

## ***THE END OF ALEX***

The dark blue Jaguar XJ Sentinel swept round Trafalgar Square and continued through Whitehall. It was sleek and expensive with tinted windows that turned the single passenger sitting in the back into nothing more than a vague shadow. Had anyone checked the number plate, they would have discovered that it belonged to the chairman of a private bank in Liverpool Street.

The car had cost almost four hundred thousand pounds to manufacture and it was unique. It was kitted out with the very latest communications equipment, the windows were made of armoured glass, the interior was lined with titanium and there was a 15 millimetre steel plate underneath the floor. In the event of a chemical or biological attack, the car had its own oxygen system. The tyres could be shot out without slowing it down. An advanced weapons system including lightweight Javelin surface-to-air missiles was built into the bodywork.

The passenger, sitting with her legs crossed, did not work in a bank, although with her rather severe haircut, her midnight-blue suit and her gleaming black leather shoes she certainly looked like a business person. Her name was Mrs Jones and she was the Chief Executive of MI6 Special Operations – a division so secret that only half a dozen people in the country knew it existed. Today she was on her way to see one of those people and she had an uneasy feeling in her stomach. There was no actual reason for it. The summons, which had arrived by email, had been short and to the point.

Eleven o'clock. Tuesday morning.

But Mrs Jones had been a spy all her working life. Starting as a junior intelligence officer, she had risen up the ranks, finally replacing her boss, Alan Blunt, as department head. She had learned to trust her instincts and the moment she had received the message, she had known she was in trouble. What she didn't know was – why.

She glanced out of the window and saw the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben ahead of her. The time was seven minutes to eleven. The car turned left and passed underneath a stone archway, stopping outside a massive nineteenth-century building with row after row of curved windows and miniature balconies, columns and black wrought-iron railings. Everything – from the steps leading up to the main entrance to the statue of Queen Victoria on the

roof – seemed to whisper how important the place was. Arriving here, you could not fail to be awed.

The building was the headquarters of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, known as the FCO for short. This is the government department responsible for protecting British interests around the world. A large part of its responsibilities includes national security and Counter-terrorism. It is in charge of both MI5 and MI6.

A young assistant was waiting for her at the front door. In fact he was ridiculously young – in his early twenties with fair hair slicked back and a face that had surely never been shaved. As Mrs Jones got out of the car, he watched her with watery blue eyes that seemed to cut her to the bone. He was wearing a made-to-measure suit that was a little tight on him, as if it had been made to measure for his younger brother. His shoes had been polished until they looked brand new.

“Good morning, Mrs Jones,” he said. “Please will you come this way?”

He did not speak again. His job was simply to take her through security and on to the office of Dominic Royce, the Permanent Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs and the single most powerful man in the building.

The head of the FCO is the Foreign Secretary. He is the man you will see on television, travelling around the world, talking to foreign leaders and the press. (So far only one woman has held the position.) But

the Permanent Under-Secretary works behind the scenes. He is a civil servant, not a politician. He runs the department on a day-to-day basis and makes all the most important decisions. Dominic Royce had only joined the FCO a few weeks before. He was very much a cold fish with no close friends. When he walked into a room, people fell silent or, if they could, found an excuse to leave. It was said that the Foreign Secretary was terrified of him and that when he went to Downing Street, even the Prime Minister pretended to be out.

Mrs Jones thought of all this as she followed the young man across a spectacular entrance hall with columns and galleries stretching up to an iron and glass ceiling far above. They came to a grand staircase and suddenly their footsteps fell silent as they moved from bright coloured mosaic to soft carpet. They climbed two floors, then continued along a corridor to a double-height door at the end. They had passed a few people as they made their way but nobody had looked at them. In this building, everyone minded their own business.

They went in without knocking. A woman sat in an outer office with a desk, three telephones and a computer. "Mrs Jones," she said with the faintest flicker of a smile but no hint of enthusiasm. "Mr Royce is expecting you."

Outside, in the distance, Big Ben chimed eleven. Mrs Jones continued through.

Dominic Royce was sitting behind a desk so

enormous that it reduced him to the size of a school-boy. He was a small man anyway, thin with a long, narrow face, grey eyes and grey lips. His hair was very black, neatly combed back and a little greasy. He was wearing an old-fashioned pinstripe suit and round, wire-frame glasses that perched hesitantly on his up-turned nose. He was clean-shaven and from his looks Mrs Jones would have guessed that he was in his late forties. But there was no need to guess. She never went to a meeting without learning everything about everyone in the room and she knew that he was actually forty-three years old, educated at Eton and Cambridge, married with two sons who were also at Eton. He had inherited millions of pounds from his father who had inherited millions more from his. He owned several properties, including a flat in Pimlico and a huge country house with twenty acres of land just outside Salisbury. At the weekend, he liked to go shooting ... birds, rabbits, deer. Anything that moved.

He looked up as Mrs Jones came in but he didn't stand to shake her hand or anything like that. "Please sit down." He turned his attention back to the folder that he had been examining. Mrs Jones could see the words TOP SECRET in red on the cover.

In the silence that followed, she examined the office. She had been here before. The Permanent Under-Secretary before Dominic Royce had been

an altogether different sort of man, loud and cheerful, happy to discuss business over tea and biscuits. Jaffa cakes had been his favourite. There were going to be no refreshments this time. The office was dark and severe with old wood panelling and leather-bound books on shelves. Two windows reached from floor to ceiling but very little light came in.

Royce laid the folder down and Mrs Jones saw a black-and-white photograph lying on top of the first page. She showed no emotion. She had been trained to give nothing away. But her throat tightened. Now she knew why she was here.

The picture, which had been taken more than a year ago, showed a very good-looking boy, dressed in a school uniform. He was gazing into the mid-distance, unaware that he was being snapped. Two strands of fair hair hung down, partly covering his eyes. He was pushing a bicycle, a Condor Junior Roadracer, and there was a backpack hanging off his shoulder.

"Tell me about Alex Rider." The Permanent Under-Secretary looked up from the file and challenged her with cold, unfriendly eyes.

"What is it you want to know?" Mrs Jones replied.

Royce blinked heavily, then looked at her as if she had deliberately insulted him. "Well, let's start with a simple question. Is it true that this boy works for you?"

"He used to work for the department. Yes, sir." Mrs Jones chose her words carefully. It was true that

several months had passed since Special Operations had last recruited Alex – sending him out as an undercover agent to an international school in Cairo. That had brought him up against the criminal organization known as Scorpia and a secret hideout in the Western Desert. Not for the first time, it had almost got him killed.

"A schoolboy! He was fourteen years old!"

"That was what made him so effective. It's all there in the file. Because he was so young, nobody suspected him. He was the perfect secret weapon." She paused. The man sitting opposite her said nothing so she went on. "His uncle was an agent who also worked for our department. Ian Rider was unfortunately killed investigating that Stormbreaker business but it turned out that he had trained Alex—"

"Yes. I have read all this. Every last word of it!" The Permanent Under-Secretary's voice was thin and whiny and didn't change no matter how angry he became. He was angry now. "You had him train with the SAS in the Brecon Beacons."

"Alex passed with flying colours."

"I find that extremely hard to believe. But whether he was ready or not, you then sent him all over the world." He spread the file in front of him. All of Alex's missions were described in detail. "First Cornwall. Then the Point Blanc Academy in France, some island off the coast of America, Thailand, Australia ... you even blasted him into outer space!" He slammed

the file shut. "Are you seriously telling me that the British government quite cheerfully went ahead and employed a child who wasn't even old enough to vote? That you took him out of school and endangered his life ... how many times?" He batted any answer away with his hand and continued without drawing a breath. "Do you have any idea how much embarrassment it would have caused if the wretched boy had managed to get himself killed? What do you think would have happened if anyone had found out?"

"We were very careful," Mrs Jones said. "And Alex was exceptionally gifted. Thanks to him—"

"I'm not interested," Royce cut in. "To be honest with you, I think you should be considering your position, Mrs Jones. You must have taken leave of your senses. I mean, what were you thinking of, recruiting him in the first place?"

In fact, it hadn't been Mrs Jones who had recruited Alex. That had been Alan Blunt's idea and she had actually been against it. But she wasn't going to tell Dominic Royce that. Whatever her differences with the man whose job she now occupied, she would never have taken sides against him. And there was something about Royce, his coldness and his arrogance, that disgusted her. She wasn't going to waste her time trying to make excuses.

She waited for him to continue.

"How many people know about Alex Rider and his involvement with MI6?" Royce asked.

"Very few." Mrs Jones considered. It was certainly

the case that a great many people who had come up against Alex were now dead. Herod Sayle, Dr Grief, Colonel Sarov...

"Where is he now?" The question broke her train of thought.

"He's back at school."

"I want to get one thing absolutely straight, Mrs Jones. When I was shown the contents of this file, I found it almost impossible to believe. I've never heard of anything quite so ridiculous and downright dangerous" He lifted a finger. "Dangerous for us, I mean! Can we trust the boy not to talk? What happens if he tells his friends?"

"Alex is very discreet."

"Well, let me make it absolutely clear that you're to have nothing more to do with him. I never want to hear his name again. Do you understand me?"

"Yes."

"I presume he's signed the Official Secrets Act. You can tell him that if he says one word to anyone about this, we will make life very difficult for him and for everyone he knows. I want you to frighten the life out of him."

"Actually, Alex isn't very easily frightened."

"Just do it, Mrs Jones. This business with Alex Rider was a huge error of judgement on your behalf. You are not to have any further communication with him under any circumstances. Good morning!"

The last two words were a dismissal. Mrs Jones got to her feet.

*NIGHTSHADE**THE END OF ALEX*

At the same moment, the door opened and the young man who had brought her to the office appeared. Presumably, the Permanent Under-Secretary had summoned him with a button concealed under his desk. Once again, he said nothing but stood there, pale and silent, like a ghost. As Mrs Jones walked back out of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, he followed close behind, a half-smile on his face as if he had heard everything that had just been said. She ignored him, thinking about the conversation she'd just had.

As much as she disliked Dominic Royce, she had to admit that he had a point. It had been wrong to use Alex Rider even if he had been a quite extraordinary success. He was a schoolboy, not a spy, but that hadn't stopped MI6 tearing him away from his home and his friends, putting him in danger over and over again. How many times had he almost died? He had actually taken a bullet in the chest, right outside the office in Liverpool Street. Ever since Alan Blunt had first recruited Alex, Mrs Jones had seen just how much damage they had done to him. Although she had tried to persuade herself otherwise, she knew that Alex had no place in her world.

The Jaguar was waiting for Mrs Jones outside the Foreign Office with the engine already running. She got in and closed the door. She didn't need to tell the driver where to go. The car pulled away, heading back the way it had come.

So it was finally over. Dominic Royce was her boss and she couldn't argue with him. She could never use Alex Rider again.

Unless, of course, she went behind his back.