

# ONE

*Autumn 2008*

Death came in at three minutes to four on a sluggish morning tide, and changed Harry Tate's life forever.

It edged up a shrouded Essex inlet, a scrubby white fifty-foot motor launch with a fly bridge, its engine puttering softly against the slow current. The exhaust sounds were muffled by a heavy, early mist rolling along the banks, blanketing the dark marshland like cold candyfloss.

Three figures stood outlined by a flush of refracted light from the open cockpit. One was on the forward deck, a swirl of dreadlocks framing his head like a war helmet. He was holding a thick pole balanced on one shoulder. Number two, the helmsman, was a bulky shape up on the fly bridge, head turning constantly between the instrument panel and the banks on either side.

The third man stood on a swimming platform at the stern, inches above the murky wake. Skeletal, with long, straggly hair under a baseball cap, he had one hand down by his side, the other bracing himself on the rear rail.

'It's Pirates of the frigging Caribbean!' The whisper drilled

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softly into Harry's earpiece, gently mocking, forcing a smile in spite of the tension in his chest. The voice belonged to Bill Maloney, his MI5 colleague, in cover fifty yards along the bank to his right.

A light breeze lifted off the water, brushing past Harry's position behind a hummock of coarse grass, fanning his face with the sour smell of mud and decay. The sickly tang of diesel oil seemed to ooze out of the ground everywhere, and something was seeping through his trousers. He tried not to think about the kinds of toxic waste festering beneath him from decades of commerce, skulduggery and neglect.

He toggled his radio. 'Where the *hell* are you, Blue Team?' The query was strained with urgency. As Ground Controller, he'd been chasing the back-up police unit for fifteen minutes with no response.

Still nothing. Accident or a comms malfunction? Either way, they weren't here. He swore softly. Having been slashed at the last minute – economic demands, was the vague explanation – and now with the support van lost somewhere in the darkness, they were down to three men. With what was rumoured to be concealed in the boat's bilges, from bales of hash to 'bricks' of heroin, each containing up to fifty individual pay-and-go bags, and enough methamphetamine crystals to send half the kids in London off their heads for a month, the prize was too valuable. They needed all the help they could get.

But it wasn't there.

He leaned to his right and peeled aside some strands of grass, eyeing the misty darkness where Blue Team should have been

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in position. Nothing. Instead, he heard a click in his ear, then a hiss of static.

‘That’s a negative, Red One . . . repeat negative. We’re up to our axles in mud, five hundred yards from your O.P. The fucking ground’s like molasses. Blue Team out.’

Harry’s gut turned to water, the urgency now the bitter pre-taste of panic.

**WITH A NARROW WINDOW** the previous day to reconnoitre the area where the shipment was coming in, he and Maloney had ambled in on foot, posing as sometime fishermen on an idle day out. The inlet, bordered by a muddy track, was mostly used by working boats, weekend sailors and jet-skiers. The going, while reasonably solid underfoot, showed some evidence of a spongy sub-layer.

They’d spent an hour in the area, fishing, sipping beer and competitively skimming stones on the water, all the while scouting for cover in hollows, bushes and overturned or rotting boats. Other than a woman walking her dog and a couple of dinghies making laboured trips to boats further along, they had seen no-one who shouldn’t be there.

As they were leaving, it had started to rain; hard, slashing drops like liquid gobstoppers, pounding the softer patches into mud holes and blanketing the harder ground with a layer of filthy water. They had highlighted these areas on a laminated map for special attention.

Blue Team clearly hadn’t read the signs.

Harry closed his eyes against a rising nausea. Of all the luck.

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He could be at Jean's place right now, replete and warmed by her infectious humour, enjoying her company. Instead, he was stuffed with a growing disaster of titanic proportions.

Except that he knew deep down that this was as much a drug for him as the narcotics on the boat were for others.

'Stand by.' He toggled the switch to warn the other two men and watched the boat slide by thirty yards away. It was too late to abort, too risky to do nothing; within hours the stuff on board would be hitting the streets, flooding veins with its false promise and sending the weak and vulnerable to an early, hazy oblivion.

It was now or never.

He was clutching a handful of grass with his right hand. He forced himself to let go and slid his fingers into his jacket, to the reassuring touch of a semi-automatic.

'Is it a go or not?' Parrish, the third man. A firearms officer on loan from the local force, he was to Harry's right, close by the water's edge, positioned to cut off the boat's retreat. A last-minute replacement for an MI5 officer off sick, he was nervy, impatient and looking to prove himself.

'Wait!' Tate breathed, and hoped the idiot wasn't about to leap from cover and do a Rambo along the bank. As he spoke, the helmsman on the boat called a soft warning to his companions and cut the engine, steering the nose towards a short wooden jetty jutting out from the near bank.

'Blue Team . . . you out yet?' It was a wasted call, but gave him a few more seconds before having to make a final, no-going-back decision.

'Negative, Red One. We're not going anywhere. Sorry.'

'You forgotten how to fucking *run*?' he blasted back, and

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instantly regretted it. Five hundred yards in full gear, stumbling through the dark; even with night-vision kit they'd be like a pack of elephants.

He decided to give it another two minutes, to allow the boat's crew to split up and come ashore. Divide and conquer. Maybe, he thought wryly, when they saw they were surrounded by just three men stranded on a muddy bank in the dark, they'd give up without a fight.

Then bad luck and timing chose that moment to join the party.

From Harry's left, the opposite end of the approach track from Blue Team's last position, the familiar harsh roar of a Land Rover engine pierced the night, and a dark, square shape burst into view. Its lights were on low, but were sufficient to burn through the mist and highlight the surrounding bank . . . and the white hull of the docking vessel.

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*'Fuck!'* Maloney's curse registered deep shock. 'Where the hell did *he* spring from?' All approaches to the area were supposed to have been shut off one hour ago. Any sooner would have alerted the traffickers that their plans were blown.

'What's happening?' Parrish again, and by the catch in his voice, Harry knew that the firearms officer was about to make a move.

'Hold your position!' He turned to focus on the approaching car, gripping the hard outline of the gun and gathering his legs beneath him. Either someone had stuffed up the security cordon or the informant had lied about the smugglers' plans.

He used his radio. 'Red Three, this is Red One. A vehicle just arrived. What the hell's going on out there?' Red Three was another MI5 officer – a floater – operating the outer cordon with the local police. He should have warned them about the car's approach.

'Red Three?'

Silence.

*'Shit!'* He pounded his fist into the soft ground. What else could go wrong?

The Land Rover slid to an untidy stop ten yards short of the

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jetty, throwing up a spray of ground water. Both doors opened and a man sprang from behind the wheel and ran round to the passenger side. He appeared to be urging the passenger – a young woman in a floaty dress – to stay inside, but she had already slid from the car's high seat, followed by the heavy beat of hip-hop music.

*Christ, no,* Harry thought, hardly able to believe his eyes. *This is all we fucking need . . .*

As the driver tried to turn the girl back inside the car, he glanced at the boat ghosting into the jetty, its crew of three illuminated by the car's lights, and lifted a hand towards them.

But the girl didn't seem to understand.

'Hey, baby,' she cried plaintively, her voice slurred. 'Whassup? What're you doing?' She ducked past him and peered at the incoming vessel. 'Who're they?'

As the boat brushed the jetty, the man with the dreadlocks moved forward on the deck, bouncing the pole up and down on his shoulder. Behind him, the figure on the rear platform got ready to jump ashore, a glint of something stubby and metallic in his free hand.

Harry Tate felt a kick of anguish deep in his gut.

*'Don't . . . !'*

Afterwards, he never was sure what he'd intended to say – something more definite, for certain – and nothing like the single, useless utterance which came out of his mouth. He pushed himself to his feet, muscles cramped after too long in the same position, and brought up his gun. It was a long shot for a handgun but doable; he'd managed under worse conditions before now.

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His instincts told him Maloney was still somewhere to his right, also ready and willing to mix it if he had to.

‘Stop! Police! Don’t move!’

It was Parrish. Shouting and running forward along the bank, faint in the reach of the car’s headlights, he was swinging his Heckler & Koch in the air, the barrel aimed at the night sky. Harry couldn’t tell if it was bravado or stupidity, but the gun was pointless if he wasn’t going to use it.

And he was running across his colleagues’ direct line of fire.

‘Get down, you prick!’ yelled Maloney.

Too late.

The man with the dreadlocks looked at Parrish, then turned back to the Land Rover and screamed in defiance. He swung the pole down from his shoulder, catching it with a solid smack in his other hand. The car headlights glinted off dark metal.

*Shotgun.*

The muzzle-blast ripped the night apart, and the driver of the Land Rover was punched off his feet. The girl screamed as he was torn from her grasp, and her legs sagged. She whirled round to see what was happening, incomprehension on her face. Then a stutter of automatic fire came from the man at the rear of the boat. It ripped into her, shredding the floaty dress and sent her spinning to join her companion.

Without pause, Dreadlocks swung his gun and pulled the trigger again. The heavy charge knocked Parrish over backwards. The helmsman shouted a warning and hauled on the wheel, surging away from the bank with a howl of engines. Taken by surprise, Dreadlocks grabbed for the side rail but missed. He sprawled headlong on the deck, while the man on the stern



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platform danced off-balance for a moment before grabbing the side bar and holding on tight.

Harry cursed. Whatever was housed below decks wasn't a standard engine, but something bigger – possibly twin diesels. The boat was already on its way out and would soon be gone for good if it wasn't stopped.

He took aim and squeezed the trigger, a controlled double-tap followed by another, then a third. He was aiming at the helmsman; stop the driver and the boat would go nowhere. The volley of shots was lost among the roar of the engines, and puny in contrast to the stunning blast of the shotgun. But a section of glass windshield exploded and the helmsman ducked as a chunk of moulding blew apart alongside the wheel.

Maloney was up and running, tracking the boat along the bank. He began firing steadily at the charging vessel, now nose-up as it increased speed, the wash flashing white against the sloping mud walls on either side.

At the stern, the man with the machine gun was trying to bring his weapon to bear, but was thrown off balance as the boat bounced and swayed in the narrow inlet. Dreadlocks, however, had regained his feet. Gripping the rail with one hand, he raised his shotgun and lined up on Maloney, barely thirty feet away and with nowhere to hide.

'Bill, down!' Harry bellowed, and as Maloney threw himself to the ground, still firing, he emptied his clip at the gunman.

Shots from both guns caught the man high in the body, flipping him overboard.

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Seconds later, the boat had gone, leaving in its wake three bodies on the shore and a fourth bobbing in the cold, black water.

## THREE

‘We’re sending you out of the country. Pro tem.’

The speaker was George Paulton, Harry Tate’s superior and Operations Director for MI5. His office in Thames House had a fine view of the river below, but the scenery was lost on the three men facing each other.

‘Why?’ Harry stared at his superior, then flicked a glance at a heavy figure standing in one corner. The man, nameless and grey as battleship paint, had said nothing when Harry had entered the room, and there had been no introductions.

Two days after the shooting, and a raft of internal MI5 and Metropolitan Police enquiries had been kicked off with startling speed, engineered to analyse failure and avoid blame. Still numbed with feelings of guilt and remorse about the deaths of the young couple and Parrish, Harry had been called to Paulton’s office to face what he was sure would be intensive questioning, yet maybe a reassurance that all would be well in the end.

Now he wasn’t so sure.

‘Needs must, I’m afraid,’ Paulton explained smoothly. ‘The press will be all over this like a rash, especially after Stockwell. The de Menezes affair,’ he added unnecessarily, and adjusted a buff folder on his desk.

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‘That wasn’t the same thing,’ Harry protested. ‘We didn’t have enough men—’

‘Maybe not. But we have to view things in a broader context. There are . . . gaps in the sequence of events. Gaps we need to deal with. We can’t do that while there’s a danger you might be compromised by the press discovering your name.’

‘How could they?’ Harry looked from Paulton to the other man. He didn’t like the way the conversation was going. ‘There’s no way they can find out, unless someone talks. And what gaps?’

‘You’re right: on balance, they shouldn’t find out. But we can’t take that chance.’ He waved at the folder, which Harry guessed contained his and Maloney’s debriefing notes. ‘As to gaps . . . there’s the question of why the secure perimeter around the site allowed two civilians to pass through. And why the police officer on assignment wasn’t managed correctly. It doesn’t look good.’

‘I’ve already been over this.’ Harry had faced a three-person committee earlier that morning. A woman from Legal and two men, one from Human Resources and the other a limp-wristed individual from Operations. All faceless, all void of any emotion, they had absorbed detail like sponges but offered no help or empathy. It was as if his career so far counted for nothing.

It had been like facing a death tribunal.

‘We’re trying to safeguard your situation,’ Paulton purred.

‘Is that what it is?’ Harry felt an uncommon rebellion building. His dealings so far with Paulton had been relatively few and at best remote. But he had always seemed to be on the side of his officers. Now something different seemed to be hovering in the air. ‘Why do I get the feeling that the fault for what happened is being shifted my way?’

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‘There were failings, you can’t deny that.’ There was a hint of steely reproof in Paulton’s voice.

‘Damn right there were. Like the last-minute reduction in team numbers. Economics, I was told. What kind of economics?’ Harry continued, before the other could interrupt, ‘We were in the middle of an operation!’

‘You could have vetoed it.’ Paulton tapped the folder, his cheeks flushing. ‘If you felt there were insufficient resources at your disposal, you could have said . . . *should* have said. It’s every officer’s right . . . every officer’s judgement.’

‘And let those drugs out on the streets? We’d have been crucified and you know it.’ Harry felt himself beginning to boil over. He breathed deeply. Losing it here and now wouldn’t do any good. But after the meaningless debriefing with the three Stooges earlier, he could sense the drawbridges going up all around him. He wondered if this was how establishment stitch-ups began.

‘It was still your call.’ The dig came from the man in the corner; pointed, cold, unfriendly. Silent until now, he had clearly decided to wade in on Paulton’s side.

‘Really?’ Harry turned, the heat rushing to his face. ‘And who the hell are you? When did you last go out on an op?’ He glared at the man, saw only empty, hooded eyes staring back from a well-fed face. ‘When did you last lie in shit and sewage for hours at a time, waiting to face men armed with automatic weapons – men who don’t give a flying fuck about law and order because of what they’re bringing in? You think they give a pig’s tit about “stop, police” or us waving our ID? They don’t.’

‘The planning—’ Paulton tried to interject, but Harry was on a roll, sensing his future going up in a fireball.

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‘The planning was done by the book, with all the assessment boxes ticked, just the way the suits like it. But guess what – someone was too concerned with budgets, targets and key performance indicators!’

‘Tate—’ The unnamed man lifted a pudgy hand, his eyes as cold as granite.

‘It’s *Mister Tate* to you,’ Harry growled. ‘Those two civilians died because they were allowed to penetrate a compromised security cordon and ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time. As for not ‘managing’ the dead officer, that’s bullshit. He ran across the firing line. He was brave, certainly, but stupid; he should have done as he was told and kept his bloody head down.’ He could have added that in running out from cover, Parrish had probably exacerbated the situation and drawn fire on to the couple while using their arrival as a distraction. But he didn’t say it; the man was dead. ‘Ask Maloney – he’ll tell you.’

‘Maloney has made his report. He has been taken off operational duties pending an enquiry.’ Paulton fixed him with a glare. ‘As of now, you are not to have any contact with him. Understood?’

‘Why? That’s ridiculous. He’s my number two—’

‘*Was* your number two. As of this minute, we’re offering you a new posting. Overseas. It’s a career position, with additional benefits at an enhanced grade.’ He gave a thin smile. ‘Should help your pension entitlements, I’d have thought.’

‘Jesus, the *pension!*’ Harry wanted to spit, he was so mad. ‘For how long? Doing what?’

Paulton shrugged. ‘For as long as necessary. Until things calm down, at least. You’ll be briefed on arrival by your head of station.’

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I recommend you take the post.' He studied his fingernails. 'Right now, I don't see any alternatives.'

They were protecting themselves, Harry knew. They wanted him out of the way while all the official wailing and gnashing of teeth went on and they could build a credible explanation. But what were his options? Stay and face a public enquiry, the token guilt figure? Resign and be hounded by the press? Or take their dubious offer and work his way back?

'How long do I have to think about it?'

'You don't. You leave today.'

Against all his instincts, Harry took the offer.

**AFTER LEAVING PAULTON'S OFFICE**, Harry went home to pack a single bag and make a few phone calls. To friends to say he would be away for a while; to Jean, a slim red-head in her forties who referred to herself with dry wit as the OD – Occasional Date.

Instead of Jean, he got Felicity, her Sloaney business partner in a west end flower business.

'Off again? She'll be sorry she missed you.'

'Really?' Harry wasn't so sure. Jean knew what he did but had never asked questions. Until now, he'd taken it for a judicious lack of interest.

'Obtuse man.' Felicity's voice was friendly, gently reproachful. 'Don't you know you're the only person who makes her smile? Come back soon.'

He put down the phone amid conflicting emotions; resumed packing to get his mind in gear. The department would deal

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with the letting of his flat while he was gone, so he boxed up his personal things and left them in the middle of the floor for removal and storage.

**A SHORT TAXI DRIVE** took him west to RAF Northolt, where he was shunted aboard a military plane and handed a flask of coffee, a bottle of chilled water and a tuna sandwich. He took his seat and found he had two escorts sitting nearby. Military policemen by the look of them, hard and capable. They ignored him completely. He knew that if he tried to get off, they'd have him face down on the cabin floor before he reached the door.

He ignored them in return. Drank his coffee, ate half his sandwich, saved the rest for later. Not that he liked tuna especially. But better than nothing. He fell asleep thinking of Jean.

They prodded him awake at Frankfurt. Gummy-eyed, he stared through the window. The plane had stopped behind a military hangar, shrouded in shadow, distant arc lights casting an eerie glow. He was urged down the steps and into a plain, white van reeking of oil and stale sweat. Three minutes later he was in the civilian terminal, where he was told where to collect his tickets for his onward flight. He signed a docket at the desk and turned to see if his escorts were coming, too.

They had disappeared.



## FOUR

‘In hindsight, Tate should have had more back-up and support.’ Paulton tossed his listeners an early *mea culpa* to be going on with. It was chicken bones at best, probably pointless, but might keep them at bay for a while and sit well on the record should a board of enquiry be convened.

‘Is that all you can say? After all that work and preparation?’ Gareth Nolan, Deputy Commissioner for Operations in the Metropolitan Police, scowled across the table. He was clearly intent on levelling blame towards MI5 for the failures. ‘You’re defending the man?’

They were in an anonymous, polished room in the bowels of a building off Horse Guards Avenue. The flak from the failed operation was beginning to settle around everyone’s ears as the story gradually became public knowledge, and this was not the only meeting Paulton had been called to.

‘It’s not a matter of defence,’ he said curtly. ‘It’s the facts I’m interested in.’

The senior policeman shrugged it off. ‘It was a bloody cock-up, right from the start! It cost one of my men his life, *and* two innocent civilians. Your man – Tate, is it? – should be charged

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with incompetence at the very least! What is he – a trainee, fresh out of university?’

‘He is a former army officer,’ Paulton said calmly, a defensive stance for the record rather than loyalty to his man. ‘He served with distinction in Kosovo and Iraq, among others, but he isn’t Superman. Circumstances went against him . . . against the team. It happens.’ He smiled coldly, adding, ‘Besides, if I understand the facts, it was your officer who put himself at risk; your team who got stuck driving their van into a mud-wallow. Don’t you teach them ground-reading skills anymore?’

‘Gentlemen.’ The voice of the third person in the room cut off Nolan’s intended retort, leaving him fuming impotently. ‘Let’s press on, shall we?’ Marcella Rudmann, chair of a Joint Intelligence Subcommittee overseeing security operations, flipped open a folder in front of her. ‘This business is appalling by anybody’s standards. Which is why this meeting involves just the three of us . . . so far.’

The subtle warning did not go unnoticed by the two men. They were in session with one of the most powerful women in Whitehall, against whom arguments were like light rain on a metal roof. She had the Prime Minister’s confidence and the support of senior cabinet members.

‘Two civilians dead – one the daughter of a local VIP, we believe – a courageous firearms officer killed and one dead drug-runner. I couldn’t care less about the last one, but the other three are going to keep the press on our collective necks for months to come. What are you doing about it?’

‘Doing?’ Paulton raised an eyebrow, although he knew perfectly well what Marcella Rudmann was alluding to. A head

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had to roll and, more importantly, had to be seen to roll. More than that, any source of embarrassment had to vanish quietly, beyond the reach of the press. He felt for a moment the spectre of blame settling around his neck like an icy collar. If anyone had to take the fall, it should be the weasel in uniform across the table from him; it had been his men who had thrown the drugs bust into disarray after many months of work, leaving the MI5 operators and the on-loan firearms officer to deal with the ensuing firefight. There was also the manpower cuts forced on them at the last minute by the Home Office; cuts meaning that resources were tailored to the threat level involved. Intelligence reports had advised that the threat level of the operation in Essex was likely to be low, and therefore required minimum personnel on the ground.

It had been a bad decision, but one Paulton himself had reluctantly agreed to. Outgunned and on foot, Tate and the others hadn't stood a chance. He wondered idly whether senior police officers were issued with swords on which they could fall. Probably not; their health and safety department wouldn't allow them near anything sharp.

'About Tate.' Rudmann was in her fifties, attractive and poised, but possessed of an aggressive approach which belied her looks. She had a reputation for caring little about individual sensibilities or rank, evidenced by several big-gun civil service carcasses littering the ground behind her.

Paulton forced himself to remain calm. Was it really going to be this simple? Had she just given him a clear, unambiguous signal that the man on the ground was to take *all* the blame? He sighed; he'd be stupid to toss it back in her face. Tough on

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Tate, especially at his time of life. Forty-something, he seemed to recall.

Better for himself, though. If he was careful.

Nolan wasn't slow to pick up the inference, and snickered in triumph. 'Tell me, Paulton, what *do* you do with security types you want rid of? You can hardly send them down to the local job centre, can you? Or have them spilling their guts by writing their memoirs.'

Paulton shot him a look of genuine loathing and resisted the instinct to mention the Stockwell tube shooting in 2005, by a police marksman. Instead, he replied, 'Actually, we execute them. Saves time and paperwork. We could always extend the practice to your lot, if you like. Care to be the first candidate?'

Nolan's face paled and he began to protest. But Rudmann's hand came down flat on the table, the rings on her fingers giving the sharp, flat echo of a gunshot.

'Your solution, George.' It wasn't a question.

'You mean here and now?' He was damned if he was going to give her an answer in front of this jumped-up traffic cop – not when it meant admitting he was surrendering the head of one of his officers. It would be tantamount to admitting that he had the guts of a slug. He slid a glance at his watch.

Tate's flight should be taking off anytime now. A few hours and he'd be beyond reach. For good.

Rudmann's hand drifted ominously towards a phone at her side. 'Make it quick, George. Time's running out.'

He gave in, convincing himself he was fighting his corner but battenning down on the tiny worm of self-contempt seeping into his bones.

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‘It’s taken care of,’ he said with feigned reluctance, aware that Nolan would practically soil his pants hearing what he was about to say. ‘We have a place . . . a posting. It’s a recent innovation. It will put Tate beyond the reach of the press, or . . .’ he hesitated, eyeing Nolan, ‘. . . anyone else who goes looking for him.’

‘What sort of place?’ Rudmann had been fingering her watch, no doubt late for another meeting. But she stopped at this latest revelation.

‘A branch office. I don’t want to disclose the precise location, but it’s not in this country.’

Nolan’s eyebrows shot up to join his receding hairline. ‘How? Five doesn’t have jurisdiction out of the country.’ He looked at Rudmann for support.

‘Actually, you’d be surprised where we have jurisdiction.’ Paulton gave him his nastiest smile, pleased to have taken the policeman by surprise. ‘But that’s all I’m saying.’ He waited for Rudmann to insist. This one should be a definite no-go area, even for her.

She nodded. ‘Very well.’ She closed the folder before her and stood up. ‘That’s all, gentlemen.’

Nolan looked crestfallen at being frozen out, but hurried away, no doubt eager to begin spreading tales. Paulton watched him go, determined not to share even the same corridor space with the man in case he was tempted to do something physical.

He turned and faced Rudmann. Her expression was a mask.

## FIVE

‘I wasn’t going to insist,’ Rudmann said quietly after Nolan had gone. ‘Especially in front of that odious little creature. But there are others who will. Is it wise sending Tate to this . . . posting?’ It suddenly occurred to Paulton that she might already know about the place he was referring to. He couldn’t think how, but she undoubtedly had contacts he wasn’t aware of; resources he didn’t know about. It was an unsettling thought. ‘The PM, you mean?’ He caught a hint of perfume and wondered vaguely what it was. And where she daubed it.

‘Probably not. But his office. They will want to be sure Tate isn’t going to pop up somewhere foreign and start talking. That really would be a disaster – for everyone.’

‘He won’t.’ Paulton mentally gagged at the idea; it would be a career killer. The decision to tell her something – anything – was easily made. It might keep her off his back and satisfy others that a head had rolled; that all was well in the world. Most would see it as a classic display of self-defence – a civil service skill customarily absorbed on the first day in the job. Not that Tate would appreciate the subtlety. ‘He’s been assigned to the modern equivalent of Fort Zinderneuf. It’s remote, unpleasant, and he’ll be monitored to ensure he doesn’t go AWOL. It should suffice.’

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'I see.' She gave him a sharp look. 'You'd planned this already.'

'I thought it might be on the cards, yes, after . . . previous incidents. It's a precautionary measure.'

'How astute. But why? What's so special about Tate?'

He paused for several beats, wondering how much to tell her. Thrown a small bone, it might be enough to put her off-track for the time being.

'Nothing, as such,' he said finally, choosing his words with care. This could come back and bite him on the arse if he said the wrong thing. 'Tate's old school; knows things we'd rather he didn't get prised out of him by a clever hack. He's one of those intelligence officers who crept up on the outside rails without being noticed; diligent, solid, good at his job, does what he's told most of the time.'

'But?'

'He can be bolshie when he thinks he's right. It's best we keep him out of the way.' He could have added that Harry Tate had refused to play the game of musical chairs which passed for a career path around here, but he'd been around long enough and deep enough to know where several skeletons were buried. Even if he didn't know that he knew. It might be a good time to ensure it stayed that way.

The main fact was that Tate, good and obedient servant that he was, was feeling justifiably annoyed at being left dangling out in the Essex marshland. Reason enough to move him out of anyone's sight and hearing before he exploded.

Rudmann seemed satisfied. 'How long will he be there?'

'For as long as we think fit. He'll be allowed back eventually – subject to safeguards, of course. No contact with home and

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hearth, all communications with Thames House to come via his head of station. Even his family won't know where he is.' Not that Tate had any, he recalled. Divorced and likely to stay that way. An odd fish. Probably a drinker, on the quiet. With a shudder, he realized the man actually had the potential to be the worst kind of spook to have on your hands when the shit hit the fan.

'Who else knows about this place?' Rudmann dragged him back.

'Six. But nobody else.' He held his breath, aware that he was on thin ice. What if she asked why this had not come up before?

'I see. How often do you . . . use it?'

'Rarely, so far. As I said, it's fairly new. Experimental, you might say.' He forestalled further questions by asking, 'Is there anything else?'

Rudmann shook her head. There was something of the prude in her expression, as if finding something about him and his world which she did not like. Even so, it was evident that she was fascinated by what he had just told her.

'What on earth do you call this place?'

'There is no official designation.'

'Why not?'

He shrugged. 'If nobody has logged it, nobody will find it.'

There was a lengthy silence, then, 'But you must have a name for it.'

'Yes. We call it Red Station.'



## SIX

Harry Tate celebrated his birthday with a miniature of Bell's whisky while waiting for his bag to come off the plane. Between sips, he was trying to convince himself he'd been born lucky.

There was little talk in the drab terminal; most of his fellow passengers were in deep shock after an aborted first landing. About to drop on to the runway, the pilot of the Antonov AN 24 had suddenly hauled the nose up without warning, the ageing engines screaming under full power as they fought to claw the aircraft back into the thin air above Mukhrani airport, Georgia. Cries of alarm in several languages had joined the sounds of tumbling crockery in the galley. But the near-stall manoeuvre had paid off, dragging them in a juddering curve away from the airport and out over the open countryside, vibration shaking every rivet and leaving behind a heavy flow of muddy exhaust fumes like a giant crop-duster.

As they had circled for another try, the reason for the go-around became clear: a green armoured personnel carrier was sitting squarely in the middle of the single runway. A volley of swearing had echoed from the flight deck, followed by a burst of radio chatter. Then silence. Nobody in the cabin spoke, the atmosphere changed instantly from dulled relief at journey's end

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to one loaded with tension at the implications of what might be happening on the ground.

Whatever the outcome of the radio exchange, the aircraft circled and lined up again. With minimum fuss, it sank on to its landing path and touched down with a heavy thump, causing several overhead lockers to open and cascade a variety of hand-luggage on to the heads below.

As they flashed past the APC, which had pulled back on to the grass, Harry recognised it as a Cobra, an image dredged up from a distant weapons-recognition class. Perhaps the local tourist board had decided that meeting incoming aircraft with light armoured vehicles was the latest way to impress visitors.

After the air-conditioned cabin, the atmosphere outside the plane was muggy, and the walk across the oily tarmac to the terminal was like stepping through a steam room. Beyond the single-storey structure, the distant line of the Caucasus Mountains rose to the north, their jagged peaks hazy against a dirty sky. Elsewhere, the view was of shabby hangars and smaller, unnamed buildings set back from the runway, surrounded by scrubby grass. The tang of aviation fuel hanging in the air mixed disturbingly with the acrid fog of cheap cigarettes.

The combined aroma made Harry feel nauseous. It wasn't just the landing though; he'd been cheated of sleep by a fat journalist from Ohio named Carl Higgins, who had insisted on talking non-stop about his family.

Passport control consisted of a pair of plywood booths with edgy-looking uniformed men inside and soldiers in camouflage outside. To add to the lack of welcome, none of the video screens around the walls appeared to be working and there was no

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air-conditioning to combat the oppressive humidity. Throughout, the overhead lights were a dull yellow, adding to an atmosphere of heavy gloom.

After nearly an hour, during which his passport was scoured twice at length from front to back, Harry arrived at the baggage reclaim hall, another shed tacked on to the arrivals hall. He crossed to the window overlooking the landing area, where a team of baggage handlers was abusing luggage off his flight. His own bag was in there somewhere, but he'd long ago given up taking anything of value on foreign trips. Experience had shown that it was better to move lean and light, unencumbered by unnecessary weight.

Another APC lumbered into view on the far side of the airport. The rear hatch swung open and several armed men in camouflage uniform dropped out and scurried away into a row of bushes. Practice or reaction? The sight made him uneasy.

He caught sight of his reflection in the glass. Solid and squalid, his father would have said, in need of some exercise, rest and healthy food. He wondered what it was about him that made Jean smile. He knew he looked pasty, with red-shot eyes under a brush-cut of dark hair peppered with hints of grey. Where he was going, the exercise might be guaranteed, but the rest and healthy food might have to wait.

One of the baggage handlers pulled a black holdall out of the aircraft and drop-kicked it into a wire cage, then held up his arms to acknowledge applause from his co-workers. When he saw Harry watching, he made a short, one-handed gesture. It might have been obscene, might not. Harry responded with a genial tilt of his whisky miniature and went back to waiting for

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the carousel to start up. At least his bag would be easy to spot, as it now had a large dusty boot-print embedded in one side.

He yawned and felt his jaw click, and tried not to think about the unseemly haste with which he'd been bundled out of the madness of London. It must have broken civil service records for speed and efficiency, especially in Human Resources and Travel. He hadn't even been asked to surrender his weapon, but told they would send it on in a secure bag.

They were clearing the decks before the press got to him. It was the MI5 way. Move the man, move everything associated with him. Sanitize and deny. Avoid awkward questions and embarrassing answers.

It may have been dressed up as a new posting, but he was beginning to regret his decision already. He had followed orders, the same as always.

He felt hungry. Remembering the sandwich they'd given him at Northolt, he took out the other half and bit into it with dull enthusiasm. It prompted a reminder of his escorts from London. They may have disappeared from sight, but he didn't believe he was being allowed to move without being observed.

To test the theory, he kept his head down, blanking out the activity around him and recapping who he had seen so far. He discounted the obvious ones – hard-nosed, copper or army types – because they were usually innocent. His money was on a young bloke with a buzz-cut lounging around near the main doors, pretending to be waiting for an incoming passenger.

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**THIRTY MINUTES LATER, AS** Harry carried his bag towards the main exit, the man with the buzz-cut was using a mobile phone on the far side of the arrivals area.

‘He’s just leaving,’ he said quietly. ‘Heading for the cab rank.’

‘Has he talked with anyone?’ The voice on the other end was calm but clipped, establishment English. No background noise. A quiet office close by the Thames.

‘No.’

‘Good. Did he see you?’

‘No way. He was busy sucking on a miniature of whisky. He hadn’t got a clue.’

‘If you believe that,’ the voice said with cold contempt, ‘you’re an idiot. The only way Harry Tate would have missed spotting a tail was if he was unconscious and blindfolded.’

## SEVEN

There were more military personnel outside the terminal building. All armed, looking alert or bored depending on rank, and most looked as if they had been dressed and assembled in a rush.

There were no takers for cabs at the rank, and only a single vehicle waiting; a dusty Mercedes with a crumpled wing. The driver was a young man with spiky hair, oval spectacles and a faded Def Leppard T-shirt. He lifted his chin as Harry caught his eye, and popped the boot. Harry handed him a slip of paper with the office address, and the man pursed his lips and nodded. He seemed about to say something when a large shadow loomed over them.

‘Hey, Tate – you got the only ride left! Care to split the fare?’ It was Higgins, the American journalist. He was sweating profusely and clutching a large overnight case and a plastic duty-free bag. His suit looked as if it had been used to bed down a donkey.

‘Sure. Climb in.’ Harry could have done without the company, but refusing the suggestion would have made him stand out.

‘Jesus, what a shit-heap!’ was Higgins’ opening comment as they left the small airport and headed out along a narrow perim-

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eter road. He banged on the back of the driver's seat. 'Hey – does this thing have air-con? Stinks like a dead beaver in here.'

The driver tapped a button on the centre console, and a fan stirred lazily but with little effect.

As they turned on to the main road, Harry looked back. There were no other vehicles in sight. If his watcher from the airport was still there, he must have borrowed Harry Potter's invisibility cloak.

During the journey, which changed from a scattering of commercial units and residential blocks around the airport, to occasional farms and clusters of low houses in open, gently-climbing countryside, Higgins complained at length about the trip, the flight, the landing and the lack of facilities. The only thing he appeared not to have an opinion on was the over-abundant display of military personnel and vehicles in the area. Stationed at crossroads and junctions, they were watchful but unthreatening.

As they cruised into the drab outskirts of a medium sized town, Higgins took up a running commentary about the country and the people, little of it complimentary. Harry wondered if the driver spoke English. He occasionally found the man's eyes flicking up to the mirror and meeting his with a quizzical expression, although he remained silent.

The town, set in the cooler air among low foothills, was unsophisticated and raw, and reminded Harry of a western frontier town from a Sergio Leone film. A maze of narrow streets intersected by several empty, tree-lined boulevards, it boasted a bare handful of four-storey buildings which would have been considered for demolition anywhere else. Some of the streets were bordered

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by large, rubbish-strewn gutters on either side, with planks laid across the gap for pedestrians, who seemed to use the street like a walkway and paid little attention to surrounding traffic. Overhead, electric wires sagged between the buildings, barely high enough to avoid the radio aerials of the large trucks pounding through and dousing everything in heavy exhaust fumes. The people looked grey, shuffling along with little signs of conversation, moving between the shops which ranged from garish to utilitarian and shabby.

Two hours after leaving the airport, the driver turned on to one of the boulevards and stopped outside a hotel boasting an awning and a cluster of tables with parasols on the pavement outside.

Higgins looked at the driver and shifted his bulk forward to pound on the back of his seat. 'Hey, Spikey – how did you know where I was staying?' He turned to Harry without waiting for a reply. 'Did I say where I was staying?'

Harry shrugged. The driver merely smiled in the mirror.

Higgins swore at the lack of reaction and nudged Harry with a beefy elbow. 'See this dump? It's called the Palace. My bathroom at home is bigger than this. Say, where are you staying, Tate? You here, too?' It obviously hadn't occurred to him that the hotel might have guests other than himself.

'No,' said Harry with quiet relief. 'My firm made other arrangements.'

'Your firm? Oh, you in oil or something? You never said.'

'You never asked.' Harry wanted the man out of the car.

Higgins appeared not to hear him. 'I know a lot of guys in the oil business. Mostly engineers. They work on the pipeline



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going from Baku on the Caspian all the way through to the Med. Anyway, I gotta go. See you around, Tate. Maybe we'll have a drink sometime. Watch out for bed-bugs – they're built like fuckin' raccoons.'

He levered himself out of the car and tramped heavily into the hotel, his jacket tails flapping like a tent. He had made no offer to share the fare. Harry let him go. The peace and quiet was worth it. He made a mental note to avoid the Palace Hotel and signalled the driver to move on.

Three minutes later, the Mercedes stopped outside a plain-fronted, three-storey building rendered in a sickly cream coating speckled with dust. There were few vehicles or pedestrians about, but two soldiers were standing on the nearest corner.

As Harry pulled out some notes, the driver turned and draped one arm over the back of his seat.

'And they have the fucking cheek to wonder why everyone hates them.' His voice was heavy with disgust, his accent was from somewhere south of Birmingham. He smiled at Harry and held out a hand. 'Rik Ferris. Comms, IT support, research and general jobsworth. The boss said to come get you in case you got kidnapped.'

The spiked hair and pop T-shirt seemed almost homely. Harry smiled and took the offered hand. 'Nice of you. Is kidnapping a likelihood?'

'It happens, yeah. Usually oil engineers; the local bandits know they've got plenty of cash and their companies need their expertise.'

'They wouldn't get much for me, then. But thanks for the warning.'

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‘No problem. Welcome to the lower rectum of British Intelligence, Central Europe. If you’ve any taste, you’ll hate the place. I’ll get your case.’ He jumped out and went to the boot.

Harry followed him across the pavement into the build-ing, his skin reacting instantly to the cooler climate after the airport. As the door closed behind them, Rik held a finger to his lips and flapped his hand over one ear.

The message was clear: the walls have ears.

On the second floor, he fed a code number into a worn keypad and threw open a heavy wooden door, ushering Harry ahead of him. They were in a large open office with high windows overlooking the street on one side and a jungle of a garden on the other. A through-breeze stirred sheets of A4 paper pinned to bulletin boards around the walls, while the hum of electronic machinery filled the background. Papers and cardboard folders were stacked in trays, with spare boxes of stationery and brochures piled under desks and in between cupboards and side tables, and a tangle of cables criss-crossed the scuffed wooden floor. It could have been any commercial office anywhere in the world.

The door closed behind them with a click of security dead-bolts, and Rik came and stood beside him.

‘You can say anything you like in here; sing the Red Flag, tell dirty stories about Putin, but don’t be rude about our lords and masters, because they’re probably listening, the cheap, chuckle-starved sons of gits.’ He grinned and pointed to a woman in her thirties sitting at a PC near the back window. She had long dark hair scraped back into a ponytail, brown eyes and what might have been a broken nose. She was devoid of make-up. It made

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her look drawn. 'Clare Jardine, Harry Tate; Harry Tate . . . well, you know the rest.'

Harry nodded. She returned it without expression, then went back to her work.

A door opened on the far side of the room and a heavyset man entered. He had greying, stubby hair, neatly brushed, and wore well-pressed dark blue trousers and a blue shirt with black shoes. Almost a uniform, thought Tate. The man gave Harry a wary look.

'Keith Fitzgerald, our security hound and resident heavy,' said Rik.

Ex-army, Harry decided as they shook hands. Strong grip. Probably came out with three stripes and a pension, kids and wife gone, no family, a host of war stories and looking for a job to call home. And this was it.

'Keith,' he murmured. He dropped his bag on a chair and said to no-one in particular, 'I was expecting to see Stuart Mace.'

'He said he'd meet you for coffee,' Jardine said without looking round. Her voice was cool, matter-of-fact, the accent neutral. She pointed over her shoulder. 'Back out, turn left, right at the top and fifty yards along. The Odeon.'

Fitzgerald coughed. 'We'll need to go through your induction,' he said. 'Security procedures and protocols, who's who, routes in and out, basic travel details, that kind of thing.' He waited, eyes carefully assessing.

'After coffee do you?' There was no sense in trying to avoid it, and the security man was only doing his job.

Fitzgerald nodded, positions agreed, and Harry turned and left them to it. They would probably dissect him the moment

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he was gone, anyway, the way people do in these situations. He wondered how much they knew.

Outside, the earlier mugginess had cooled, and he walked down the street trying to relax and shake off a growing feeling of despondency. He passed three men in combat uniforms, and saw the ugly snout of an APC parked at the intersection. Another soldier was standing nearby. The men were unshaven and heavily-built, their uniforms crumpled and greasy. His former RSM would have gone ballistic.

As he approached the end of the street, he heard footsteps and realized the three men in combats had turned and followed him. Then the man by the APC stepped out and blocked his way, one hand on the holster at his side. The other three stopped behind him, blocking the way back.

Across the street, two women with shopping bags turned the corner, took one look at the situation and scuttled back the way they had come.

*'Pass,'* said the soldier, and tapped his breast pocket.