footprints you leave behind. The fragments of data floating in cyberspace: status updates, blog posts, tweets. Every search that you make, everything

that you buy. Every byte of information that tells you who you are. Birth certificates, medical records, credit checks. I can see it all and I can take it all away with a single click of the mouse.

Profiles deleted, bank accounts purged, records wiped. Everything that you need to live in the twenty-first century gone in a split second. That's what it means to go in for the kill.

We're the ghosts in the machine. Cyberspace assassins. This country's last line of defence against the invisible enemies that plague us. The Elite.

The ultimate job – the ultimate thrill. With a computer at my fingertips, I'm invincible. Bulletproof. Nobody can touch me.

So how did I end up here – my hands scrabbling for a grip on a slippery steel cable as the lift cage below speeds towards me? I glance across at the filthy red numbers stamped inside the lift shaft. Floor 53. Forty-seven to go. Blood drips through my fingers as the cable cuts into my skin.

Inside that cage are two men armed with AK-47s who are hunting me down. As I climb this skyscraper in the heart of London's Canary Wharf, every single person inside the building wants me dead. Security guards, office workers, cleaning staff – they would all kill me without a second thought.

My hand slips and, for a heart-wrenching moment, my legs kick against empty air. I can hear the harsh grinding of lift gears as the cage comes towards me. If I fall now, it's all over.

With my hand flailing against the void, I reach up in desperation. The lift shaft fills with a screeching howl – the

deafening sound the last thing I hear. Then my blood-slicked fingertips grab hold of the concrete sill.

As the last reserves of strength ebb from my body, I fling my other arm up, fingers scrabbling for grip and then haul my shaking body into the narrow recess between the lift shaft and the concrete wall. I lie there, my face pressed against the cold stone sill. Breath judders from my body in shuddering gasps.

I've never felt so alive.

The skyscraper shakes with a hideous whine as the lift cage approaches. Grinding gears pass centimetres from my face. Then the muffled sound of the men's voices echo from the cage as it climbs above me.

I'll tell you how I got here – about everything that happened to me from the first moment I heard about the Elite. I just need to make sure I stay alive long enough to finish the story.

# CHAPTER ONE

From the window of my apartment, I could see London spread out before me. Its skyscrapers and gleaming offices. The gothic spires of the Houses of Parliament and the glittering spokes of the Millennium Wheel. All following the curve of the River Thames.

*A two-million pound view, that's what the estate agent who had sold the penthouse had said to me. Are you sure your parents can afford it?* I transferred the money into their bank account later that day. Behind me, a 62-inch 3D TV hung from one wall of the apartment, blaring out the football match from surround-sound speakers. Littered around the place were pieces of the latest hi-tech kit: games consoles, mixing decks, smartphones and laptops. Every gadget that money could buy.

My name's Luke Kitson. I'm fourteen years old and I live here alone. No parents. No school. No worries.

Do you want to know how I did it? I can't tell you everything – I've got to keep a few trade secrets, but I'll let you know one thing. All I needed was a computer.

In the far distance, an ugly tower block squatted on the skyline. A grim reminder of where I came from.

You see, I didn't always live like this. My name used to be Harrison Andrews. I lived with my grandmother in a poky two-bedroom flat on a run-down estate, just north of the Watford Gap. The only thing she ever told me about my parents was that they didn't want me. That was fine – I didn't want them either. But I wanted out.

At school, most people thought I was some kind of geek as I spent all my free time holed up in the computer suite. I didn't care – most of my friends were online anyway. While they played video games, I was searching the Internet for ways to escape. That's when I came up with my plan.

I'd always been smart when it came to computers – knowing how to get them to do what I wanted them to do. At first I just played around on the school's computer network. Most of my teachers were too lazy to bother to change their passwords regularly, so it was easy to crack into the system. Once inside, I could change my grades, improve my attendance record, even find out the questions for next week's Maths test – all with just a click of the mouse. That's when I realised how profitable my computer skills could be. But when every single person in my class scored a hundred per cent in a Maths test, I soon learned the importance of covering my tracks.

After that I graduated to developing my skills in the wilds of the World Wide Web. Everything I wanted to know was out there. With a bit of practice, I was soon able to sneak past the security systems of most websites, creeping through the back doors left behind by the coders who built them. Cracking passwords, dodging firewalls, accessing encrypted files. Whatever I wanted, if it was on the Internet,

then I could find a way inside. Some people might call it hacking, but I preferred to call myself a digital explorer.

As I explored, I discovered a whole new world – one that I realised could give me a brand-new life. But then, when I popped back home for lunch on the last day of the school term, the real world broke back in with a vengeance.

As I opened the front door, I saw my gran lying flat on her back in the hallway. Her stiffened fingers clutched at her chest and her pale glassy eyes stared sightlessly back into mine. A *heart attack*, the paramedic said when he finally got up the sixteen flights of stairs. *We'll have to let your parents know.*

As they wheeled her body out of the front door, I sat there alone in the flat. From the street outside, I could hear the sound of shouts and breaking glass. I felt numb, but I knew what I had to do. It was time to go. Heading back into school, I walked into the computer suite for the final time. I was ready to put my plan into action.

First of all, I wiped every trace of Harrison Andrews: my birth certificate, medical records, mobile-phone statements, bank-account details. From the school network to government databases, I didn't leave a single byte of data behind. It was as if Harrison Andrews had never existed.

And in his place, I built a new life for myself. I chose a new name – Luke Kitson. I've always been tall for my age, so I just added a few extra years to Luke's birth certificate to make myself eighteen years old. After all, life's easier when you're a grown-up, right? And to give myself the best possible start to my new life, I gave Luke straight A\* exam results and a multi-million-pound trust fund.

Don't worry, I didn't steal it. That's all money is nowadays – just a string of ones and zeroes floating in cyberspace. With the right program, I could put a million pounds in your bank account tomorrow and nobody would be any the wiser. I'd show you how, but like I said, trade secrets.

While the ICT teacher sat at his desk marking a pile of essays, I uploaded my photograph to Luke Kitson's online records. I stared at the picture as it appeared on the screen – my piercing blue eyes staring out distrustfully from beneath a fringe of dark-brown hair. Beneath the ID photo was my new name and date of birth. The transformation was complete.

Before I logged off the computer, I used my new bank account to book myself on to the next train down to London – first class of course. Then I walked out of the classroom and into my new life.

That was only six months ago, but as I looked out of the window on to the city below, I still couldn't quite believe it.

I flopped down on the sofa as the roar of the crowd swelled from the speakers, ready to watch the second half of the match. Sitting in front of my giant 3D TV screen, I had the best seat in the stadium. As Chelsea kicked off, there was the distant sound of a knock at the door. I ignored it. The whole suite of apartments was security coded. Nobody could even get to my front door without me buzzing them in on the video intercom. It must just be one of the maintenance guys who had taken a wrong turn.

The knocking started again, heavier this time. Irritated, I peeled myself off the sofa as Arsenal broke down the right. As I headed towards the apartment door, the roar of the

crowd grew louder. Getting ready to give the guy a piece of my mind, I keyed in the security code and the front door swung open.

Standing there was a tall man in a sharp suit. His dark hair was closely cropped, and his eyes shaded behind sunglasses.

'Hello, Harrison,' he said with a knowing smile.

The name hit me like a punch to the gut. *Harrison Andrews*. The boy I thought I had left behind. I stared anxiously back at my reflection in his mirrored shades, my face suddenly pale.

'Mind if I come in?' the man asked.