

**“MOVE OVER JACK REACHER.
LOOK OUT JASON BOURNE.”
MATT BALLARD**

GHOSTS

A JOHN MILTON NOVEL

MARK DAWSON



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PART ONE

LONDON
Eight Years Ago

Chapter One

THE VAN WAS PARKED at the side of the road. It was a white Renault and it had been prepared to look just like one of the maintenance vehicles that Virgin Media used. It was parked at the junction of Upper Ground and Rennie Street. The spot had been chosen carefully; it allowed an excellent view of the entrance to the Oxo Tower brasserie on London's South Bank. The interior of the van had been prepared carefully, too. A console had been installed along the right-hand side of the vehicle, with two monitors displaying the feed from the low light colour camera that was fitted to the roof. There was also a 360-degree periscope that could be raised and lowered as appropriate, various recording devices, a dual band radio antenna and a microwave receiver. It was a little cramped in the back for the two men inside. The intelligence officer using the equipment had quickly become oblivious to any discomfort. He reached across to the console and selected a different video feed; they had installed a piggyback into the embassy's security system two weeks ago and now he had access to all those separate feeds as well as to an array of exterior cameras they had also hijacked. The monitor flickered, and then it displayed the footage from the security camera that monitored the building. He could see the black Mercedes S280 that the chauffeur had parked there, but, apart from that, there was nothing.

The second man was sitting just to the side of the technician, watching the action over his shoulder. This man was anxious, and he knew that it was radiating from him. "Change views," he said tensely. "Back inside."

The technician did as he was told and discarded the view for another one from inside the restaurant. The targets were still in the main room, finishing their desserts. The first target was facing away from the camera but she was still recognisable. The second target was toying with an unlit cigarette, turning it between his fingers. The second man looked at the footage. It looked as if the meal was finally coming to an end. The two targets would be leaving soon.

"Group," the second man said into the headset microphone. "This is Control. Comms check."

"Copy that Control, this is One. Strength ten."

"Eight, also strength ten."

"Twelve, copy that."

"Ten, strength ten."

"Eleven, same here. Strength ten."

"Five. Ditto for me."

"Eleven, what can you see?"

The agent code-named Eleven was standing at the bar, enjoying a drink as he waited for a table. His name was Duffy and he had latterly been in the Special Boat Service. Control could see him in the footage from the camera and watched as he angled himself away from the couple and put his hand up to his mouth. "They're finishing," he said, his voice clipped and quiet as he spoke into the discreet microphone slipped beneath the strap of his watch. "The waiter just asked if they wanted coffees and they didn't. Won't be long."

Satisfied, Control sat back and watched. Very few people knew his given name. He was dressed well, as was his habit, in a pale blue shirt and tastefully spotted braces. He held his glasses in his right hand, absently tapping one of the arms against his lips. He had been in day-to-day command of Group Fifteen for several months but this was the first operation that he had overseen from the field. He was a desk man by nature. He preferred to pull the strings, the dark hand in the shadows. The puppet master. But this operation was personal and he wanted to be closer to the action. He would have preferred to smell the gun smoke, if that had been possible. He would have preferred to pull the trigger.

Watching would be an acceptable substitute.

~~It was an expensive and exclusive restaurant. The wall facing the river was one huge expanse of glass, with doors leading out onto a terrace. The views were outstanding and Control knew, from several meals there himself, that the food was just as good. The bright sunlight refracted against the watch that the first target wore on her wrist and the diamond earrings that must have cost her a small fortune. Control watched and felt his temper slowly curdle. He had been introduced to her by a mutual Iranian friend. The name she had given him was Alexandra Kyznetsov. He knew now that that was not her name. Her real name was Anastasia Ivanovna Semenko and, instead of being a businesswoman with interests in the chemical industry, she was an agent in the pay of the Russian Federal Security Service. She was in her early forties but she had invested heavily in cosmetic surgery and, as a result, she could have passed for a woman fifteen years younger. Control had found her attractive and he had enjoyed her flirtatious manner on the occasions that they had met.~~

Now, though, that just made her betrayal worse.

Control stared at the screen and contemplated the frantic action of the last three days. That was how long he had had to plan the operation. It was hopelessly insufficient, especially for something as delicate as this, but the role that Semenko played cast her as something of a globetrotter and it was difficult to find a reliable itinerary for her; she tended to change it on a whim. She had only just returned from business in Saudi Arabia. Control had only green-lit the operation when it was confirmed that she was stopping in London before returning to Moscow. The team had then been assembled and briefed. Control had considered the precise detail of the plan and, by and large, he was satisfied with it. It was as good as he would be able to manage in the limited time that he had available.

The second target laughed at something that Semenko said. Control switched his attention to him. He had introduced himself as Andrei Dragunov but, again, that was a lie. His real name was Paschal Shcherbatov. He, too, was Russian. He was in his early middle-age and he was a long-time KGB agent, an intelligence man to the quick; since the fall of the Wall he had amassed considerable influence in the SVR, the successor to his notorious previous employer, and was now considered to be something of an operator. A worthy opponent, certainly.

Semenko clasped the hand of the *maitre d'*, her face beaming. They both got up, leaving money on the table, and made for the archway that opened into the lobby.

“DOLLAR and SNOW are on the move,” Control reported. “Stand ready.”

Shcherbatov's phone rang and he stopped, putting it to his ear. Semenko paused, waiting for him. Control stared at the pirated feed, willing himself to read Shcherbatov's lips, but it was hopeless: the angle was wrong and the quality of the image was too poor. He watched, frowning hard. Shcherbatov smiled broadly, replaced the phone and spoke with Semenko. Control hoped that their plans had not changed. That would throw things into confusion.

“Control to One and Twelve,” Control said into the mike. “They are on the move.”

“One, Control. Copy that.”

Control watched as Semenko and Shcherbatov headed towards the exit. The pair stepped beneath the camera and out of shot. “Keep on them,” Control said, and the technician tapped out a command and switched views to a new camera. This one was in the elevator and, as he watched, the door opened and the two of them stepped inside. Shcherbatov pressed the button for the ground floor. The camera juddered as the lift began to descend.

“Targets are in the lift,” Control reported. “One and Twelve, stand ready.”

“One, Control. Copy that.”

The technician swung around on his chair and brought up another feed on the second monitor. It offered a wide angle view of the street outside the restaurant. Control could see Semenko's chauffeur

He was a large man, powerfully built, with a balding head. They knew he had a background in the Spetsnaz and would certainly be armed. He wore a pair of frameless glasses and was dressed in a dark suit and open-necked shirt. Control watched as he stepped out of the shadows, tossing a cigarette on the floor and stomping it out.

The lift came to a stop and the door opened.

Semenko emerged into the wide shot first, walking with a confident bounce across the space to the Mercedes. Shcherbatov followed, his phone pressed to his ear again. The chauffeur opened the rear door for his passengers and, as they slipped inside, he opened the front door and got in himself.

He started the engine. Control could see the fumes rising from the exhaust.

The Mercedes reversed and turned and then pulled away, moving quickly.

“Targets are in play,” Control reported.

Chapter Two

BEATRIX ROSE was sitting astride a Kawasaki motorcycle on Rennie Street. The visor of her helmet was up and the cool air was fresh against her face. The usual buzz of adrenaline had kicked in as the operation moved into its final phase. She was a professional with years of experience behind her; too professional to let excitement render her less useful than she would need to be. She listened to the comms chatter in the receiver that was pressed into her ear, the detailed commentary as the Mercedes passed from the back of the restaurant and onto Upper Ground. She had memorised this part of London, at first with the aid of a map and then, over the course of the morning, three hours of careful reconnoissance that had fixed the local geography in her mind. She was confident that she was prepared as she could be.

“They’re turning east towards the Bridge,” intoned Control.

There was another motorcycle next to her. The agent sitting astride it was nervous, despite the time he had spent in the army and then the SAS. He had a glittering resumé, with one mission behind the lines during the second Iraq War a particular stand out, but it was one thing to go into battle during war when the rules of engagement were clear and success would often be publicised and quite another to conduct a clandestine extrajudicial operation like this, with no backup or recognition, and the likelihood of incarceration, or worse, if things went wrong. The man had his visor open, like she did, but where she was clear-eyed and focussed, he looked ashen.

“Milton,” she called across to him.

He didn’t respond.

“*Milton.*”

He turned to face her.

“You alright?”

“Fine,” he called back.

“You look like you’re going to be sick.”

“I’m fine.”

“Remember your training. You’ve done more difficult things than this.”

He nodded.

Beatrix Rose was Number One, the most senior agent in the Group. The man on the second bike was John Milton. He was Number Twelve. The Group was a small and highly select team. Twelve members. Milton was its most junior member and his presence in it was at least partly because of his influence. Number Four, a cantankerous Irishman who had served with the Special Boat Service before being transferred to the group, had been killed in a firefight with al Qaeda sympathisers in the Yemen six months earlier. Control had identified ten potential replacements to fill his spot on the team and had deputed the job of selecting the most promising soldier to her. She had interviewed all of them and then personally oversaw the selection weekend when their number had gradually been whittled down, one at a time, until Milton had been the last man standing. Beatrix had known before the weekend started that it was going to end up that way. His commanding officers described him as a brilliant soldier who was brave and selfless. They also spoke of a steely determination and a relentless focus on the goal at hand. He did not allow anything to stand in his way. He had demonstrated all of that. He was the most promising recruit that she had ever worked with and, in all the time that she had been Number One, she had tutored two men and two women who had replaced fallen team members. There had been more than three hundred possible recruits for those four spots and Milton was better than all of them.

“Here they come,” she called out.

The Mercedes turned the corner and headed in their direction. Beatrix flipped her visor down and gave the engine a twist of revs. Milton did the same, gunning the engine and then, as the Mercedes moved past them, closing his visor and pulling out into the empty road.

“One, Control,” Beatrix said.

“Go ahead, One.”

“We’re in pursuit.”

Chapter Three

“CONTROL, ONE. Roger that.”

Control had placed his agents carefully: One and Twelve east of the restaurant on Rennie Street; Five and Eight in a second van, currently idling in Southwark Street; Ten on a third bike, waiting on Stamford Street in the event that they were west instead of east; Eleven inside the restaurant. He was confident that they had all eventualities covered.

The driver of the surveillance van started the engine and they pulled out into the traffic and headed north. The Mercedes was out of sight but One was providing a commentary on its movements and it was a simple thing to follow.

Control twisted the wedding ring on his left hand. Despite his satisfaction with their preparation, he was still nervous. This had to be perfect. The operation was totally off the book; usually, the files with the details of their targets were passed down to him by either of MI5 or MI6, but that wasn't the case this time. Neither agency had sanctioned this operation and he would have even less cover than he usually did if anything went wrong. It wasn't just that this was unofficial business—all of the work they did was unofficial—it was personal.

None of his agents knew that. He had deceived them.

“Control, One. Report.”

“Target is waiting at the junction at Blackfriars Bridge.”

Control knew their itinerary for the rest of the day. Semenko and Shcherbatov were going to the meeting.

As far as they knew, the meeting was with him.

It was an appointment that Control had no intention of keeping.

Chapter Four

THE MERCEDES PICKED UP speed as it turned onto Blackfriars Bridge. It found a small gap in the traffic. Beatrix opened the throttle in response, keeping the Mercedes a few car lengths ahead of the rest. Their intelligence suggested that the woman she knew as DOLLAR had an appointment with a contact on Victoria Embankment; it looked as if the intelligence would prove to be accurate.

Beatrix stayed between fifty and a hundred yards behind the car; Milton was another twenty yards behind her. She kept up a running commentary as they gradually worked their way south east, toward the river. "North end of the Bridge, turning off ... onto the Embankment, heading west ... passing Blackfriars Pier ... coming up to Waterloo Bridge, following the river to the south."

The traffic started to queue as they reached Victoria Embankment Gardens. Beatrix bled away almost all the speed, ducking in behind a bus that was idling opposite Cleopatra's Needle. She could see the Mercedes through the windows of the bus and, beyond it, the Houses of Parliament.

"One, Control. Waiting at the lights at Embankment Pier."

"Acknowledged," said Control. "They'll continue south."

"Copy that." The lights changed, the traffic started to move, the last pedestrians broke into self-conscious trots as they hurried out of the way. "He's accelerating towards Hungerford Bridge."

She gunned the engine and sped forwards, not about to get stuck should the lights turn against her.

Control's voice crackled again. "Control, Group. This is as good a spot as any. Five?"

"In position," reported Number Five. "Five, One and Twelve. Get ready. Here we come."

Beatrix watched: a white van, not dissimilar to the one in which Control was watching, had been running parallel to them on Whitehall. Now though, it jerked out into the traffic from Richmond Terrace and blocked the road in front of the Mercedes. Number Eight—Oliver Spenser—was at the wheel. Number Five—Lydia Chisolm—was alongside him. Both agents were armed with SA-800 machine guns but the plan did not anticipate that they would need to use them.

Beatrix braked to thirty and then twenty. "One, Control. They're stopping."

"Control, One and Twelve. You have authorisation. Take them out."

Beatrix rolled the bike carefully between the waiting cars: a red Peugeot, a dirty grey Volvo, an open double decker bus that had been fitted out for guided tours. The Mercedes was ahead of the bus, blocked in between it and the delivery van in front. Beatrix reached the car, coming to a halt and bracing the heavy weight of the bike with her right leg. Milton rolled up behind her. Neither of them spoke; they didn't need to, they were operating purely on instinct by this stage, implementing the plan. Beatrix quickly scoped the immediate location: the inside lane was temporarily clear to the immediate left of the Mercedes, the pavement beyond that was empty and then it was the wide open stretch of the Thames.

No need to concern themselves with catching civilians in the crossfire.

Beatrix released her grip on the handlebars and unzipped her leather jacket. She was wearing a strap around her shoulder and a Heckler & Koch UMP was attached to it.

She raised the machine pistol, steadied it with her left hand around the foregrip, aimed at the Mercedes, and squeezed the trigger.

The window shattered, shards spilling out onto the road like handfuls of diamonds.

Milton was supposed to be doing the same but he had stopped.

Beatrix noticed but didn't have time to direct him. She was completely professional. Even as the machine pistol jerked and spat in her hand, her aim was such that every round passed into the cabin of the car. The gun chewed through all thirty rounds in the detachable magazine, spraying lead through the window.

The driver somehow managed to get the Mercedes into gear and it jerked forwards. He must have been hit because he couldn't control the car, slaloming it against the delivery van, bouncing across the road, slicing through the inside lane and then fishtailing. It slid through one hundred and eighty degrees and then wedged itself between a tree and a streetlamp. The horn sounded, a long and uninterrupted note. The car had only travelled twenty feet but Beatrix couldn't see into it any longer.

"Milton!"

She was fresh out of ammunition and he was the nearest.

"Milton! Move!"

He was still on the bike, frozen.

The passenger side door opened and SNOW fell out. The car's wild manoeuvre meant that the back of the car was now between Beatrix and him; he ducked down beneath the wing, out of sight.

"Milton! SNOW is running."

"I've got it," Milton said, but she could hear the uncertainty in his voice. He was corpsing; Beatrix had not anticipated that. She ejected the dry magazine and slapped in another, watching through the corner of her eye as he got off the Kawasaki and drew his own UMP.

Beatrix put the kickstand down. There was a terrific clamour all about: the Mercedes's horn was still sounding, tourists on the bus—with a clear view of what had just happened—were screaming in fright as they clambered to the back of the deck, and, in the distance, there came the ululation of a siren. Too soon, surely? Perhaps, but it was a timely reminder; the plan only allowed them a few seconds before they needed to effect their escapes.

She approached the car, her gun extended and unwavering.

It was carnage. The driver was slumped forwards, blood splashed against the jagged shards of windshield that were still held within the frame. The full weight of his chest was pressed up against the wheel, sounding the horn. DOLLAR was leaning against the side of the car, a track of entrance wounds stitching up from her shoulder into her neck and then into the side of her head. Her hair was matted with blood and brain. Beatrix strode up to the car and fired two short bursts: one for the driver and one for DOLLAR. She kept moving forward, the machine pistol smoking as she held it ahead of her, zoning out the noise behind her but acutely aware of the timer counting down in her head. The man and the woman were unmoving. She looked through the driver's side window and saw a briefcase on the passenger seat. They were not tasked with recovering intelligence but it was hard-wired into her from a hundred similar missions and so she quickly ran around to the passenger door, opened it, and collected it.

"Control, One," came the barked voice in her earpiece. "Report."

"The driver and DOLLAR are down."

"What about SNOW?"

"He's running."

There was panic in his reply: "What?"

"I repeat, SNOW is on foot. Twelve is pursuing."

Chapter Five

MILTON LEFT the bike behind him and sprinted. SNOW was already fifty feet ahead, adjacent to the Battle of Britain memorial. The great wheel of the London Eye was on the other side of the river and ahead, a line of touring coaches had been slotted into the bays next to the pavement.

SNOW dodged through the line of stalled traffic; nothing was able to move with the shot up Mercedes blocking the road ahead. He turned his head, stumbling a little as he did, saw Milton in pursuit and sprinted harder. He was older than Milton but he had obviously kept himself in good shape; he maintained a steady pace, driven on by fear. Milton's motorcycle leathers were not made for speedy running and the helmet he was wearing—he dared not remove it for fear of identifying himself—limited his field of vision.

He took out his Sig and fired a shot. It was wild, high and wide, and shattered the windscreen of one of the big parked coaches. It inspired SNOW to find another burst of pace, cutting between two of the parked busses. Milton lost sight of him. He ran between a truck and the car in front of it, passed between the two busses behind the ones that SNOW had used, and saw him again. A second shot was prevented by a red telephone box and then a tall ash tree.

Milton heard the up-and-down wail of a police siren. It sounded as if it was on the Embankment behind him, closing the distance.

Milton stopped, dropped to one knee and brought up the Sig. He breathed in and out, trying to steady his aim, and, for a moment, he had a clear shot. He used his left hand to swipe up his visor, breathed again, deep and easy, and started to squeeze the trigger.

SNOW ploughed into the middle of a group of tourists.

Shit.

He dropped his arm; there was no shot. He closed the visor and ran onwards, just as he saw the man again: he had clambered onto the wall that separated the pavement from the river and, with a final defiant look back in his direction, he leapt into space and plunged into the water. Milton zig-zagged through the panicking tourists until he was at the wall and looked down into the greeny-black water. There was nothing for a moment and then, already thirty feet distant, he saw SNOW bob to the surface. The currents were notoriously strong at this part of the river. The riptides were powerful enough to swallow even the strongest swimmer but SNOW was not fighting and the water swept him away, quickly out of range.

The siren was louder now, and, as he turned to face it, he saw that the patrol car was less than a hundred feet away, working its way around the stalled queue.

Milton paused, caught between running and standing still. He froze. He didn't know what to do.

"Milton," came Number One's voice in his ear.

He turned to his left.

Beatrix was on the pavement, between the river and the row of busses, gunning her Kawasaki hard. Milton pushed the Sig back into its holster and zipped up his jacket. Beatrix braked, the rear wheel bouncing up a few inches, then slamming back down again. Milton got onto the back; Beatrix had a slight figure and he looped his left arm around her waist and fixed his right hand to grip the rear of the pillion seat. Milton cleared six foot and was heavy with muscle but the bike had a 998cc four-cylinder engine and his extra weight was nothing. It jerked forward hungrily as Beatrix revved it and released her grip on the brakes.

Chapter Six

BEATRIX LOOKED out of the window of Control's office. It was the evening, two hours after the operation. It was a habit to debrief as soon as possible after the work had been done and, usually, those were not difficult meetings. Normally, the operations passed off exactly as they were planned. They were not botched like this one had been botched. Control was busying himself with the tray that his assistant, Captain Tanner, had brought in; it held a tea pot, two cups, a jug of milk and a bowl of sugar cubes. He poured out two cups. Beatrix could see that he was angry. His face was drawn and pale, the muscles in his cheeks twitching. He had said very little to her but she knew him well enough to know that the recriminations were coming. The crockery chimed as he rattled the spoon against it, stirring his sugar. He brought the cups across the room, depositing one on her side of his desk and taking the other one around to sip at it as he stood at the window.

"So?" he began.

"Sir?"

"What happened?"

Beatrix had known, of course, that the question was coming. The mission had been an unmitigated failure. The watchword of the Group was discretion, and the shooting had been the first item on all yesterday's news broadcasts and the papers were leading with a variation of the same picture: Milton in black leathers and a helmet with a mirrored visor, his arm extended as he aimed at the fleeing SNOW, his abandoned motorcycle in the background. The headline in the *Times* was typical: MURDER ON THE STREETS OF LONDON.

"It was just bad luck," she said.

"Luck? We plan so that luck isn't a factor, Number One. Luck has nothing to do with it."

"The driver managed to get the car away from us. That was just bad luck."

"It was Twelve's responsibility to neutralise the driver. Are you saying it was his fault?"

She had given thought to what she should say. The honest thing to do would be to throw Milton under the bus. This had been his first examination and he had flunked it. He had frozen at the critical moment. They had the targets cold, helpless, and it had been his corpsing that had given SNOW the opportunity to make a run for it. And even then, she knew Milton was a good enough shot to have taken him down.

She could have said all of that and it would have been true. She could have burned him but that wouldn't have been the right thing to do.

She had some empathy. She remembered her own introduction to the Group. The operation where she had lost her own cherry had been a fuck-up, too; not quite like this, but then she had been in Iraq and not on the streets of London, far from prying eyes and the possibility of your mistakes being amplified by a media that couldn't get enough of something so audacious and dramatic. Her own wobble had been between her, the female agent who had been Number Six in those days and her victim, an Iraqi official who was passing information to the insurgency; she had paused at the moment of truth and that meant that the man she had just stabbed in the gut had been able to punch her in the face, freeing himself for long enough to hobble into the busy street outside. Number Six had pursued him outside and fired two shots into his head and then, keeping bystanders away with the threat of the gun, she had hijacked a car and driven them both away. Their Control had been the predecessor to the one and yet he was still just as daunting, and Beatrix had baulked when he had asked her how it had gone. Number Six had covered for her, telling him that the operation had passed off without incident and that it had all been straightforward. Beatrix would have been cashiered without hesitation. Number Six had told Control the truth. So she understood what had happened to Milton. It did not

diminish her opinion of him. It did not make her question her decision to recommend him.

“It wasn’t his fault,” she told him, looking him straight in the eye. “He did his job, just as we planned it.”

“So you say. But he went in pursuit of SNOW?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“He never had a clear shot, not one he could take without a significant risk that he would hit a bystander. The rules of engagement were clear. This had to be at no risk.”

“I know what the bloody rules of engagement were, Number One,” he said sharply. “I wrote them.”

“If you want to blame anyone, blame me. I could’ve taken the driver out.”

Control flustered and, for a moment, Beatrix was convinced that he was going to blame her. That would have been alright. She had been a member of the Group for six years and that was already pushing at the top end of an agent’s average life expectancy. It wasn’t an assignment that you kept you had something to lose. Beatrix had a daughter and a husband and a family life that she enjoyed more than she had ever expected. She had done her time and she had done it well, but all things had to come to an end eventually. She wouldn’t have resisted if he blamed her and busted her out of the Group. There would be something else for her, something safer, something where getting shot at was not something she would come to expect.

But he didn’t blame her. “It’s a bloody mess,” he said instead, sighing with impatience. “A bloody bloody mess. The police have been told it’s an underworld thing. They’ll buy that, if only because the prospect of their own government sanctioning a hit is too bloody ludicrous to credit. No-one hears either of you speak?”

“It was all on the radio. And the only thing we left was Milton’s bike, and that’s clean. There’s no way back to us from that.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely sure.”

He took his saucer and cup to his desk and sat down. He exhaled deeply. “What a mess,” he said again. He was frustrated, and that was to be expected, but the immediate threat of the explosion of his temper had passed. “Where is Milton now?”

“Training,” she told him. That was true. He had barely left the quarters where the Group’s logistics were based since the operation. The rangemaster said that he had spent hours with a target pistol firing over and over until the targets were torn to shreds, then loading another target and pushing it further out and doing it all again.

“Are you still sure about him?”

“He’ll be fine,” she said. “When have I ever been wrong about a recruit?”

“I know,” he said, leaning back. “Never.”

He exhaled again and sipped at his tea. Beatrix looked beyond him, beyond the plush interior of his office where so many death warrants were signed, and out into the darkness beyond. London was going about its business, just as usual. Beatrix’s eyes narrowed their focus until she noticed the image in the glass: the back of Control’s head and, facing him, her own reflection. She stood at a crossroads with a choice of how to proceed: she could say nothing, and go back to her family, or she could do what she had decided she had to do and begin a conversation that could very easily become difficult.

“There was one more thing,” she said.

“What?”

“I pulled some evidence out of the car.”

He sat forward. “That wasn’t in the plan.”

“I know. Force of habit, I suppose. It was there, I took it.”

“And?”

“And you should probably take a look.”

She had travelled to the office on her own motorbike and had stowed the case in a rucksack. She opened the drawstring, took it out and laid it on Control’s desk. It had been locked and she had unscrewed the hinges to get it open; it was held together by one of her husband’s belts at the moment. She unhooked it and removed the top half of the case. There was a clear plastic bag with six flash drives and, beneath that, a manilla envelope. Inside the envelope was a thick sheaf of photographs. They were printed on glossy five-by-eight paper and had been taken by someone from a high vantage point, using a powerful telephoto lens. It was a series, with two people in shot. The first person was a man. He was wearing a heavy overcoat and a woollen hat had been pulled down over his ears. The picture had been taken in a park during the winter; the trees in the foreground were bare and a pile of slush, perhaps from a melted snowman, was visible fifty feet away. The man was bent down, standing over a park bench. There was a woman on the bench.

Despite the distance and the angle that the picture had been taken, it was still obvious that the standing man was Control.

“What is this?” he asked brusquely.

“It was in the case...”

“Yes,” he snapped. “You said. I have no idea why.”

“That’s you, sir, isn’t it?”

“If you say so.”

The atmosphere had become uncomfortable, but Beatrix couldn’t draw back.

“The woman on the bench...”

Control made a show of examining the photograph more closely.

“It’s DOLLAR.” He said nothing. “I don’t understand, sir...”

“Your job is not to understand, Number One. Your job is to follow the orders that I give you.”

He paused; Beatrix thought he was hesitating, searching for the words to say what he wanted to say but he didn’t say anything else. He just stared at her instead.

“Sir?”

He indicated the flash drives with a dismissive downward brush of his hand. “Have you looked at these?”

“No, sir,” she said, although that was a lie.

“Very good.” He shuffled in his chair, straightening his shoulders. “I want you to keep a close eye on Milton. It might be that we were wrong about him—and we can’t afford passengers. If we were wrong, we’ll need to reassign him. Understood?” She nodded that she did. “That will be all for now. You’re dismissed, Number One.”

She stood, still uncomfortable and confused, and then turned for the door.

She was halfway across the room before Control cleared his throat.

“Look, Number One... Beatrix. Please, sit down again.” She turned back and did so. He had come around the desk and now he was standing by the mantelpiece. “You’re right. I did meet her. A couple of times. Looks like she decided she’d like some pictures to mark the occasion. I can’t tell you who we met and I can’t tell you what we spoke about, save to say that it was connected to the operation. The details are classified. All you need to know, Beatrix, is that you were given a file with her name on it. And you know what that means.”

“I do, sir. Termination.”

“That’s right. Is there anything else you want to ask me?”

She looked at him: a little portly, a little soft, his frame belying his years of service in the force. Including, she knew, a distinguished campaign in the Falklands. He was looking at her with a

expression that looked like concern but, beneath that, she saw a foundation of suspicion and caution. Beatrix was a professional assassin, Number One amidst a collection of twelve of the most dangerous men and women in the employ of Her Majesty. She was responsible for the deaths of over eight hundred people all around the world. Bad people who had done bad things. She was not afraid of very much. But Control was not the sort of man you would ever want to cross. She looked at him again, regarding her with shrew-like curiosity, and she was frightened. The thought began to form that she had just made a very, very bad mistake.

Chapter Seven

BEATRIX HAD a house in a pleasant area of East London. There were estates surrounding it on all sides, but the grid of streets that included Lavender Grove was a peaceful and safe middle-class enclave that was, she thought, a good place to set up home. The house that she and her husband had bought five years earlier was a three bedroom terrace, slotted between properties owned by a kind retired couple and a young banker who was often abroad. The front of the house had a narrow strip of garden that was separated from the pavement by a set of iron railings and they had fixed colourful hanging baskets on either side of the brightly painted red front door. There was a larger garden to the rear, long and narrow, just big enough for the chickens that Beatrix had always wanted. It was a warm house with plenty of space for her, her husband and their daughter.

They were talking about trying for a second child and the house would be big enough for him and her, too, although it would be a little tight. It just needed to get them through the next eighteen months. Beatrix had decided that she would request reassignment from the Group after that; she had been doing it more than long enough. You could reduce the risks involved with an assignment with excellent planning, and Beatrix was fastidious about that, but there was always the chance that something might go wrong: bad intelligence, something that could not have been predicted, a lucky shot. Look at what had happened yesterday. She had been tempting Fate for years and she knew very well that, eventually, that would catch up with her. She was going to get out before that could happen.

She slotted the bike into the nearest space to the house and killed the engine. She took off her helmet, angled her head and looked at her reflection in the mirror. She looked fine: the ride across London had given her some time to think and, now that she had taken a moment to consider it, she wondered whether she might have been overreacting to her conversation with Control. There was probably a very good explanation for the meeting he had taken with DOLLAR, whoever she was. It was entirely possible that he had been gathering intelligence prior to greenlighting the operation to eliminate her.

It was a pleasant day, unseasonably warm, and she was in a good mood as she crossed the pavement, opened the gate and then the front door.

“I’m home,” she called out.

There was no answer.

That was strange. Her husband, Lucas, was a web developer and he worked from the second bedroom upstairs. It was past four o’clock as well, and so their daughter, Isabella, should have been home from school. She took off her jacket and hung it up. Perhaps they had gone to play in the park. She unfastened the clasps of her shoulder holster and took it off. She unclipped the leather strap that held the Sig Sauer in place, withdrew it, and popped out the magazine. She laid the gun and the magazine on the table. She had a gun safe upstairs and would put them away just as soon as she had poured herself a glass of water.

She went through into the kitchen. There was a pile of unopened post on the counter. She flipped through them with idle interest: bills, junk mail, nothing interesting.

She took the glass of water into the sitting room.

She dropped the glass.

Lucas was sitting on the sofa. Isabella was next to him. He had his arm around the girl’s shoulder.

Number Five was sitting in the armchair facing them, a silenced semi-automatic laid across his lap.

Number Eight was standing by the door to the hallway, a silenced semi-automatic in his right hand aimed at her.

She built a quick mental picture of possible weapons that were within reach: the letter opener on the sideboard; the paperweight next to it; a series of books in the bookcase, some of them hardback, some of them reasonably heavy; the switchblade in her right front pocket; the glass bowl that she used to hold fruit.

She was suddenly rabbit-punched in the kidneys; a sharp pain blossomed through her chest all the way down to her diaphragm. She stumbled forwards a step, bracing herself on the sideboard, before strong hands gripped her around the shoulders and spun her around. She glimpsed the cruel face of the third agent, Number Ten, as he drew back his head and then butted her in the nose.

She dropped down onto her backside, blood over her face.

She got to her hands and knees.

Ten kicked her in the ribs and she thudded into the sideboard again, sweeping her arm across the surface so that the lamp toppled over and so the letter opener fell between the furniture and the wall. She lay flat, her hand inches away from it; it was too far away to get it without noticing.

Kick me again.

She raised herself up again and Ten booted her in the ribs for a second time. She landed against the sideboard, reached beneath it for the opener and palmed it, reversing it and sliding the blade up into her sleeve.

“That’s enough,” Five said.

She bore her weight on one arm and pushed up.

“You’re going to play ball, right, Beatrix?”

She wiped away the blood.

“Because, you know, it’ll be so much better if you do. I don’t want to have to murder you in front of your daughter.”

She looked up. Her husband looked back at her with pained, confused eyes. He didn’t know what she really did for a living; he thought that she was still in the military.

Beatrix felt a pit opening in her stomach and, for a brief moment, the strength drained from her legs.

She mastered it quickly.

“I’m going to play ball,” she replied.

“That’s right. Are you armed?”

“No.”

“So where’s your weapon?”

“Outside. In the hall.”

“Any others in the house?”

“No.”

“Alright. Get up.”

She did as she was told and stood. She moved gingerly, her ribs blaring with pain; it felt like a couple were broken.

She looked through the window as another two agents walked down the front path. Number Nine and Number Eleven.

Five, Eight, Nine, Ten and Eleven.

Five of them.

Beatrix knew them all.

Five’s name was Lydia Chisholm. She had joined the group after a career in the Special Reconnaissance Regiment. Its agents operated in plainclothes, often submerged in deep cover, and employed a unit of forty women dubbed ‘the Amazons’ by a lazy and unoriginal commanding officer. Five had been the pick of the bunch. She tall and broad and muscular and Beatrix knew that her reco-

had been excellent since she had transferred, with a series of flawlessly executed kills.

~~Eight was Oliver Spenser. Beatrix had supervised his training. He had demonstrated a lack of control and a propensity to aggression and she had recommended against his selection; Control had overruled her. His Special Boat Service background was more traditional for the Group. He was more of a blunt weapon; if Five was a knife, Eight was a cudgel. Both were dangerous.~~

Ten, the agent who had knocked her to the ground, was Joshua Joyce. Nine and Eleven, the agents who were just letting themselves into the house, were Connor English and Bryan Duffy. All three were SAS.

“What do you want?”

“You need to come with us,” Five said calmly.

“Fine,” Beatrix said. “There’s no need for this to be messy.”

“I agree. No need at all.”

She had no intention of going with them and it was most certainly going to be messy. She would have gladly sacrificed herself for the lives of her husband and child but she knew, for sure, that there was no outcome that she could negotiate that would not end with her family being shot.

She heard Ten shuffle his feet. Three or four feet behind her.

She felt the cold metal of the letter opener as she held it against the inside of her wrist.

“Control doesn’t trust me?”

“He wants to be sure that he can.”

She could guess what their preferred outcome was: they would offer the safety of her family for her cooperation and then, when they had satisfied themselves that she had not kept any of the evidence that she had retrieved from the car, they would execute all three of them. They would leave no clues that might explain what had happened. The police would investigate, find nothing, describe it as a senseless tragedy and close the book.

“What do I have to do to prove it?”

“Let’s start with the photographs. Did you copy them?”

“No,” she said.

“And the flash drives? Look at them?”

“No.”

“Copy them?”

“No. I told him I didn’t.”

“I know you did. He doesn’t believe you.”

She worked hard to keep her focus clear but it was almost impossible. Isabella was looking at her with a dumb mixture of incomprehension and terror and Lucas, while he was fearful and confused to see her, also wore a look of betrayal and that, Beatrix had to accept, was fair enough. She had always done everything that she could to leave her work at the door; usually it was possible to leave it at the airport arrivals gate. She had never entertained the possibility that it might find her here.

“You mind if the others have a look around the house?”

“Knock yourselves out.”

“Go upstairs,” Five said to Eight. He disappeared into the hallway and started upstairs. She heard Nine and Eleven follow him. She looked over at Ten. “Check the kitchen.”

Beatrix fixed them all in her mind, working out the order she was going to have to attack them. Five, Ten, then whoever came down the stairs first.

“Keep nice and still,” Five said.

She kept the gun aimed at Lucas.

Chapter Eight

BEATRIX WOULD wonder about what she did next for the next decade of her life, running the sequence of events through her mind in the squalid rooms and opium dens that would become her home. She knew that this would be the only chance that she had; the odds were against her, and unless she was prepared to sacrifice either her husband or her daughter she knew, beyond question, that they would all be dead within a matter of minutes. She would wonder, too, during the long lonely nights of her exile when she numbly chased the dragon, whether Lucas had looked at her with a flash of understanding—and perhaps even silent approval—just before she dropped the letter opener down in her hand, spun it, and leapt for Five.

Chisholm was trained to act on instinct and the shot, from this range, couldn't possibly miss. The 9mm round struck Lucas in the face, boring a hole in his forehead just above his nose and almost perfectly between his eyes. It was a small mercy that he died immediately and he did not see his wife lunging across the room with the blade clasped in her fist. Five swung her gun arm around in a blur of motion, preternaturally fast, and fired another shot. The range was too close to miss, again, although Beatrix had anticipated it and arced away from the bullet's track at the final moment; it missed the centre of her body and sliced through the flesh and bone in her left shoulder instead. Her nerves screamed but the rush of adrenaline drowned them out. She tackled Five, the sudden impact of the collision tipping the armchair over and onto its back, spilling both women onto the floor. Five tried to block Beatrix's downward stab but her arm was pinned and Beatrix had all the momentum. Their wrists clashed but Beatrix forced the blade down and down until she couldn't press it down any more.

Isabella screamed, leapt to her feet and ran for the door.

Five's Sig was on the floor; Beatrix reached for it and rolled over onto her back, aiming and firing twice as Ten came back into the room. Her broken ribs impeded her aim and the first shot went wide splintering the door jamb, but the second hit him in the leg. He dropped his gun and collapsed, falling sideways to the floor.

Five struggled to her haunches and then fell backwards onto her backside. Her head hung forward but at an angle, and her breathing came in ragged hisses in and out. Beatrix aimed the gun as Chisholm raised her head and looked at her.

The letter knife was buried halfway into her throat.

There was sound of hurried movement from upstairs. She had no time. She got to her feet. Isabella was at the door. Her face and the white dress she was wearing had been sprayed with blowback from the shot that had killed her father.

"Isabella," Beatrix moaned through the sudden curtain of pain that fell across her. "Come here, darling."

She was covered in blood: her own, and Five's.

The girl hesitated.

"Isabella, come to Mummy."

She took a half step but it was too late. The door opened and Eight was there, encircling her waist with his left arm and aiming the gun at Beatrix's head with the other.

"Drop it!" he said.

Beatrix aimed back at him. "If you hurt her..." she began, the words trailing away. Nine and Eleven were clattering down the stairs. They would go around through the kitchen and flank her. There was a standoff she couldn't win.

"Put the gun down," Eight ordered.

Beatrix ignored him as she backed away. "Listen to me, very carefully. If anything happens to her

—and I mean if you hurt a single hair on her head—I’ll hunt you down and kill you and everyone you’ve ever loved. That goes for the rest of you and Control, too. It goes double for him. Tell him. The only thing that is going to keep me from doing that is my daughter. If anything happens to her, I’ll have nothing to lose.”

Eight nodded. He was wise enough to know when to compromise. “Fair enough.”

Beatrix held the gun steady, aware that by aiming at Eight she was aiming at her daughter, to “Isabella,” she said. “I want you to listen to me. I want you to go with this man. He’s going to look after you. Mummy has to go away now. I don’t know for how long, maybe for a very long time. But I’ll always be watching you. And I will always love you. Very, very much. Do you understand that, baby?”

The girl was only three years old. How could she understand? She had been sitting next to her father as he was shot in the head and then she had watched as her mother had been shot, then stabbed a woman in the throat and shot a man in the leg. If she could understand what she was telling her now she did not show it; she stared at her dumbly, her mouth slack. Beatrix desperately wanted to remember her blue eyes with their usual sparkle of mischief but now they were empty and dull.

She backed away, her eyes beginning to blur from the tears, and opened the door to the garden. Ten was on the floor, clutching his leg, and Eight did not come after her; perhaps he was tending to Five, perhaps he recognised that it made more sense to accept the truce. The pain of her wounded shoulder blazed as she ran into the garden, scattering the chickens pecking at their seed, and clambered up and over the fence and into the garden of the adjacent house beyond. She thought of Isabella, and the fear and confusion in her priceless face, and choked down a sob as she opened the gate and passed into the road beyond.

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