



I PULL MY PISTOL OUT of my striped Cath Kidston nappy bag. A half-eaten rice cake is stuck to the barrel. Fabulous. Keeping my gun clean used to be not only a matter of pride but one of professionalism. And now here is my beautiful custom-made snub-nosed .38 suffering the indignity of having small snacks crushed on to it. Looking closer, I see that the formula container has leaked and powder is caught between the ridges on the handgrip. Nightmare to clean. At least if anyone looks too closely they'll just assume it's cocaine.

I stare at myself in the mirror and take a deep breath. I always knew this was going to be tough. This was the life I chose when I came back to work. Plan a hit, stalk a target, pull the trigger and still make it home for bath time.

When you become the elite of the elite, you really do believe you can do anything. But now here I am. Admiring my injuries in a Starbucks toilet, officially under investigation at work and very aware of the fact that someone wants me dead.

'I'm sorry little one, I'm doing my best.' I look down at the perfect, chubby-cheeked baby lying on the hard, plastic changing table. I still can't believe she's mine. Blissfully unaware of the morning's drama, she is safe, and that's all that matters. If I can survive the week, I have a chance. That is all I need. A few more days to work out who wants my name in the mud and my body in the ground.

'Let's get you all nice and clean.' I reach into the bag and take out a nappy and wipes.





I try to make sense of it all as I change her. The men today were nobodies. Toy soldiers blindly following the orders of an unknown general, doing his dirty work while he stays hidden in the shadows. To defeat him I have to unmask him.

I stare down at my baby daughter and stroke her cheek. I'm grateful I got away with my life but I can't help feeling a little insulted such low-calibre professionals were sent to do the job. Underestimated to the bitter end.

The nappy changed, I pull her little tights back on and adjust her corduroy dress. She looks up at me, chewing on her fist. Big blue eyes watch as I check my gun again, load it and lock it back into place. I need to work fast. My need to stay alive is more than just a selfish desire to continue enjoying life. I have someone relying on me now. Someone whose life will be inextricably changed if I'm taken out of it.

I lift up my shirt and look at the large purple bruise forming across my midriff. My enemies have got it wrong if they think that becoming a mother has made me weaker. I stare down at her as she holds my little finger. There is nothing I wouldn't do for her. Climb mountains. Fight tigers. Track down and kill every single fucker trying to tear us apart. I will show them all.

I look at my watch. Shit. But first I have to get to Monkey Music.



# Part One

## Weaning

wean<sup>1</sup>, *v.*

Gerund or present participle: **weaning**.

1. Accustom (an infant or other young animal) to food other than its mother's milk.
2. Accustom (someone) to managing without something which they have become dependent on.



## Chapter One

**K**ILLER MAMA. MUMMY BOND.'

I tried the words out loud. Today was my first day back at work after six months of maternity leave and while searching through the depths of my wardrobe I was trying to think of a name for my new dual status.

'Assassa-Mum. Slayer Mother. Breastfeeding Bullet Bitch.'

It was an attempt to distract myself from worries that undoubtedly struck every mother taking that first step back into the workplace. Is it too soon? How much am I going to miss her? Will she forgive me for leaving her? Is this the right thing to do?

There were also a few, perhaps a little less usual, other concerns. Is baby brain going to affect my aim? How am I going to fare in combat when my boobs are so damn sore? Is the extra baby weight going to be an operational issue?

Could 'having it all' really extend to mothers who were also highly trained assassins in covert branches of Her Majesty's Secret Service?

I had been looking forward to leaving babyville and heading back to the cold hard grind of my underground office. But now last-minute doubts were creeping in. Not helped by a call a few minutes ago from my boss, Sandy, telling me not to come to our headquarters but to go straight to Legoland, our name for MI6's



HQ, as we had an urgent meeting. Such a meeting would require a suit, which had languished at the back of my wardrobe for so long I was having trouble finding it.

I flicked back through the hangers again. I caught a flash of white amid a sea of black. There it was. I pulled the shirt and suit out. Trousers with a waistband. My new nemesis.

I squeezed into them and hurried into the kitchen. Beata, the nanny I selected so carefully, was busying herself at the sink. Gigi, my beautiful baby with round cheeks and soft brown hair that always seemed to naturally spike into a Mohawk, was sitting in her highchair at the head of the table, examining the food laid out in front of her. Blissfully oblivious that today would be the first day of her short young life where I wouldn't be there for her every waking moment. I took a deep breath, kissed the top of her head, shouted a goodbye to the hulk of Beata's back as she was loading the dishwasher and rushed out the door for the tube station.

Packed into a full eastbound commuter train, I deeply missed the VIP status of Transport for London's tacky 'Baby on Board' badge. I stood rammed up against the doors and looked around the carriage. It was all dark clothes and solemn faces. The only splash of bright colour came from a woman in a party dress with panda eyes and bed hair. She kept tugging down at the short frayed hem as suited men watched her over the top of their newspapers.

I had forgotten how miserable the morning commute was. I pulled out my phone and clicked on my 'GigiCam' app. Up popped a live feed of Gigi, now indulging in a strawberry yoghurt facial. I stroked the screen. I missed her already. But





having access to an arsenal of government-issue surveillance equipment was definitely helping.

Thanks to motion-activated cameras hidden all over the house and the GPS tracker in the pram I could not only keep an eye on what Beata was pureeing for Gigi's lunch, but track their movements all over Chiswick. I had also tasked Bryan in R & D to work on a prototype tiny camera that could be hidden inside Gigi's amber teething necklace. He had been making good progress although he had warned it was unlikely the image quality would be the requested HD. To make up for this disappointment he had added a sound sensor notification to the app – if Gigi's crying reached a certain decibel I would immediately get an alert to my phone allowing me to check the cause of her tears and assess Beata's reaction to them. Hands-free parenting made easy.

Gigi was currently staring transfixed at Beata, who was balancing a bright pink plastic cup on her head and wobbling around the kitchen with more grace than I expected from someone of her build. Gigi had thankfully taken to the nonsense mother-of-four immediately. My own confidence in Beata was undoubtedly helped by the office undertaking several exhaustive background checks, a month of surveillance and even arranging for a local agent to visit her small home town in Eastern Poland.

The cup fell from Beata's head and Gigi squealed with laughter.

The worries I had quietened, the tight knot in my chest loosened. Gigi was being well looked after, I was getting back to work, this is what I always wanted. To have it all. And, one day, it would prove to my daughter that she could, too.





But hopefully with a job that didn't involve quite so much bloodshed.

I looked around the carriage and saw nothing but glazed eyes and stifled yawns. Not me. I felt more awake than I had been since I entered the baby haze of sleep-deprivation. I felt ready. Fully prepared for my first day back. Excited, even. I could do this. I was an Assassa-Mum.

I definitely needed to work more on the name.

The tube rattled on past graffitied walls, the morning sun brightening an otherwise grey streetscape, and I turned my mind to the meeting. Everyone who had heard the MI6 building at Vauxhall Cross referred to as 'Legoland' assumed it was down to its unusual art deco exterior. An easy mistake to make. But my colleagues and I called it Legoland because, to us, Six was a toytown. Little figurines were lined up and placed wherever they were wanted. They copied each other's homework and called each other names. Building blocks of intelligence were painstakingly built up and then swiftly demolished. Legoland was a playground compared to the real world *we* lived in. They were still children, with clean hands and full deniability. We were the grown-ups who sullied our souls with the dirty work that was necessary to keep them safe. Yet parenting was a thankless task. They threw tantrums when we asked them to share, and would sit rocking with their hands over their ears when told Father Christmas *did* exist – just not anymore because we had put a bullet in his head.

The train jerked to a stop. Then a crackle and the voice of the driver entered the carriage.

'Apologies, ladies and gents. Signal failure up ahead. We're being held here for a few minutes. We'll be on our way shortly.'







A few people sighed loudly and looked at their watches. The rest didn't even look up from their reading material. I was the only one smiling.

I wondered who my colleagues were interrogating.

In a fitting nod to the underground nature of our work, our offices were located in a disused network of rooms and tunnels coming off Platform Eight at Holborn tube station. It was a set-up that worked well for us as we could roam all over London, under the streets, away from the all-seeing CCTV and the inconvenience of traffic. The sound of the trains also helped disguise any troubling noises from our less cooperative interviewees. 'Signal failure' was often caused by over-enthusiastic interrogating shorting the electricity supply and affecting the whole underground grid. Whereas what would be reported as a 'person on the tracks' was actually a highly effective way of disposing of those who would rather die than answer our questions. This tactic worked well for us because 'splatters' were near impossible to do autopsies on.

Not everyone appreciated the benefits of our location. Many years ago a disgruntled unit leader, fed up with the lack of natural light and the constant background rumbling of the trains, had complained that being stuck in such conditions made him feel no better than a sewer rat. He had not lasted long, but the name had and Rats were how we were referred to by those in the know.

As the train started up again I wondered which Rat had been leading the interview that caused our delay and whether they had got all the answers they wanted. Those who entered our underground interrogation room rarely left without relinquishing



their secrets. Information on an impending terrorist attack, tips on which container needed to be intercepted at customs; everything spilled out before their guts did. Afterwards a Black-outtini, a Platform Eight special cocktail, ensured subjects woke up in hospital with memory blanks and injuries concurrent with whatever a helpful bystander was reported to have witnessed. *'It was terrible – the car rammed him, reversed and then drove over his hand as it sped off . . . Yes, that would exactly explain why all the bones are crushed.'* Or in a particularly reticent subject's case, *'He fell from a second-storey balcony and landed in a puddle that must have been electrified.'* That one really should have ended up a splatter. Reportedly, interviewees never did regain their memory, although after-effects included an inability to ride the tube without sweating profusely and a screaming, hyperventilating need to be back above ground. But, then, didn't most Londoners using public transport on a hot summer's day exhibit those symptoms?

At the next stop a new flood of people entered the carriage, pushing us all further into each other. While squashed up against some bearded man's armpit, I looked down and noticed how much my shirt was straining to contain my chest. Great. In all the joy of managing to just about fit into my trousers, I had overlooked how my cheap polyester shirt was going to be no match for my breastfeeding-sized boobs.

Legoland. It was fitting that MI6's home was a huge shiny building out in the open, pinned on Google Maps for all to find, while us Rats scurried around underground in offices with peeling walls and dank, crumbling corridors. A division that didn't exist in a headquarters that didn't exist.



I headed through security and after pulling out my ID card signed myself in as an employee of GCDSB, which stood for Government Communication and Data Specialisation Branch. On paper we were a data consultancy firm whose services could be called upon by both MI5 and MI6, yet our longwinded official name was routinely ignored by those in the know in favour of the catchier Platform Eight, or just the Platform.

We were one of our country's essential security services. There was Five, Six and then us – Eight. The numbers that kept our country safe.

I got into the thankfully empty lift and pressed the button for the third floor; we always used the same meeting room for our visits to Legoland – the corridor cameras were angled so that anyone entering and leaving #0341 were never recorded. I had a look in the lift's large mirror and tried to pull the shirt further across, which made things slightly better, as long as I didn't try to breathe too much. I straightened up and reached to pull my ponytail out – at least my hair could help divert attention. Ping. Just moving my arm had been more strain than the shirt could take and off flew the top button. A seriously distracting amount of bra and cleavage was now visible to anyone looking my way. That combined with my ruffled hair gave me the look of a sexy secretary out of a clichéd porn film. All I needed to complete the look were the fake glasses.

I was busy worrying about my reflection when the lift doors opened at the third floor.

'Why, hello, Mummy.' It was Jake. There he was in all his six-foot-four glory, wearing a dark suit, bright red tie and with his eyes firmly on my chest. 'I've been waiting for you.' He studied me closely. 'You look just the same. Except with bigger breasts.'





He smiled. 'Isn't this the longest we've been apart?' He was clean-shaven and his dark hair effortlessly styled.

I stepped out of the lift and pushed past him, catching the all-too-familiar smell of stale cigarettes, coffee and Hugo Boss.

'Come on Jake. We're going to be late.' I put my hair back up and unfolded my jacket lapels to limit the exposure from my missing button. He followed behind me.

'So we're saving the tearful hug and how much you've missed me for after the meeting?'

I ignored him as I opened the door to our meeting room.

My boss, Sandy White, stood alone next to the large conference table fiddling with his garish multicoloured tie. In all the years I had worked for him, each time I saw him in a suit I marvelled at how uncomfortable he made it look. He turned as we walked in.

'Welcome back, Lex.' He paused. 'Now, please let's all sit the fuck down.' He clutched his right leg as he eased himself into his chair. A bad gunshot injury that had never healed properly had meant desk-work for the last decade. You could tell from his frame and the way he carried himself he used to be a hardened ball of muscle, but the forced sedentary lifestyle had taken its toll. He was losing the battle against middle-aged spread. The leg gave him a lot of pain and at first I'd tried to be a little more understanding about his moods and general dark demeanour until one of the other Rats told me he'd been just as miserable before he'd been shot.

'Russia.' Sandy swung his leg up on to the chair next to him. 'That's why we're here. They're about to gain control of a new weapon to use in the silent war they've been raging against the West. This meeting is to get you two up to speed and to discuss





our plan of action with Six. Let's all be at our most agreeable and we can get the hell out of here and I can get this hangman's noose off.' He motioned to the accessory knotted around his thickset neck. Sandy had always insisted that the poor sods who had to wear ties every day to a dreary nine-to-five were just 'dead men walking'. If you couldn't sit around all day in a T-shirt and battered combat trousers planning how to kill people, life was, to him, quite clearly not worth living.

The meeting room door was flung open and two men walked in. Handshakes and nods were exchanged. The shorter of the two, with broad shoulders and auburn hair, cut off Sandy as he was introducing us.

'Alexis and I know each other. University.'

'Yes. Right. Exactly.' I had no idea who he was. He obviously saw through my super spy poker face as his face darkened. Just what I needed, some guy from Six having it in for me because I didn't remember sitting next to him in a lecture.

It was only while he was droning on about Russia's current political climate that his name came to me. Dugdale. Harry Dugdale. Duggers. He played a lot of rugby. Back then his hair was thicker, more foppish, his face a little less full. His gold signet ring tapped against the table as he used his hands to emphasise a point he was making. He still had that cocky self-assurance of someone to whom life had always come easily.

I recalled something else.

I had slept with him. No wonder he was pissed off I hadn't remembered him. I tried to keep a straight face. It had only happened once, after some college event that involved black tie and a lot of vodka. I now remembered how he had had some weird obsession with sticking his tongue in my ears. I touched my ear,





cringing at the unpleasantness of the memory. Maybe that was his thing. Some guys love the ear. Obviously now I kept thinking about it, I kept wanting to touch my ear. Maybe he would pick up on that and think I was mocking him. Or trying to seduce him. Shit, I touched it again. What was wrong with me? I sat on my hands as he continued his long-winded diatribe.

‘... make no mistake, this is a new cold war, waged through information campaigns, where knowledge is power. It’s a digital battlefield and right now Russia is winning. We already know our main ally has been compromised. I ask what more—’

Sandy cut in. ‘Look, we get it. We can’t count on America. The special relationship is over. Big Daddy’s dumped us for a Russian mistress. We need to kick the bitch out the marital bed and get our man back.’

‘Yes. Quite.’ Dugdale looked round at us all. ‘And things are about to get a hell of a lot worse. Rok-Tech is Russia’s largest privately owned technology corporation and our sources tell us they’ve just created software that could change the world as we know it. Richard, take us through it.’

Dugdale’s spectacled colleague leaned forward on to the table with his hands clasped.

‘Rok-Tech has created an app called VirtuWorld. They are at the final stages of testing and plan to launch it early next year. VirtuWorld has taken Google Street View to the next level. Users can put on a headset and walk virtually down any mapped street in the world. The possibilities are endless. You could “walk” from your house to a shop on the other side of town, ask the salesperson questions and even purchase an item to be delivered to your home. Your real address, obviously, not your virtual one.’ Richard sniggered as we all remained silent. ‘As you can interact





with other users on VirtuWorld you could even arrange to meet a prospective luuuurrrveee' (I winced at Richard's pronunciation of 'love') 'interest in VirtuParis and go for a romantic walk along the Seine together. Eventually you would be able to VirtuHoliday in any destination you want. It's really quite amazing.'

I could totally see the appeal of exploring new places without ever having to worry about the traumas of a flight with a baby.

Dugdale broke in to Richard's delight. 'Get to the point.'

Richard straightened up. 'Just like with Google, Rok-Tech has its own fleet of cars with inbuilt scanners for mapping the streets. The difference is the software in the Rok-Tech scanners is able to spoof a building's wireless network and record the Media Access Control address of every electronic device inside and store it on a central database. If any of those devices then download the hot new VirtuWorld app the database links their name and registration details to their MAC address, remote access is activated and . . . kaboom! Life as we know it will explode.'

He looked round at our blank faces.

'Okay let's say there's a girl out there called Melissa . . . Melissa . . . Melissa X. If I'm in control of the VirtuWorld software I can search the VirtuWorld database for a "Melissa X". If her name and details pop up, with one click I could go through her texts, emails, her photos, contacts, everything as if her phone was in my hand. I could even access her camera and start recording. And because I can also see every wireless network and mobile phone tower that has ever logged Melissa's MAC address, I will know every place she's ever been and now be able to track her movements in real-time.' Richard let that sink in. 'I can even do a search for what other MAC addresses were on the same network as her on the same





date and time. I would know everyone she's ever met with and when and where. She couldn't lie. I would know.' He tapped the side of his head.

I made a mental note to check in on the real Melissa in Richard's life and warn her to stay the hell away from him.

Richard continued, 'The very existence of the VirtuWorld software is a worrying sign of how things could escalate. Within ten years, our sources predict the majority of the whole world could be mapped and the software advanced to the point the app doesn't need to have been downloaded to take control.' Richard pushed his glasses back up his nose. 'We could be looking at a future whereby we have to give up mobiles, iPads, in fact all digital hardware, to protect data and try to keep any semblance of privacy.'

Turning our phones against us.

I tried to imagine life without my mobile. What the hell would I stare at during those boring midnight feeds? And how on earth would I distract Gigi on a long car journey without the bright flashing images of YouTube? And no Google to answer my panicked 'what kind of rash is a bad rash' questions?

Dugdale cut into the silence, 'As you can understand we can't go public with this information – there would be wide-spread panic over the fact this technology even exists.'

'I understand the need for discretion but couldn't we at least come up with a story to discourage people from downloading the app?' Even as I asked the question I knew what the answer would be.

'We could,' said Sandy slowly. 'But as terrifying as it is to think of the damage it could do *against* us, it is exciting to think of how much it could do *for* us. Imagine if we had concerns about







an upcoming terrorist attack – at the click of a button we could be monitoring the movements and conversations of a hundred different persons of interest and everyone in their immediate circle.’

‘That’s all very well, but what’s to stop our enemies doing the same to us?’ asked Jake.

‘Once we understand exactly how the VirtuWorld software operates our engineers could set up protection protocols to stop foreign powers using it against us,’ said Dugdale. ‘The current owner and chairman of Rok-Tech is eighty-five-year-old Viktor Tupolev. Upon his instruction Rok-Tech were in the process of setting up a black-market sale of the software to all interested international agencies. Being an astute businessman he recognised just how much everyone in the security services would be willing to pay for this technology. However a few days ago Tupolev had a massive stroke. He’s still alive but it looks as though there could be brain damage. Doctors are running tests.’

‘As if that stroke was really from natural causes,’ Sandy guffawed. ‘Dimitri Tupolev, his eldest son, will be the one taking over from his father as chairman of Rok-Tech. Dimitri has been living in London for seven years now, running Rok-Tech’s UK subsidiaries. Five months ago, as soon as we first heard rumours of the VirtuWorld software, we put Dimitri under surveillance and started gaining intelligence on him. It looks like even though his old man is a die-hard capitalist always wanting to add to his fortune, Dimitri is a die-hard supporter of The President. He subscribes to the regime’s belief that companies should advance the interests of the dear motherland.’





‘And that means not selling the software so only Russia can use it to her advantage.’

I shook my head. This was going to be one hell of a first mission back.

‘This spells disaster for the rest of the world,’ said Dugdale. ‘If Russia remains the only country with this technology, this weapon of mass intrusion, we might as well surrender. If you think The President can crush opponents and influence elections now, imagine what he can do with that kind of power.’

Sandy took his leg off the chair and pulled himself up. ‘Dimitri’s younger brother Sergei shares his father’s greed and he’s the man we need to ensure will take over Rok-Tech. He wants to sell the software to as many buyers as possible and get himself a nice big payday. Right now the Rok-Tech leadership is in limbo. Old man Tupolev needs to be declared incompetent before Dimitri can take over. The incompetency hearing has been set for three months’ time – in December. It’s the official process a billion-dollar company has to go through, but it will undoubtedly declare the old man unfit.’ Sandy paused to take a long gulp from his water glass while he gave his tie another yank. ‘Before Dimitri can be officially granted full control of Rok-Tech he must be covertly eliminated.’

‘So something a bit more subtle than radiation poisoning in a Knightsbridge hotel, then?’ Jake smirked. ‘This will be fun. A nice welcome back for you, Lex.’ We grinned at each other. The band was back together.

Dugdale cleared his throat. Perhaps being reminded that someone he once slept with was a trained killer made him feel uneasy.





‘I speak for Six when I confirm that we’re fully behind whatever action Eight deems fit to take. The Committee have instructed that we help as and when you need it.’

All of us within the Security Services answered only to the Committee. They were the ones who really ran this country. The prime minister and government were about as effective as a close-the-door button on a lift. There merely to give the appearance of control. The Committee believed in democracy. They just considered themselves a helping hand to make sure it went the right way. The best way for the country. We were part of the tiny percentage who knew that what was played out in the public eye very rarely reflected what was happening behind closed, reinforced doors.

Sandy stood up. ‘We’ll get things moving and keep you updated.’

The meeting was over. We had played nicely and they had let us know they were all too happy for the grown-ups to handle everything for them. With formal handshakes all round, I managed to avoid any more ear touching and made a fast exit.

Every time we visited Legoland I thought about how this world, away from the slime and grime of the sewers, could have been my life – if I didn’t have this part of me that could kill on command, for Queen and for country, while still having a good night’s sleep. Seeing Duggers reminded me how different the paths we had taken had been. Oxford University was nearly twelve years ago. Like me, he would have been recruited just before graduation. Both of us would have faced the same rigorous testing, the extreme psychological profiling and at the end



been assigned a number. Five, Six or Eight. Just like in Harry Potter when the students of Hogwarts put their faith in the Sorting Hat, we had to trust the Committee had called it right. Got us right.

I thought back to Duggers' discomfort at the mention of the planned hit. He had grimaced while I had smiled. They had got it right, all right.

## Chapter Two

SANDY'S PLATFORM EIGHT-ISSUE black BMW was parked right outside Legoland, ready and waiting to whisk us back to Holborn and our underground world. I looked out of the tinted window as we weaved in and out of traffic, the siren on the roof making drivers freeze and get out of our way like startled rabbits. There was no emergency, but the logic had always been our time was better spent out of the car than in it.

I saw a woman up ahead waiting at the traffic lights with a pram. Before Gigi I had never noticed mothers and their babies. When I assessed a street, looking for threats, I glossed over the women pushing prams. Harmless. Irrelevant. Invisible. Now I saw them everywhere I looked. They stood out like beacons. I noticed the model of pram they were using. How old the baby was. How sweet the baby was. How old the mother was. How tired she looked. How flat her stomach was.

The woman looked up from fussing over the baby's blanket as we came to a halt at the lights, waiting for a large coach to pass by, and stared straight at me. Her brow furrowed and she tilted her head slightly. I leant back from the window and looked away before remembering the car's blackout glass and that it was her own reflection she was looking at so intently.



The coach moved and off we sped.

I tried not to think of my baby, in her pram, being pushed by someone other than me. In the front Jake and Sandy talked about the meeting over the noise of the siren, their ties already removed and stuffed in their pockets. It felt good to be back. Eliminating Dimitri Tupolev was not going to be easy. Working out how to kill someone covertly, to make it look like an accident or natural causes, was the *crème de la crème* of the assassinating game. It was like being given an incredibly difficult puzzle at school. Except more fun and involving poisons, guns and knives. It was Sudoku for the sadistic.

And I realised now how much I had missed it.

I don't know when being a Rat became such an intrinsic part of me; at what point exactly it stopped being a job and became a calling, a way of life. I didn't grow up wanting to kill people. I wasn't one of those troubled children who had a propensity to pull the wings off flies or torture little puppies. Life was simple and unremarkable and nothing in my textbook childhood could have predicted my violent adulthood. I had no innate desire to take a life. What I did have was a need for something more than the nice, normal existence I was headed for. By the time I was a teenager I looked around at the sleepy town in Berkshire I was growing up in, and at my caring, middle-class parents and rather than being grateful for what I had it made me want to scream. It felt so predictable. Life was beige and I wanted fire-engine red. With a small sprinkling of leopard skin. I didn't want to live on auto pilot, be just another nobody on life's long treadmill. I wanted to have a strut in my walk, a flash in my eyes, a knowing secret to my smile. I wanted to be goddamn special.





I watched as the cars continued to part for us. This definitely made me feel special. Forget having the power to take a life; having the power to beat traffic is what really gave all us Rats a bit of a God complex.

Sandy turned off the siren as we pulled into the NCP car park in Covent Garden. He leaned round and looked at me.

‘Good to be back home, away from the Pigeons? Or are you rethinking things now you’re a mummy?’

In Eight we called those from Five and Six ‘Pigeons’ as they were scattered all round London and had the tendency to shit all over everything.

I was transferred to Five for the majority of my pregnancy to stay out of harm’s way and live my cover story of being ‘just a GCDSB data analyst’. The hours may have been nine to five and the work completely sedentary but the days had dragged by and felt much more tiring. I still wasn’t sure if that was down to pregnancy or the boredom of no deadly action.

I shrugged. ‘I’m still a Rat. This is where I belong.’

‘Thank fuck for that. Because we need you.’

We drove down and down until we reached what appeared to be the bottom level. We screeched past the rows of parked cars towards a large booth at the far end. A sign advertising a hand car washing service hung above it. Once parked inside, Sandy inputted an eight-digit code into the keypad by his window and a metal roller door rattled down behind us. He then typed in a second, longer code and with a lurch the floor started lowering and we descended another level further underground. This was us. The lowest of the low. There was a high-pitched shriek as the lift mechanism came to a halt and the doors opened into Platform Eight’s very own private car park.





The expansive space, the size of two football fields, was lit by rows of overhead strip lighting. Ten identical white vans, a series of black cars like the one we had arrived in, as well as a few private cars were all parked neatly in a line. A number of Rats drove to work; free parking in central London was considered a real perk of the job. The other side of the car park had been commandeered by R & D as a space to build and test their latest inventions.

We got out of the car and headed for the tunnel that led to Platform Eight's network of offices. On the streets above us people were deciding what sandwich to buy from Pret a Manger, browsing the rails at New Look, stocking up on condoms at Superdrug. Down here we had meetings discussing how someone was going to die. Life above ground was the bright, bustling place where everyone shared everything. Trending hashtags, viral videos, hysterical front pages; always in glossy-coloured, high-definition, full-megapixel glory. But it was all pretend. The real truth was quiet. Plotted out in grey faceless rooms, by grey faceless people. Us Rats were a part of this world. The gritty, dirty one where no one talked and no one tagged. But it was where everything was decided, and it was how everything got done.

As we passed a group of men in white lab coats surrounding a Toyota Prius, its passenger doors open, Sandy called, 'Don't forget we need it for next week, boys.' The windows had been darkened and the interior-door handles had been removed. 'One of our little Uber adaptations,' he explained to me. 'Our drivers will definitely be getting one-star ratings.' He chuckled to himself as he typed a code into the keypad next to the tunnel opening. The door slid back and we walked through, blinking slightly as we







adjusted to the darkness. Naked bulbs hung sporadically from the ceiling in a line running through the tunnel. Enough light to see your way but not enough to see anyone coming. Our very own little hallway to hell.

‘Meeting room in ten minutes,’ announced Sandy over his shoulder as he reached the end of the tunnel and opened the door into the main corridor of Platform Eight. He limped off in the direction of his office.

‘I’ll tell the others.’ Jake followed him. ‘You might want to sort your tits out.’ He nodded down at my chest where once again my bra was on show. ‘Unless this is a new look you’re going for. In which case I’m all for it.’ He disappeared off round the corner before I could come back with a line that was just the right combination of witty and disparaging.

I stood alone in the empty corridor. I had not set foot down here for nearly a year. The fluorescent strip lighting gave a whitish glow to the grey chipped concrete walls and floors. The low drone of the air vents and the soft buzz of electricity powering the high-wattage lights were punctuated with the noise of the tube trains rattling past. I took a deep breath. Everything was the same. Yet everything was different.

I ran my hand along the rough wall as I headed towards the locker room. People had been plotting and planning down here for decades. It was one of these custom-built underground offices the War Cabinet used to meet in before the War Rooms were created. We were carrying on the tradition, except we fought wars most people didn’t even know about.

When the Services approached me in my final year at Oxford, I knew it was because I had been getting various bearded professors very excited by the first-class Economics papers I had been





writing. They no doubt envisaged using me as an analyst or in some other important desk job where I would pour over reams of data to help keep the country safe. Yet my rather interesting psych test results evidently made them think perhaps there was another calling for a highly intelligent (scored 9.6), moderately attractive (scored 7.2) female with seriously questionable morals (scored 2.1).

I entered the locker room and looked at myself in the mirror hanging on the wall. I wondered how much of a battering my attractiveness rating would have taken since Gigi was born. I tilted my head from left to right. A few extra kilos and permanent bags under the eyes could definitely knock a couple of points off. The official name for this superficial round of testing was 'Individual Appearance Assessment'. Although much maligned and referred to by the catchier 'Hot or Not', it was considered essential in fully assessing an individual's viability as an active agent. Reportedly, a score of 2.2 and under or 8.7 and over meant you were too memorably attractive or unattractive, ruling you out of certain missions.

We all often wondered exactly how those on the judging panel assessed our looks. Scientifically? By measuring the symmetry of our features? Instinctively? By how much they wanted to see us naked? Or had some award-winning mathematician come up with a special algorithm taking both into account? I was just grateful I had a score that ensured eligibility for all missions and the somewhat smug satisfaction of being officially, as judged by my country, more Hot than Not. I flashed my reflection a grin.

I walked towards my unit's corner of the locker room. Since I became a fully-fledged Rat I had only ever worked within the





same team. There were around sixty of us within Eight, all rattling around in our underground lair, with the added bonus of a canteen and gym. Half of us were Rats. The rest were Tech Support or working in departments like Surveillance, R & D or Special Projects. Despite the sinister nature of our business, we weren't that dissimilar from the companies in Holborn working directly above us.

Rats and Tech Support were divided into units, each headed up by a unit leader, and assigned specific missions which could be on home soil or anywhere in the world. Each unit was named by its leader; a power that was routinely abused as a chance to try to show off their wit or lack thereof.

I looked up at the 'Unicorn' scrawled in paint across our line of six metal lockers and shook my head. Sandy had named our unit this, saying, 'What else would you call a group of dickheads who don't officially exist?'

Other unit name highlights included 'Megatron' (big *Transformers* fan), 'Watermelon' (a reference to the ball size required to do this job) and 'Jagger' as that leader genuinely believed he had 'moves like Jagger'. I would often think how our American counterparts probably had unit names like 'Freedom', 'Independence', 'Patriot' or other such worthy, inspiring monikers whereas we were proudly British in our schoolboy humour.

I entered the code for my locker's padlock. In a defiant nod to the extreme security measures and the complicated passcodes that filled my working life, for this padlock I used 0000. I was not sure exactly who this was a middle finger to, but it was a small act of rebellion in my otherwise cautiously secure existence. I also figured if anyone really wanted to steal a bag of gym





kit, spare underwear and a little black dress, they were welcome to it. I took off my suit jacket and stuffed it into the locker and pulled my hoodie out my gym bag. I put it on, zipping it up to my neck.

I passed Sandy's office on my way to the meeting room. I saw a flash of him sitting at his desk.

'Lex, come in here, will you?' He had obviously spotted me, too.

I walked into his small office. The concrete walls were empty except for a poster that had been blu-tacked up behind his desk. It was a photo of a rat with its back to the camera. Underneath was the slogan 'I'm all out of fucks to give . . . but here's a rat's ass'.

'Yes, boss?'

'Take a seat.'

He waited until I was sitting bolt upright in the plastic chair on the other side of his scuffed desk before he spoke. 'Don't get me wrong, Tyler, I'm delighted you're back.' His face remained deadpan. 'But I need to know you're going to be all right. That your head is back in the game?'

'Sandy, I took a few months off and had a baby, not a psychotic break. Of course I'm fine.'

'Good. I just had to check. As you know. Hormones.' He twirled a finger round next to his head. 'You're taking the lead on this mission. Not Jake. Everything's riding on you being on top form.' He leaned forward in his chair. 'If the Russians get even the slightest hint of what we're up to, retaliation will be brutal.'

'Sandy, all of us in Eight know exactly how unforgiving the Russians can be.' A couple of years ago a Rat had been caught inside the home of a general from The President's





personal guard. He had been tortured for a week before he was executed and his body left in pieces on the steps of the British Embassy in Moscow. 'It sounds like you don't fully believe I'm up to the job.'

'You're the first female agent in our history to have had a kid and come back, which is making a lot of people very nervous. This is one hell of an important mission. It doesn't get much bigger than this. Knowledge is power and with VirtuWorld behind him The President becomes god. We mess this up and Russia will be in charge of us all.' He pointed his right index finger at me. 'Everyone is going to be watching you very closely.'

'I have *never* failed you. Do you really think having a baby has suddenly made me a liability?' I may have had my own doubts, but he didn't get to judge me from his supposed high horse of male superiority.

'I'm just warning you, Lex. You've always gone on about being treated the same as everyone else and that's exactly what we're going to do.' He lifted his bad leg up on the table. 'So no trying to pull a sickie if the kid has a sniffle. No coming in late because your babysitter was stuck in traffic. If you want to work somewhere that has to be legally understanding about you being a mother you can head back over to Five and fucking stay there.' He stared at me unsmiling. 'What we do is too important to have someone trying to slack off because they feel their vagina gives them special rights.'

'Understood.' I clenched my jaw so tight my teeth started to ache. I left his office, letting the door slam behind me. First day back on the job and already they were watching me from the sidelines, doubting I could do it. And after everything we had been through together.





It had been a busy and bloody ten years since my first day as a Rat when I had entered the joint-briefing room to report to Sandy that I was his latest recruit.

‘You’re Alexis Tyler? I thought you’d be a bloody man.’

‘Well it looks like you have enough of those.’ I had gestured at the all-male faces around me. ‘And you can call me Lex. But not Lexi. Unless you want me to shoot you and blame it on PMT.’

‘I think we’re going to get on just fine, Lex.’

He was right, we had. He had been a good unit leader; he was blunt and to the point but his mission planning and tactical support had been faultless. I had always done everything he had asked of me, and more. I liked to think I had shown you didn’t need actual balls to do this job; just hard-assed grit, determination, and the ability to always succeed in getting the shot, pushing the button, plunging the needle.

But, then, that was old Lex. New Lex and her baby were a whole different commodity. It looked as though I was going to have to prove myself all over again. Some welcome back.

