

# YASSEN

YOU SLIGHTLY SPOILED things by shooting the prime minister,” Alan Blunt said. “But all in all you’re to be congratulated, Alex. You not only lived up to our expectations. You way exceeded them.”

It was late afternoon the following day, and Alex was sitting in Blunt’s office at the Royal & General building on Liverpool Street wondering just why, after everything he had done for them, the head of M16

had to sound quite so much like the principal of a second-rate private school giving him a good report.

Mrs. Jones was sitting next to him. Alex had refused her offer of a peppermint, although he was beginning to realize it was all the reward he was going to get.

She spoke now for the first time since he had come into the room. “You might like to know about the clearing-up operation.”

“Sure...”

She glanced at Blunt, who nodded. “First of all, don’t expect to read the truth about any of this in the newspapers,” she began. “We put a D-notice on it, which means nobody is allowed to print anything. Of course, the ceremony at the Science Museum was being televised live, but fortunately we were able to cut the transmission before the cameras could focus on you. In fact, nobody knows that it was a fourteen-year-old boy who caused all the chaos.”

“And we plan to keep it that way,” Blunt muttered.

“Why?” Alex didn’t like the sound of that.

Mrs. Jones dismissed the question. “The newspapers had to print something, of course,” she went on. “The story we’ve put out is that Sayle was attacked by a hitherto unknown terrorist organization and that he’s gone into hiding...”

“Where is Sayle?” Alex asked.

“We don’t know. But we’ll find him. There’s nowhere on earth he can hide from us.”

“Okay.” Alex sounded doubtful.

“As for the Stormbreakers, we’ve already announced that there’s a dangerous product fault and that anyone turning them on could get electrocuted. It’s embarrassing for the government, of course, but they’ve all been recalled and we’re bringing them in now. Fortunately, Sayle was so fanatical that he programmed them so that the smallpox virus could only be released by the prime minister at the Science Museum. You managed to destroy the trigger, so even the few schools that have tried to start up their computers haven’t been affected.”

“It was very close,” Blunt said. “We’ve analyzed a couple of samples. It’s lethal. Worse even than the stuff Iraq was brewing up in the Gulf War.”

“Do you know who supplied it?” Alex asked.

Blunt coughed. "No."

"How about the submarine that I saw?"

"Forget about the submarine." It was obvious that Blunt didn't want to talk about it. "You can just be sure that we'll make all the necessary inquiries..."

"What about Yassen Gregorovich?" Alex asked.

Mrs. Jones took over. "We've closed down the plant at Port Tallon," she said. "We already have most of the personnel under arrest. It's unfortunate though that we weren't able to talk to either Nadia Vole or the man you knew as Mr. Grin."

"He never talked much, anyway," Alex said.

"It was lucky that his plane crashed into a building site," Mrs. Jones went on. "Nobody else was killed. As for Yassen, I imagine he'll disappear. From what you've told us, it's clear that he wasn't actually working for Sayle. He was working for the people who were sponsoring Sayle ... and I doubt they'll be very pleased with him. Yassen is probably on the other side of the world already. But one day, perhaps, we'll find him.

We'll never stop looking."

There was a long silence. It seemed that the two spymasters had said all they wanted. But there was one question that nobody had tackled.

"What happens to me?" Alex asked.

"You go back to school," Blunt replied.

Mrs. Jones took out an envelope and handed it to Alex.

"A check?" Alex asked.

"It's a letter from a doctor, explaining that you've been away for three weeks with the flu. Very bad flu.

And if anyone asks, he's a real doctor. You shouldn't have any trouble."

"You'll continue to live in your uncle's house," Blunt said. "That housekeeper of yours, Jack Whatever.

We'll get her visa renewed and she'll continue to look after you. And that way we'll know where you are if we need you again."

Need you again. The words chilled Alex more than anything that had happened to him in the past three weeks. "You've got to be kidding," he said.

"No." Blunt gazed at him quite coolly. "It's not my habit to make jokes."

"You've done very well, Alex," Mrs. Jones said, trying to sound more conciliatory. "The prime minister himself asked us to pass on his thanks to you. And the fact of the matter is that it could be wonderfully useful to have someone as young as you—"

"As talented as you—" Blunt cut in.

"—available to us from time to time." She held up a hand to ward off any argument. "Let's not talk



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about it now,” she said. “But if ever another situation arises, maybe we can talk about it then.”

“Yeah. Sure.” Alex looked from one to the other. These weren’t people who were going to take no for an answer. In their own way, they were both as charming as Mr. Grin. “Can I go?” he asked.

“Of course you can,” Mrs. Jones said. “Would you like someone to drive you home?”

“No, thanks.” Alex got up. “I’ll find my own way.”

He should have been feeling better. As he took the elevator down to the ground floor, he reflected that he’d saved thousands of schoolchildren, he’d beaten Herod Sayle, and he hadn’t been killed or even badly hurt.

So what was there to be unhappy about? The answer was simple. Blunt had forced him into this. In the end, the big difference between him and James Bond wasn’t a question of age. It was a question of loyalty.

In the old days, spies had done what they’d done because they loved their country, because they believed in what they were doing. But he’d never been given a choice. Nowadays, spies weren’t employed. They were used.

He came out of the building, meaning to walk up to the tube station, but just then a cab drove along and he flagged it down. He was too tired for public transport. He glanced at the driver, huddled over the wheel in a horribly knitted, homemade cardigan, and slumped onto the backseat.

“Cheyne Walk, Chelsea,” Alex said.

The driver turned around. He was holding a gun. His face was paler than it had been the last time Alex saw it, and the pain of two bullet wounds was drawn all over it, but—impossibly—it was Herod Sayle.

“If you move, you bliddy child, I will shoot you,” Sayle said. His voice was pure venom. “If you try anything, I will shoot you. Sit still. You’re coming with me.”

The doors clicked shut, locking automatically. Herod Sayle turned around and drove off, down Liverpool Street, heading for the City.

Alex didn’t know what to do. He was certain that Sayle planned to shoot him, anyway. Why else would he have taken the huge chance of driving up to the very door of M16 headquarters in London? He thought about trying the window, perhaps trying to get the attention of another car at a traffic light. But it wouldn’t work. Sayle would turn around and kill him. The man had nothing left to lose.

They drove for ten minutes. It was a Saturday and the City was closed. The traffic was light. Then Sayle pulled up in front of a modern, glass-fronted skyscraper with an abstract statue—two oversized bronze walnuts on a slab of concrete—outside the front door.

“You will get out of the car with me,” Sayle commanded. “You and I will walk into the building. If you think about running, remember that this gun is pointing at your spine.”

Sayle got out of the car first. His eyes never left Alex. Alex guessed that the two bullets must have hit him in the left arm and shoulder. His left hand was hanging limp. But the gun was in his right hand. It was perfectly steady, aimed at Alex’s lower back.

“In...”

The building had swing doors and they were open. Alex found himself in a marble-clad hall with leather sofas and a curving reception desk. There was nobody here either. Sayle gestured with the gun and he walked over to a bank of elevators. One of them was waiting. He got in.

"The twenty-ninth floor," Sayle said.

Alex pressed the button. "Are we going up for the view?" he asked.

Sayle nodded. "You make all the bliddy jokes you want," he said. "But I'm going to have the last laugh."

They stood in silence. Alex could feel the pressure in his ears as the elevator rose higher and higher. Sayle was staring at him, his damaged arm tucked into his side, supporting himself against one wall. Alex thought about attacking him. If he could just get the element of surprise. But, no ... they were too close.

And Sayle was coiled up like a spring.

The elevator slowed down and the doors opened. Sayle waved with the gun. "Turn left. You'll come to a door. Open it."

Alex did as he was told. The door was marked HELIPAD. A flight of concrete steps led up. Alex glanced at Sayle. Sayle nodded. "Up."

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They climbed the steps and reached another door with a push bar. Alex pressed it and went through. He was back outside, thirty floors up on a flat roof with a radio mast and a tall metal fence running around the perimeter. He and Sayle were standing on the edge of a huge cross, painted in red paint. Looking around, he could see right across the city to Canary Wharf and beyond. It had seemed a quiet spring day when Alex left the Royal & General offices. But up here the wind streaked past and the clouds boiled.

"You ruined everything!" Sayle howled. "How did you do it? How did you trick me? I'd have beaten you if you'd been a man! But they had to send a boy! A bliddy schoolboy! Well, it isn't over yet! I'm leaving England. That's why I brought you here. I wanted you to see!"

Sayle nodded and Alex turned around to see that there was a helicopter hovering in the air behind him.

Where had it come from? It was painted red and yellow, a light, single-engine aircraft with a figure in dark glasses and helmet hunched over the controls. The helicopter was a Colibri EC 1 20B, one of the quietest in the world. It swung around over him, its blades beating at the air.

"That's my ticket out of here!" Sayle continued. "They'll never find me! And one day I'll be back. Next time, nothing will go wrong. And you won't be here to stop me. This is the end for you! This is where you die!"

There was nothing Alex could do. Sayle raised the gun and took aim, his eyes wide, the pupils blacker than they had ever been, mere pinpricks in the bulging white.

There were two small explosive cracks.

Alex looked down, expecting to see blood. There was nothing. He couldn't feel anything. Then Sayle staggered and fell onto his back. There were two gaping holes in his chest.



The helicopter landed in the center of the cross. The pilot got out.

Still holding the gun that had killed Herod Sayle, he walked over and examined the body, prodding it with his shoe. Satisfied, he nodded to himself, tucking the gun away. He had switched off the engine of the helicopter and behind him the blades slowed down and stopped. Alex stepped forward. The man seemed to notice him for the first time.

"You're Yassen Gregorovich," Alex said.

The Russian nodded. It was impossible to tell what was going on in his head. His clear blue eyes gave nothing away.

"Why did you kill him?" Alex asked.

"Those were my instructions." There was no trace of an accent in his voice. He spoke softly, reasonably.

"He had become an embarrassment. It was better this way."

"Not better for him."

Yassen shrugged.

"What about me?" Alex asked.

The Russian ran his eyes over Alex, as if weighing him up. "I have no instructions concerning you," he said.

"You're not going to shoot me too?"

There was a pause. The two of them gazed at each other over the corpse of Herod Sayle.

"You killed Ian Rider," Alex said. "He was my uncle."

Yassen shrugged. "I kill a lot of people."

"One day I'll kill you."

"A lot of people have tried." Yassen smiled. "Believe me," he said, "it would be better if we didn't meet again. Go back to school. Go back to your life. And the next time they ask you, say no. Killing is for grown-ups and you're still a child."

He turned his back on Alex and climbed into the cabin. The blades started up, and a few seconds later, the helicopter rose back into the air. For a moment it hovered at the side of the building. Behind the glass, Yassen raised his hand. A gesture of friendship? A salute? Alex raised his hand. The helicopter spun away.

Alex stood where he was, watching it, until it had disappeared in the dying light.