

DEATH WILL  
FIND YOU...

**GUY  
ADAMS**

**THE  
RAIN-SOAKED  
BRIDE**



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## About the Book

### **HOW DO YOU STOP AN ASSASSIN THAT CAN'T BE KILLED?**

When several members of the diplomatic service die in seemingly innocent, yet strangely similar circumstances, it seems a unique form of murder is being used.

Toby Greene is part of Section 37, known as The Clown Service, a mostly forgotten branch of British intelligence tasked with fighting exactly this kind of threat.

However, the Rain-Soaked Bride is no ordinary assassin. Relentless, inexorable and part of a larger game, merely stopping this impossible killer may not be enough to save the day...

## About the Author

Guy Adams lives in Spain, surrounded by rescue animals. Some of them are his family. He isn't a spy, but he is a boy, so naturally he's always dreamed of being one.

Having spent over ten years working as a professional actor and comedian, eventually he decided he'd quite like to eat regularly, so switched careers and became a full-time writer. Nobody said he was clever.

Against all odds he managed to stay busy and since then he has written over twenty books.

Also by Guy Adams:

*Torchwood: The House That Jack Built*  
*Torchwood: The Men Who Sold The World*  
*Kronos*  
*Hands of the Ripper*  
*Sherlock: The Casebook*  
*Countess Dracula*  
*The Clown Service*

**GUY  
ADAMS**

**THE  
RAIN-SOAKED  
BRIDE**





From the other side of St Isaac's Square, a driver beats his horn twice in quick succession. It echoes like a musical sting from a trumpet, bouncing around the buildings of St Petersburg. Toby Greene, a man who is doing his very best to appear relaxed, nearly jumps out of his skin at the sound.

'A little on edge, old thing?' asks the voice in his ear. 'Do try not to scream in panic at every bit of traffic noise.'

'It's all right for you,' Toby mutters, straightening his bow tie, keeping his lips still and his voice only just loud enough for the mic to pick up. 'The worst thing that can happen to you this evening is that you get a parking ticket.'

August Shining, Toby's superior, leans back in the driver's seat of his hire car, looks through the windscreen at the young officer's retreating back and smiles. 'This is true. But you'll be fine. Probably.'

'Thank you for your confidence.'

Toby continues to walk, tugging the sleeves of his dress shirt from within the cuffs of his dinner jacket, wanting to wear it well.

'The name's Greene,' chuckles August in his ear, 'Toby Greene.'

'You don't walk into the lobby of the Astoria in jeans and a T-Shirt.'

'I don't walk *anywhere* in jeans and a T-shirt. Now stop talking, someone will hear you.'

'Maybe they'll be of more help.'

Toby looks up at the illuminated dome of St Isaac's cathedral as he crosses the street and walks towards the hotel entrance. The Russians treat God well, he thinks; they grant him five-star accommodation and shower him in opulence.

He steps through the doors of the Astoria and fixes an affable smile in place. Everywhere he looks, people are serious. The staff are earnest, the guests, as is the way with wealthy travellers, are looking for something to disapprove of. His smile makes him unusual. In his experience, however, people suspect a man with a big grin on his face of little but being drunk. People will remember the emotion but little else.

The foyer is a mixture of gold and cream. As much an embodiment of a luxurious heaven as the cathedral across the road. Gold drapes shimmer. Chandeliers glitter. The veined marble floor tiles sprout upwards into pillars. It's like walking into an ostentatious oyster.

Toby ignores the reception desk and moves straight through to the bar.

He nods at a girl mixing cocktails as if he knows her well and takes up residence at a small table near the exit, his back very carefully aimed towards a large and raucous group of Russian men in the far corner. He doesn't need to face them, he can watch them in the mirror that hangs behind the bar.

'Party in full swing?' asks Shining.

Toby doesn't reply, he's smiling at the waiter who has come to his table enquiring after his order.

'Go on,' says Shining. 'Ask for a vodka Martini. I promise not to laugh.'

'Gin and tonic,' Toby orders in impeccable Russian. Languages are his strong point. He has an excellent ear.

'I'll make the call,' Shining informs him, and Toby leans back in his chair, glancing around, smile in place. Just a wealthy idiot, nothing to see here. He glances at his watch and shoots the occasional look towards the foyer as if waiting for someone. In his ear he can hear Shining talking on his mobile.

In the car, the old man has poured himself a cup of coffee from a flask and is making a very passable imitation of



being an angry guest.

'I can't relax with all the noise,' he is saying. 'I like a party as much as the next man but I swear I just heard someone screaming and that's nobody's idea of fun.'

Toby can't hear the response of the hotel receptionist but he can imagine their unctuous tones, their promises to deal with the situation at once.

A couple of minutes pass and a stressed manager appears. This is good. This is according to plan. The man looks towards the loud party in the corner, takes a breath, attempts to look stern and walks over. Toby watches him in the mirror as he draws the attention of the alpha male of the pack, a hirsute beast in a suit so shiny Toby suspects he could comb his hair in its reflection. Toby knows this man. His name is Bretzin, he is the 'Brigadier' of the St Petersburg brigade of the Bratva, Russia's organised crime syndicate. The hotel manager is right to look scared - Bretzin has killed people before now for no greater irritation than spilling his drink. In London, Toby had read this man's file and for a moment, just a moment, wondered if they weren't biting off more than they could chew.

The manager is walking a delicate line. The Rock on the phone has forced him to face up to a Hard Place and he is deeply uncomfortable. There is a lot of deferential nodding and his body language makes it clear he would love nothing more than to run away. He cannot. He stands by his duty, passing on the complaint even as the intimidating man wears him down. Toby has no doubt that the Bratva pays the hotel well to be able to use their private suites but the Astoria is a hotel of distinction and can only turn a blind eye for so long.

Eventually, Bretzin nods, making no attempt to hide his disgust at being forced to act. The manager walks away so quickly he's almost running.

Bretzin speaks into the ear of one of his men, passing on a set of orders. This is one of Bretzin's *boyeviks*, or

'warriors'. A loaded gun. The man puts down his drink without a hint of complaint, gets to his feet and makes his way towards the exit.

'Any luck?' asks Shining.

Toby reaches into his pocket, takes out his mobile and pretends to place a call.

'Hi,' he says, still speaking Russian and getting to his feet. 'Yeah, that should be fine.'

He takes some money from his wallet and leaves it on the table next to his half-finished drink.

'I'm on my way now,' he says, following the Russian out of the bar and towards the lifts. 'Shouldn't be a problem.'

He hangs back slightly, pretending he has trouble hearing the other person on the line, letting the Russian get into the lift first. Access to the private suites is only possible via a key card and Toby doesn't have one. Of course, he knows a man who has. If he enters the lift too quickly the man may try and force him to leave, insisting that he's only heading to the top floor. He has to get this just right. Like so much in life, espionage is all about the timing.

The Russian has entered his key card and pressed the button for the top floor. Toby moves again, grabbing the closing door of the lift and forcing his way in. The Russian tries to complain but Toby presses the button for the fourth floor, one beneath the suite level, smiles distractedly at the Russian, and continues with his phone call.

'I know,' he shouts, 'I know. It's just about getting them onside. Hopefully, if we sit back they'll do the hard work for us and we can reap the benefits.'

'Are you actually talking to me?' Shining asks in his ear.

'Not really,' admits Toby, turning his back on the Russian and watching the floor numbers click upwards on the display above the control panel. All the time he keeps his head low so that the camera in the roof doesn't get a clear shot of his face.

He continues talking. White noise. An irritation but not a threat.

As the lift passes the second floor, he spins around and punches the Russian in the throat. It's a dirty blow but Toby isn't of a mind to worry about such things. The Russian drops forward and Toby brings his knee up into the man's face. He steps over him, slips the phone into his jacket pocket, grabs the Russian's head and twists hard. There is an unpleasant crunch. It has taken Toby four seconds to reduce the population of the elevator to one.

'Are you all right?' Shining asks.

'Fine. Clock's running.'

'Understood.'

From this moment on Toby is in serious danger. He can hope that nobody saw him kill the Russian on the security camera, they can't be monitoring all the feeds all the time. Likely it will be footage that will be consulted after the fact. But he can't *know* that. Worst-case scenario: the alarm bells are already ringing.

The lift stops at the fourth floor. Toby glances out. The corridor is empty.

The doors close again and the lift continues to the private suite.

Toby takes the Russian's gun, a heavy and ostentatious .45. Typical gangster swagger, Toby thinks. The dead man's world is all about size and volume, every shot fired is an act of violent PR. He checks the safety catch then tucks it in the waistband of his trousers, damn thing won't fit in any of his pockets but his training tells him to hold on to it, better to have too many weapons than not enough, it's there in reserve should he need it.

He removes his own gun from the holster beneath his arm. It's a subcompact pistol, easy to conceal but concealment doesn't mean a damn thing once you've fired it so he'll have to do his best not to. He cocks it and returns it to the holster.

He lifts the Russian to his feet. He's so heavy, Toby isn't quite sure he's going to manage but he finds his balance, standing directly behind him as the lift doors open out onto the private suite.

'Grigory?' a voice asks, confused by the sight of his colleague.

Toby shoves the dead Russian forwards, jumping over him and launching himself at the man who has been left to babysit.

Gangsters are slow, Toby tells himself, they don't have the paranoid training. It takes them a few seconds to react and that's his window. That's his opportunity.

There is nearly too much space between them, the gangster has had time to draw his weapon as Toby reaches him. But not time to aim it.

Toby grips the man's wrist and forces it upwards, using the momentum he has built running across the room to send them both falling backwards onto the deep red carpet. Toby throws his weight into it, driving his forearm down onto the man's windpipe as they hit the ground. The babysitter's eyes bulge and his mouth splutters spit onto Toby's cheeks. He keeps up the pressure, forcing himself down while still holding the gun out of harm's way. Finally, the babysitter stops moving.

Toby gets to his feet.

'All this exercise,' says Shining in his ear. 'You'll be aching tomorrow.'

'Hope so,' Toby replies.

'If your back is still towards the lift, the main bedroom is ahead of you,' Shining continues. 'To your left is a bathroom and an adjoining corridor leading to the second and third bedrooms.'

The room is ludicrously large, filled with old-fashioned opulence. The sort of decadent soft furnishings that ooze their comfort at you. The paintings on the walls are

contrastingly modern, explosions of colour and form, mood rather than content.

Toby quickly drags the two bodies out of immediate view. He hopes that he'll be long gone before anyone else comes up here, but if he's wrong about that then it would be better were his handiwork not obvious the moment the lift doors opened. He might need every second he can get in order to react.

As he's dropping the heavier of the two men behind a sofa there is the flush of a toilet and the sliding door of the bathroom peels back to reveal a third man tucking a pink silk shirt into the waistband of his showy suit pants.

He stares at Toby who is already running towards him. The man looks to the left to where he's left his gun on a glass-topped table. He is turning towards it as Toby hits him, sending them both through the doorway and into the bathroom.

Toby isn't so lucky this time. The gangster keeps his balance, pushing back and shoving him against the floating sink which smacks him in the small of the back, hitting the concealed .45 with a loud crack and sending a jolt of pain down his legs.

Toby swings two punches. The gangster avoids the first and nearly the second, it glances off the side of his head with insufficient force to do any good. Toby grips the man's shaven head as he's lifted up and backwards, then slammed down onto the sink which shatters beneath his weight.

As he falls, a shard of glass cuts into his back and he can't restrain a cry of pain.

In the car outside, Shining spills his coffee but he knows better than to say anything. Toby needs to concentrate, the panicked questions of his superior won't help.

Toby lets himself go limp, then lifts up his legs and kicks out, sending his attacker barrelling backwards. The man hits the side of the bath and loses his balance, reaching out for the shower curtain, desperate to steady himself. Toby

keeps moving, taking the only advantage he's likely to have.

He pushes the man who topples into the bath, pulling the curtain down after him. The man kicks out but Toby forces his legs apart and then up, keeping the man's equilibrium off. Toby grabs the legs, turns, forcing the man face down inside the bath, his hands slapping against the porcelain, trying to get purchase. Toby flings the legs away and then grabs the man by the back of his collar and slams his face down against the metal of the taps. There is a wet cough and the plughole fills with blood and spit. Toby repeats the move, making sure he keeps his own balance, the last thing he wants to do is fall in the bath on top of the man. He needs to keep his advantage. He needs to be the one in control.

The man doesn't die easily. He thrashes desperately, only too aware that he's seconds from never moving again unless he can somehow turn his situation around. He catches Toby with his right leg, sending him toppling across the room. The man is just pushing himself up in the bath, his face a mess of blood, when Toby returns, the stolen .45 in his hand. He beats the man with the handgrip, hammering at him until he drops again, landing as a dead weight in the bath.

Toby staggers back and sits down on the toilet.

'OK?' Shining asks, his voice hesitant.

'I'm fine.' He touches his back which is hot and wet, blood mingling with sweat and making his shirt cling.

'Pretty much.'

He gets up, reaches into the bath to check the man's pulse. Satisfied, he steps back out of the bathroom and closes the door behind him.

'This is taking too long,' Shining warns him.

'I know.'

He moves to the bedroom and pulls open the door.

There are three women in the bed. A blonde, a brunette and a redhead. All the flavours, he thinks, angry at the man who has left them here, hollow and brittle, waiting for his return. Human beings reduced to dolls. He tries to maintain his cold mood; anger is only likely to make him sloppy. They look at him with confused, doped eyes. The brunette gets most of Toby's attention.

'She's here.'

'Excellent.'

He holds up his hands in a placatory gesture. 'I'm here to help,' he tells them. 'I'm going to get you out of here, but we have to be quick.'

They look on in confusion. Struggling up out of the bed linen. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small case containing a syringe, sealed needles and a vial of liquid.

The blonde, a bruise under her left eye the vague shape of France, offers him an enthused look when she sees the syringe. His heart sinks. She hopes he's going to offer her a different type of freedom, the only escape she's known for far too long.

'This will help clear your head,' he explains, talking to the dark-haired girl he's come here for. 'It'll help.'

She shakes her head as he fills the syringe. Despite the drugs in her system she's still a fighter. It's a wonder they've let her live so long.

'Please,' he insists, holding her down, feeling lousy as he fights against her struggling. 'It's for your own good.'

How many times has she been told that over the last few years? He tries not to think about that as he injects her.

He lets her go and changes needles to repeat the dose on the others.

By the time he's finished, the brunette is clearer-headed. The adrenaline won't last long, he knows, but for now he has her.

'Who are you?' she asks.



‘Doesn’t matter,’ he says. There’s no way he’s giving her his name, not in front of the other two. He steps back into the main room. ‘We need to be moving.’

He presses the button for the lift.

‘Not going,’ says the redhead, her voice still sluggish. ‘If we run, they’ll only come after us.’

‘That won’t be a problem,’ Toby explains, unhooking his cummerbund and flipping it over. He peels back the silk and pulls out a thin strip of explosive. ‘They won’t think there’s anyone to come after.’ In truth, they won’t care enough to look too closely. The Bratva will be far too concerned about which rival gang has attacked them to worry about the fate of three prostitutes. These women were disposable, though he isn’t going to tell them that. ‘You need to put on some clothes.’

As the women dress, stumbling around in quiet confusion, he places the explosive in predetermined points. This is careful physics. Too much and the risk to innocents will be unacceptably high, not enough and they’ll have wasted their time. He removes the detonator from his jacket pocket and sets it for five minutes. That will be time enough.

‘They won’t think anyone was interested in rescuing you.’ As he says this he realises how awful it sounds and regrets it but the clock is already ticking. ‘They’ll think this was just a rival gang making waves. They’ll be thinking about retribution, not you. You can vanish, start again.’

The lift chimes and he spins towards it, his pistol in his hand. The doors open, the lift is empty. He pulls a chair from next to a writing desk and drags it over. Holding the doors open, he stands on the chair, reaches inside and stretches up to disable the camera. He doesn’t want anyone to know who left this suite.

‘Get in,’ he says. He suspects it’s their conditioning more than anything else that has the blonde and the redhead running into the lift. They’re used to doing as they’re told.

'You need to run,' he explains, beckoning for the brunette who's still hanging back. 'Keep your heads down for a while and you should be safe.'

Something occurs to him. He dashes over to the body of the gangster he killed in the lift and removes the man's wallet. He opens it. Loads of cash. Showy bastard. He throws the wallet to the blonde. 'Share it. It'll get you a train ticket.'

He turns back to the brunette, glancing at the detonator. Four minutes.

'Come on! We need to go.'

'No,' she says, cold and simple.

'Tell her who you are,' says Shining in his ear.

'How would that help?' he replies. 'She's never met me.' He pleads with her. 'We haven't time to argue, please, we need to go.'

Behind him the lift chimes again and he turns to see the doors closing.

'Wait!' he shouts, but the redhead has stabbed the button for the foyer and she isn't interested in hanging around.

'Fuck!' Toby shouts as the doors close and the lift begins to descend. He looks to the timer as it continues to count down.

'What's happening?' asks Shining.

'Two of them have left without us,' Toby explains, stabbing the call button for the lift, wanting to bring it back up as soon as it's free.

'How long have you got?'

Toby looks to the timer on the detonator. 'Three and half minutes. Enough.'

'Disconnect it.'

'No, it'll be enough.'

'Disconnect it.'

'No.'

'Who are you talking to?' the brunette asks.

'A friend,' he replies, tapping at his ear. 'Now, as soon as the lift comes back we won't have long. I need you to do exactly as I tell you.'

'That is what men always say.'

He ignores that. The lift has reached the ground floor. He presses at the button again, pointless but unable to help his impatience.

Eventually, it begins to climb back up again. He glances at the detonator. Three minutes. Plenty of time. It's fine. It's all fine.

'Ready?' he asks her as the lift passes the fourth floor. 'We go right down, walk straight out of the hotel and my friend is waiting in a car outside. We don't hesitate. We ignore everyone. We just walk.'

He looks at her and she gives a vague nod. That will have to do.

The lift arrives. The doors open. Toby has his gun in his hand but, once again, the elevator is empty and all is well. 'Get in,' he says, pushing her forward.

As the elevator descends, he finds himself counting down along with the detonator. Two and half minutes ...

Just before the doors open, he replaces his gun and straightens the .45 in his waistband. He checks his appearance in the reflective metal wall of the lift. He'll pass muster. In a perilously short cocktail dress that has seen better days, his companion is likely to raise the odd eyebrow but they'll move quickly. No time for questions. Straight out to the car. Drive to the docks. Go home.

The doors open and the foyer is a hive of activity. A group of people arriving clutter the reception desk, bellboys run around loading luggage and trying to be invisible. The entrance to the bar is suddenly filled with the party of gangsters, having drunk their fill. They are heading towards the lifts, towards Toby and the girl.

'Keep your head down,' he says, grabbing her by the shoulder and manhandling her towards the exit. Just young

lovers out for a night on the town.

‘Son of a bitch,’ the woman says, spitting the words as if they’re poisoned food in her mouth. He feels a tug at the waistband of his trousers and he realises she’s taken the damn gun.

‘No!’ he says but it’s far too late, she’s pointing the gun towards the gangsters and firing.

The foyer becomes a chaos of noise and panic as the sounds of the gunshots echo off the walls. He sees the girl’s target, Bretzin of course, spasm as two bullets hit him, one taking off the side of his head, the other punching a hole in his throat. His companions are quick to respond and all of a sudden the room is filled with armed men and people screaming.

‘What’s going on?’ Shining shouts in his ear.

‘Get moving!’ Toby replies, grabbing the girl by the arm and running towards the door even as the gangsters try and aim their guns. They don’t know who they’re aiming for and that’s the only thing that saves Toby and his companion, forcing their way through the panicked bystanders as everyone tries to take cover.

The girl tries for one more shot and that’s nearly the end of them. The bullet goes wild as she’s pulled across the lobby but it identifies them as the enemy.

‘Stupid,’ shouts Toby, snatching the gun from her and slamming her through the exit with more force than he will later be comfortable with. He’s angry and panicked. He sees their escape vanishing, their chances evaporating with every step.

‘He had to die,’ she tells him as they emerge onto the street.

‘He may not be the only one,’ he replies, looking towards the headlights of August’s car as his partner accelerates towards the hotel. People on the street are looking around in confusion, alarmed by the gunshots and not knowing which way to run. August has to swerve the car to avoid a

couple who run out into the road, wanting to put some distance between themselves and the hotel.

Armed pursuit appears in the hotel doorway. Out in the open, Toby has no idea what else he can do but get in the first shot. He removes the subcompact from his holster and fires. Shattering the glass in the door and hitting two of the gangsters.

The car screeches to a halt next to them.

‘Quickly!’ August shouts, throwing open the door.

Toby pushes the girl towards the back, still keeping his eye on the hotel exit. A gunshot rings out and knocks a hole in the passenger window. If August hadn’t been bent over, opening the door for Toby, it would likely have caught him too.

Toby returns fire but there are too many of them, he knows that he doesn’t stand a chance if they focus their aim on him. He has no cover and his death is so certain to him that he feels calm as he grabs the car door and turns to climb inside. At least they got her out, he thinks, waiting for the bullet that will end his life, at least it’s over for her.

Which is when the private suite erupts, a blossoming of light in the night sky and a compression of air that claps like the wrath of God.

Toby gets in, unable to believe the good fortune of the timing. The car screeches off up Voznesensky Avenue.

Shining checks the rear-view mirror as he turns left to drive back past the cathedral. ‘They’re still coming,’ he says, ‘it takes a bit more than blood and thunder to shake off the Bratva.’

Toby turns in his seat, trying to get a clear view of the road behind but August has taken the corner now and there’s nothing to see.

They drive past the cathedral, turning left again as they cut back towards Senate Square and, beyond it, the English Embankment. They’re drawing back past the hotel now, still smouldering on the other side of the cathedral.

'What went wrong?' Shining asks.

'Someone felt the need for revenge,' Toby replies, glancing towards the girl in the back. 'She shot Bretzin.'

'Good for her,' Shining replies, changing down so he can turn onto Senate Square.

'But not for us.'

'He deserve it,' she says in English from the back seat.

'No question,' Toby replies. 'I just hope it doesn't stop us getting out of here with our heads attached.'

The traffic is in chaos. Many cars have pulled to a halt, responding to the explosion that has lit up the St Petersburg sky. Shining is aware that he's drawing attention to them by driving so quickly but can only hope to put a bit of space between themselves and any pursuit.

He doesn't manage it.

'They went the other way,' he says, stabbing a finger at the mirror where a black BMW is speeding towards them. 'They must have guessed we'd have to cut back on ourselves.'

'Or there's enough of them to take a punt that we might have done,' Toby replies, turning back to the girl. 'Keep your head down.'

The BMW, having spotted them ahead, accelerates, weaving past the slow traffic to draw up behind them. Toby can see one of the passengers leaning out of the window and aiming a gun towards them.

'Brace yourselves,' he shouts as a pair of shots ring out, neither hitting them.

Toby sees the girl turning in her seat to look through the window.

'Don't,' he says, reaching back and tugging at her arm. 'Just keep your bloody head down.'

Shining swerves in the traffic, cutting from one lane to the other, weaving through the cars and trying to keep them a moving target. He tugs his phone from his jacket pocket, concentrating on the road ahead, and tosses it to

Toby as the shooter in the car behind fires again. There is the terrifying sound of pierced metal then a crack of glass as a bullet hits the rear window.

‘Andrei,’ Shining says. ‘Evac. Plan B.’

Toby nods and presses the call button. After a few seconds the call is answered, the car still speeding along Senate Square.

‘Andrei?’ Toby asks, ‘we need you to do your thing. Black BMW on our tail. Can you handle it?’

There’s a raucous stream of Russian expletives from the phone and Toby hangs up.

‘He can handle it,’ he says, turning back to the girl. ‘You need to hold on tight.’

Shining keeps his foot on the accelerator as the water and English Embankment appears ahead of them.

In the car behind, Sergei Usoyan, a young *shestyorka*, the bottom rung of the Russian Bratva, tries to retain his aim as Albert, the driver, weaves around a stationary truck.

‘Just shoot them,’ suggests Semion, from the back seat.

‘What do you think I’m trying to do?’ Sergei replies, taking another shot and blowing out one of the car’s brake lights.

There is a flash of light from the pavement, as if someone has turned a searchlight onto the road and, for a moment, the occupants of the car can’t see a thing.

‘What now?’ asks Albert, fighting to keep control, only too aware that he is driving blind.

The light is gone as suddenly as it appeared and he slams on the brakes as they approach the junction with English Embankment. Ahead of them, the car they’re pursuing makes no effort to slow down. It surges straight ahead, shooting through a gap in the traffic.

‘They’re not turning!’ Semion shouts. ‘You must have hit the driver.’

‘Yeah,’ says Sergei. He knows he didn’t, but he’ll take the credit if it’s on offer. Something like that is your passage up



the ranks.

The car sails straight across the road, mounts the pavement, hits the low wall and vaults towards the Bolshaya Neva river. For a moment it's flying through the air, its undercarriage torn loose by the impact. Shattered concrete and bricks trail behind it. Then it curves down and falls out of sight. A moment of silence then a plume of water shoots upwards as the car hits the river.

Albert ignores the blaring horns of other drivers as he cuts slowly across the road, pulling up alongside the hole in the wall. They get out, running to the wall and looking out onto the river where the impact has sent great circular waves out across the frothing surface of the water.

Sergei raises his gun but Semion knocks it away. 'Not now,' he says, 'the place will be crawling with police any second. They're dead. Job done. Let's get out of here.'

They run back to the car, Sergei laughing. 'I got the bastard! You see that? I got him!'

The BMW turns back up Senate Square, Albert sticking his finger up at the complaining traffic. 'What's wrong with the fuckers?' he says. 'You'd think they'd be more interested in someone taking a nosedive into the river.'

'People don't give a shit about one another these days,' says Semion, seemingly without a trace of self-awareness. 'Makes you sick.'

They drive back the way they came, not sparing a glance for the young man standing on the pavement who watches them go past. If they had, they might have noticed the strange way he was staring at them. Maybe they would even have noticed the large flashgun he puts back in a case before wandering off through the park.

Half an hour later, and a mile or so down the road, three people ascend the gangplank of the cruise liner *Oriana*.

'Well, Mr and Mrs Somerset,' says Shining, speaking Russian for the girl's benefit. He hands out their fake

passports. 'I hope you enjoy the rest of your honeymoon. Don't mind me, your gracious uncle, I'm just so glad you didn't mind inviting me along.'

Toby looks at the girl. 'Don't worry, I'll be sleeping on the floor. It's only a cover story.'

She shrugs, looking at her face on the passport. 'I don't sound like a Caroline.'

'You'll stay in your cabin until we get back to Southampton,' says Shining. 'Isn't that what all honeymooning couples do?'

She just stares at him. 'I don't understand. I am grateful, but ...'

'Working with August is always confusing,' admits Toby. 'You get used to it.'

'But they just stopped following,' she says. 'Why?'

'A friend of mine,' says Shining.

'He has a lot of friends,' adds Toby.

'He has certain skills,' continues Shining.

'They always do,' adds Toby.

'He makes people see what he wants them to.' Shining acts as if Toby hasn't interrupted, these are two men who have spent long enough together that they have a habit of talking at the same time. 'Remote hypnosis. He can create brief, shared illusions. Andrei is invaluable whenever I'm in St Petersburg, though it takes a lot out of him. He'll be sick for a week thanks to us.'

'You're talking crap,' she insists, scowling at them. 'Why do you treat me like a child?'

'We certainly don't mean to,' says Shining, taking her hand, 'and crap is subjective. You'll get used to it. We're not your average espionage department.'

Toby starts singing 'Send In The Clowns' and chuckling. She throws him a disgusted look.

'I think you're trying to make a fool of me,' she says. 'Don't. Too many men have made a habit of that.'

Toby stops singing, his face now completely serious. 'I know. That's why we had to come for you. I understand. It seems unbelievable. I was just like you a few months ago, I didn't understand any of it. You get used to it. If there's one thing you can accept, it's this: we look after our own.'

'But I don't even know you!'

Toby nods and she is struck by the look of deep sadness on his face. 'I know, and that's my fault. But listen, Tamar, I'm sorry you had to wait so long but you're free now. You're safe.'

'Safe?' Shining smiles. 'For now. Give it time ... Things in the Clown Service rarely stay safe for long.'

SIX MONTHS LATER

## CHAPTER ONE: THE TEST

### *Baekdu Mountain, Baekdudaegan, Korean Peninsula*

The Changhe Z-11 helicopter veered over Heaven Lake, buffeted by the high winds that always rage around the peak of Mount Baekdu, and prepared to descend.

Its sole passenger looked out through the window, gazing down on the brilliant, shining surface of the frozen caldera lake. The ice showed a distorted reflection of the helicopter as it passed. It was stretched thin, then fat, like a customer in a fairground hall of mirrors.

Local myths claimed that the lake was home to monsters. The passenger smiled at the thought. He knew all about monsters.

It was also claimed as the birthplace of Kim Jong-il. The Korean Central News Agency had added one last piece of deific splendour to the dead dictator's legend when it claimed that the ice had split with a deafening crack at the moment of his death. The passenger knew all about the power of legend too.

They came to a shaky landing on an area of flat ground away from the tourist areas and the passenger stepped out, barely able to stand in the wind.

'You are lucky we didn't end up in the lake,' said the pilot. 'This is not a good place to fly.'

'I have a feeling our host likes to make things difficult,' the passenger replied, removing a data tablet from his jacket and checking the GPS information. 'As well as keeping this so close to the border he can deny us later. We need to head down towards the forest,' he said. 'About a kilometre or so.'

‘I’ll stay here,’ the pilot said. ‘I’m paid to fly you, not keep you safe from bears.’

The passenger shrugged. ‘I don’t think it’s the bears I’ll be worrying about.’

He began to descend the mountain, tucking the data tablet back into his coat to keep his hands free.

As he worked his way down through the rocks towards the tree-line a few feet below, he cursed his clients’ frequent desire to arrange meetings in inhospitable places. What was wrong with a civilised restaurant or pleasant bar? He suspected they chose these places as a test of his character, something he found insulting and childish. He didn’t have to prove himself, his work spoke for itself.

It took him half an hour to reach the forest, by which time he was sweating despite the low temperature.

He took a moment to check the coordinates again before setting off towards the compound his tablet assured him was located a short distance to the east.

He wasn’t in the least surprised when, shortly after, he found himself surrounded by troops, emerging from the trees, their automatic rifles trained on him.

‘I am expected,’ he said, speaking English. To hell with them, he decided; if they didn’t understand him that was their lookout. ‘And if I was going to have an escort it would have been nice to have it earlier.’

The commanding officer grunted at him, checking his face against a photo he pulled from the pocket of his jacket. It didn’t match, obviously – the passenger made a point of never wearing his real face to a rendezvous. To do so would risk blowing years of cover.

‘If you want me to prove who I am,’ the passenger suggested, ‘I’m only too happy to do so. Considering my mood, though, you might want to take it as read. If I were to offer an example of my credentials, I can’t guarantee you would all survive it.’

‘Let him through,’ called a voice from further into the trees.

An older officer appeared, his uniform marking him out as several ranks above the rest of the men.

He walked unsteadily towards the passenger. The stiffness of his limbs suggested arthritis and the Englishman noted one of his eyes was quite blind, a white, useless thing that appeared to have been boiled.

‘We are cautious,’ the old soldier said, in heavily accented English. ‘This is not how we do things.’

‘Outside help?’ the passenger asked. ‘Nothing to be ashamed of. My skills are rare. In fact, I’d go as far as to say I don’t know of another contractor in my line of work.’

‘This is true. And yet it is ... uncomfortable.’

‘So is standing out here. Can we maybe carry on our conversation somewhere a little warmer?’

The old soldier nodded and the party retreated back into the woods, the passenger held at their centre, quite aware of the suspicious eyes and itchy trigger fingers that surrounded him.

The compound was only five minutes away. A rough collection of shacks that had clearly seen better days. The old soldier noticed the look of distaste on the passenger’s face.

‘We abandoned this place years ago,’ he explained. ‘But it serves our purpose today.’

Walking past the barbed-wire fences and along the overgrown mud track, the passenger was led to a central hut. The old soldier waved at the rest of the soldiers, commanding them to stay outside.

Inside there was no more furniture than a table, two chairs and a small log burner that was already alight. On the table there was a wooden crate and, beckoning for the passenger to take a seat, the old soldier reached into it. He pulled out a thin, card folder which he dropped onto the desk, then a half-bottle of Cheongju, a Korean rice wine