

# 1

THE SECRET INTELLIGENCE SERVICE PUTS TWO YEARS AND OVER £100K into the training of new field officers. You're shown how to steal cars, strip weapons, hack bank accounts. There are courses on the use of improvised explosives, two workshops dedicated to navigating by the stars. But nothing about what I had heard one old spy call *whiplash*. No one tells you how to go home.

You're marching through the bowels of Tripoli's Ain Zara Prison on Thursday; Saturday night you're at a dinner party in Holland Park. Cutlery tinkles. There is something you've forgotten. You lock yourself in the bathroom and call a restaurant on Martyrs' Square to hear a particular woman's voice and when the phone's answered there is automatic gunfire in the distance. The world cannot all be real at the same time. You apologize to your hosts as you leave, blaming jet lag, then sit on the Central line hearing mourners wail. After the first few times, officers switch to a desk-based role or they find ways of managing the transition. I can't do desks, so I had to learn.

I accumulated rituals, which veered in status between superstition and procedure. A lot of these involved returning to particular places—ones that I could touch as if they were charms and say: everything's under control, you're here again. The Premier Bar in Jordan's Queen Alia airport was a favorite. Travel between the lucky and unlucky parts of the world regularly enough and you'll find yourself killing time in Queen Alia. It was one of the twenty-first century's great crossroads. The Premier Bar tucked itself away in a corner of the main terminal, a fridge and three aluminum tables, with a clear view across the departures hall. It had Arabic news on a flatscreen TV and bottles of Heineken in a fridge. I thought of it as my local pub.

On this occasion, I was on my way from Saudi Arabia to London, with strict instructions not to stop until I was on English soil. This in itself

was ominous — most of my debriefs were held in third countries. My operation had been pulled suddenly. I had one bag and the clothes I wore, which I was starting to realize stank of smoke and petrol. The pale jacket and chinos of a certain type of Englishman abroad are not made for arson.

I sipped a beer and tried to unwind, letting the adrenaline seep out, enjoying globalization at its transient best. A Congolese family in green and purple robes filtered through a charcoal-gray swarm of Chinese businessmen. Two dazzling white sheikhs led faceless wives in gold-trimmed burkas. Eastern European sex workers pulled Samsonite cases, heading to the Gulf, Southeast Asian ones in denim cutoffs on their way to Europe. The skinny, bright-eyed Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan laborers clutched mobile phones and scanned the departure boards. Staff of NGOs and media organizations sipped water, restless or exhausted depending on the direction of travel. I watched to see who responded as flights were called: Erbil, Jeddah, Khartoum. There were other solitary individuals like myself, traveling between identities, meeting each other's eyes but not for long. You found a lot of snapped SIM cards in the bins. Private security contractors favored duffel bags. They looked well-fed, and walked with the stiff swagger of men who'd been heavily armed until recently.

I could have done with some of them earlier today, I thought. Six hours ago I'd been in an abandoned mansion on the edge of Asir in Saudi Arabia, close to the border with Yemen. The mansion had been trashed. The previous night a local group of unknown affiliation stormed the place, looting what they could on the pretext of combatting decadence. The occupant — a notorious playboy, discreet funder of terrorism, and precious agent of mine — had fled. I now knew he'd been arrested by the time I got there. At that moment, all I'd been told was that I had ten minutes to clear the place of anything sensitive before a more purposeful crew arrived.

I walked through with an empty rucksack, my footsteps echoing as I searched. I'd been inside once at a party, two years ago, amid crowds of prostitutes and coked-up Saudi royalty. I hadn't been memorizing the layout. It was a fifteen-bedroom, thirty-million-dollar palace: fun to trash, difficult to search. Crystal teardrops from the chandeliers littered the floor among balls from an antique snooker table. There were scattered books, broken glass, trails of blood where the intruders had cut themselves climbing through windows. They'd shot his pets, ransacked his wardrobe, slashed some dubious abstract art and one haunting Fan-

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tin-Latour still life. A single word of spray-painted Arabic livened the wallpaper: *Irhal*. Leave.

Which was good advice.

“Are you seeing this?” a voice in my earpiece asked.

The satellite image on my phone showed a convoy of five Toyota pickups heading straight toward me. Unclear who they were, but there were no good options. The barrels of the rifles sticking out the windows were clear enough.

“I see it.”

“Probably get a move on.”

I climbed the stairs. The first floor gave a view across the grounds. Most of the buildings I used in the Gulf were built with anti-ram walls, barriers, ballistics window film. This wasn't one of them. It had a defiant lawn, some cacti, date palms, and an elaborate sprinkler system. A Ferrari belonging to the man who used to live here remained beside those gates, a white shell of carbonized metal. Silver puddles gleamed in the burnt dust beneath it, which perplexed me until I realized it was the metal of the brake pads, melted and resolidified. That was surreal and beautiful. My own driver leaned against the gatepost, binoculars raised. A plume of dust from the convoy reached up from the suburbs of Abha, the nearest city. That was 3.4 kilometers away.

“Eajal!” Quick, he shouted, turning.

I estimated ten minutes before the men arrived, two more to breach the gates. The local Saudi police had vanished, the SAS unit attached to the intelligence services for scenarios such as these was caught by checkpoints on the highway. I was left with three temporarily loyal members of a carjacking gang high on anti-epileptic medication that they consumed by the handful, claiming it gave them courage. Maybe it hadn't kicked in yet.

One of my current allies, Samir, appeared in the corridor behind me, fat, eyes bulging, a pistol gripped in his hand.

“We go now.” He was agitated. Beside him stood a cousin or nephew, no older than sixteen, in an FC Barça top, barely able to lift his Kalashnikov.

“Five minutes.”

“Two minutes.”

“Here, swap.” I reached into my jacket, gave the boy my handgun, and told him to forget the rifle. “I'll be back down before they get here.”

I took a breath, mixed some oxygen in with the fresh adrenaline. Nice and alert; let's get this done. I opened doors, looking for electronics and paperwork, for the secure room he had somewhere, finding abandoned Kevlar, fine china, leather-bound encyclopedias.

I had one minute left

At the end of a second-floor corridor I found the door I needed, punched a code into its electronic lock, saw inside, and my heart sank.

Seven or eight crates of material filled the small, windowless space: bank statements, shipping documents, loose cash. I counted four laptops, seven concertina files, stacks of invoices for the weaponry he was funding. No doubt, somewhere within the mess was evidence of UK ties.

Samir appeared behind me, saw the haul, swore.

"We must leave it," he said.

It would take an hour to remove it all. If we had a van. A call came from downstairs: they could see the convoy approaching. I threw the rucksack into the pile.

"Get a can of petrol from the fuel house."

"We don't have time."

"We've got time. Go."

I began to sort through, taking the cash, ensuring the hard drives were exposed. A sheet of the *South China Morning Post* caught my eye. It had been folded small, tucked into a box of necklaces. I unwrapped it and saw what looked like two uncut diamonds. Even in the murky room they sparkled: yellow-tinted and unmistakable against the newsprint.

I pocketed one diamond, wrapped the other back in the paper with half the money. When Samir returned with four jerry cans, I gave him the wrap of newspaper and told him it was a present for later; I needed him poor and wary for a few more minutes. We both splashed petrol over the hoard, and then he ran down to start the car. I took a final breath before lighting the place. Sometimes it's left to you to perform the ceremony alone, to lower the flag. To admit defeat.

An hour to the airbase, a flight to Medina, then a private jet into Jordan. No one had offered me a change of clothes. And petrol smoke sticks to you. Messages kept coming in on the phone belonging to Christopher Bohren, my cover identity: fellow art dealers, drug dealers, a company that specialized in installing infinity pools. All wondering why I'd disappeared.

I had no idea.

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So the opportunity to catch my breath in the Premier Bar was more than an indulgence. I washed the taste of blood out of my mouth. The situation was a mess, I didn't doubt that. My agent had vanished, Saudi Arabia looked like it might kick off, and someone somewhere in Vauxhall Cross was worried about my own potential capture. But I had also been expecting this: The intelligence service liked to keep you moving, to stop you from building empires and attachments. The longer you were in the field the more vulnerable you became, so the thinking went. As well as the dangers of overexposure, the theory involved some old-school notion of going native. Operations got pulled overnight and you rarely, if ever, got an adequate explanation. I sometimes wondered about HQ's envy of field offices, whether they created their own secrecy just to keep you in your place. Sometimes it was as simple as a budget cut.

For now I wanted to enjoy a last moment of freedom, of being Christopher Bohren. For all the professional setback and geopolitical consequences of my departure, I was pleased to be here. The magic of returning to places never diminished — of finding them still there: the tables, the weary face behind the counter. It felt like keeping a rendezvous.

On the TV screen: *Saudi funder of terrorism arrested.*

There he was: my agent, at a party beside Lake Como. I must have been a few meters off camera. The caption beneath his face: *Is Saudi pact with extremism over?*

That was the question posed by RT Arabic, the Kremlin's new Arabic-language station. They had good footage: a reporter standing beside smoldering ruins, with the carbonized Ferrari visible over his shoulder. I finished my beer and got another.

"You used to show Al Jazeera here," I said. The manager shrugged. "You prefer Russian TV?"

"My staff prefer it."

I took the drink to my table, wondering at the way the world changes in small details. The journey from the counter gave me an opportunity to scan my immediate environment. There had been one man sitting at the Starbucks across from me for fifteen minutes now. He'd taken a seat facing in my direction, although he hadn't looked directly at me once. He had an Arabic paper spread in front of him but his eyes didn't track the text. Not airport security, but I thought I glimpsed a holster.

I finished my beer, watched a group of businesspeople speaking Russian hurry toward the flight to Damascus. After another few minutes my

Starbucks friend departed, slinging a laptop bag over his shoulder. I put my phone on encrypted mode and dialed a Saudi number.

“I’ve had to leave town for a few days. There’s a few bits and pieces I left behind which I won’t need anymore. I’d like you to dispose of it all.”

“Yes.”

“And then I think you should get out.”

“You are leaving us.”

“The situation’s become precarious.”

“We are ready.”

“I appreciate that. I have instructions.”

“It is very bad here,” the man said. “Very bad.”

“I know.” I rested my eyes on a video screen above the concourse, a woman in a field of lavender pressing a perfume bottle to her throat. “I will be doing everything I can to ensure you have no problems,” I said. “If you speak to Leyla, will you tell her I’ll be in touch as soon as possible?”

He hung up. I closed my eyes. The fabled license to kill is nothing beside the very real license to die; to walk out of a life and its responsibilities. No farewells, no last confession. I picked up my phone again and called CIA’s station in Islamabad.

“Tell Reza, Courtesan’s been arrested,” I said. “Everything on ice for now.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know. I’ll message when I do.”

I moved a British passport from my bag to my jacket pocket, booked a night at the Mandarin Oriental in Kensington. Then I went and bought a suit and a clean phone.

I knew from experience that in five or six hours I’d be facing men and women in ironed clothes who would determine, from how I presented myself, the level of mishap they could pin on me. Luckily, routes to and from war zones make for good shopping: Rolex, Ralph Lauren, and Prada do their own sleek profiteering. The woman in the Prada concession — elegant, flirtatious — didn’t blink at a man who stank of petrol smoke digging out his money belt and buying a three-grand suit.

“You have been staying in Jordan?” she asked.

“Just passing through.”

“English?”

“Canadian. What about those boxes? What’s in those?”

“Watches.”

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I chose a watch.

“Can you wrap this?”

“Of course.” She wrapped it, tied a ribbon and offered me a choice of message tags. “Just a blank one, thanks.”

Doors of carved dark wood led between potted palms into the Royal Jordanian Crown Lounge. No familiar faces inside. At the back was a disabled toilet that had served me well over the years. I changed, tore and flushed my receipts and tags, checked that my paperwork was in order. Then I took a condom wrapper from my wallet, removed a pouch of duct tape, and pried it apart. Inside was a small key, the key to my own life. I rinsed off the glue and transferred it to my pocket.

I shaved, used the corner of my boarding pass to get the dirt from beneath my fingernails. Finally, I tried looking into my own eyes. I was thirty-six, five-eleven, 160 pounds, ash-brown hair faded by the Middle Eastern sun. I started operations looking well: groomed, trim but not so worked-out that I could be mistaken for military. I ended them haggard and bloodshot and with a wired edginess that triggered attention.

I eased the tape off the new wrapping paper and removed the gift box, took out the watch, then tucked the diamond into the velvet lining and rewrapped it. I found the tag and wrote: *Let's quit.*

At the boarding gate, the usual sunburnt crew gripped their Western passports as if they might try to wriggle away. The flight took off at ten thirty a.m. I stayed awake over Lebanon, trying to see how much power was on, caught a glimpse of western Turkey, slept through Europe.

Heathrow was unusually quiet. No issues at the border. I walked into the UK, part of me hoping there was no one there to meet me, but I was out of luck.

# 2

MY DRIVER HELD A SIGN WITH MY COVER NAME. YOU COULD ALMOST believe he was a standard chauffeur if it weren't for the eyes that scanned the people around me as he took my bag. Square-jawed, broad shouldered — an army physique at odds with the gray suit.

“How was the journey?”

“Very smooth, thank you.”

The car was convincing too: black Audi, authentic private hire license in the window. Its bulletproof glass and run-flat tires weren't easily identifiable for untrained eyes. The sky above it was gray, the bite of English winter refreshing.

“Alastair Undercroft apologizes for not being here in person to welcome you home,” my driver said, when we were inside. “We're to proceed directly to the meeting.”

“That's fine.”

He kept his eyes on the mirrors as we drove, watching security and police. After several years living the life of Christopher Bohren, the most likely source of trouble was New Scotland Yard. I let him get going before leaning forward.

“I'd like to go via Marylebone High Street.”

“Sir?”

“I have something to pick up.”

“I've been asked to take you straight there.”

“We have time.”

“Okay.”

He looked uncertain, put a call in to someone announcing our change of plan. Everyone had their orders. But his was the last deference I'd get for a while, and I wanted to use it.

London looked solid, fortified in a thick, impregnable peace. A dream that had congealed. How long was I going to be here? I directed

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him to a Caffè Nero across the road from a Balthorne Safe Deposit Centre and he pulled up.

“How do you take your coffee?” I asked.

“I’m fine, thank you.”

“Go on. Flat white?”

“No sugar.”

I crossed the road to Balthorne. A row of classical columns obscured the front window. Reception was wood-paneled. They minimized human interaction. Four cameras and a smartly suited elderly guard watched you approach the entry gate and place your palm on a glass panel that read your veins. If your veins lined up, you got to enter a six-digit PIN code and walk in.

It became more functional inside: another desk, a brightly lit corridor and finally stairs down to the vault. By this stage, the key seemed quaint.

In my box there were a few photographs, some handwritten poems, souvenirs of past operations, and a manila envelope containing a SIM card. I unlocked my briefcase and removed a couple grand in various currencies, depositing it along with a fragment of pottery that might have come from the Temple of Artemis in what was now northeastern Libya. I kept the diamond. Then I took the SIM and placed it in my new phone.

I crossed the road to the coffee shop. As far as I was concerned, since the operation had been pulled six months early, I had half an hour for a coffee. And I needed strength for what was to come, whether or not it included re-entering my own life. I took the driver his flat white, with a pain au chocolat, which I felt should buy me ten minutes. Then I returned to the café and sat down.

London throbs. You’re alert to threats that aren’t there anymore, and the senses overload. Three young women came in, talking in Cantonese. A man in a corner of the café muttered Turkish into a Bluetooth headset. The coffee shop window was bare, no defensive blocks between it and the road. But there would be no attacks. I tried to re-enter the complacency. A copy of the *Times* had been folded on a rack beside the tills so that you saw a strip of flames in a front-page photo, but they were somewhere far away.

My hands looked tanned in the English light. My lips were cracked. I stared at the screen of my new phone. When you charge up a phone, you entertain the fantasy that a life will return. I’d always brace myself for the

personal business I'd have to deal with but forget to brace myself for its dwindling pressure. When you expend your energy maintaining another person's identity, your own becomes neglected. In the last seven weeks I'd missed two birthday parties, one wedding, several job offers. There was an invitation to lunch from an investor friend who owed me for some timely information, but no message from the woman I wanted to hear from. At least, that's what I thought at first.

Emails likewise: irrelevant things or those I was too late for. I checked the junk folder in case that was where my life had been diverted, saw something strange.

It was an email from a Tutanota address with a string of letters and numbers for a name. Tutanota was an encrypted webmail service based in Germany. This was a procedure I used for agents. Subject line: *Lottery Win*.

The message had been sent twenty-two hours ago. I scanned the email for malware, then opened it. The content of the email was two lines:

*HAPPY BIRTHDAY.  
CLAIM YOUR PRIZE.*

"Happy birthday" meant danger: I was in danger, or the agent in question was in danger, and I needed to initiate exfiltration procedures; i.e., time to get out of town. "Claim your prize" meant that a file had been uploaded to a message board hidden deep within the dark side of the internet.

When you've refined systems that work in the field, it's good to stick with them. But you make sure each agent has a unique signature, procedural details that identify them so you know who's contacting you in the absence of formal identification. I'd used this system with an agent in Turkey code-named Mescaline—Khasan Idrisov, a young man I had been fond of, with his pale eyes and thin beard; the frayed handkerchiefs with which he'd mop his brow. His decapitation was still up on YouTube last time I checked.

So the message was a surprise.

I looked around Caffè Nero, sipped my coffee, read the message again.

There was no way anyone should have had the code, let alone my personal email address as well. Now I looked through my missed calls more closely. Around the time of the email there were three attempts from a foreign landline. At 8:12p.m. last night, 8:14 p.m., then 8:21 p.m. The pre-

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fix was 87 172. A check online confirmed it was a landline in Astana, Kazakhstan.

I'd been in the country twice, briefly — both times near the start of my career, more than fifteen years ago. There was little MI6, activity there; the service ran a minimal station out of the embassy. It provided some shallow cover for intelligence operatives and electronic surveillance, and had enjoyed a moment of inflated importance after 9/11—Kazakhstan was a supply route to Afghanistan —but in the resource-strapped world of MI6, nowhere retained staff without good reason. The world is big, and intelligence operations are expensive and politically complicated. Nothing came up online for the number: no individual or business. I set up GPS scrambling so my location was concealed, dialed the number back. It rang but no one answered.

My driver stood watching me beside his Audi, cigarette cupped in his palm. I needed a clean device with which to access the darknet. That wasn't going to be easy today. As I got up, I wrestled with a thought I didn't have the capacity to process at the moment. One other person alive knew the contact system, the person I wanted to hear from more than any other — but not like this.