

Power. Greed. Survival

Migrant Crisis

JOHN STEEL

A chilling political thriller

MIGRANT CRISIS

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Dedication

To Pauline

Contents

Prologue	1
Chapter 1	3
Chapter 2	17
Chapter 3	42
Chapter 4	56
Chapter 5	69
Chapter 6	93
Chapter 7	112
Chapter 8	124
Chapter 9	139
Chapter 10	161
Chapter 11	169
Chapter 12	193
Chapter 13	207
Chapter 14	231
Chapter 15	254
Chapter 16	271
Chapter 17	290
Chapter 18	303
Chapter 19	321
Epilogue	334
Characters	337
About the Author	341
Author's note	343

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,

John Steel

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 One

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.

John Steel

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

Migrant Crisis

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."

Migrant Crisis

“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."