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Book I

Chapter 1: John

5 am. Gracechurch Avenue's lampposts had managed to slightly chase away the darkness left by the night, but it still refused to give way to the rising dawn. The temperature was freezing cold, and the grey-bluish night mist seemed to absorb the lampposts' dim orange light.

Had he not known what time it was, John could have sworn it was still the middle of the night, rather than morning. The sun was a late riser in London these days, as if she was aching for a lie-in herself, preferring the warmth of a pampering goose down duvet to spreading some light onto the frozen street.

John, Back home called Yochi – an abbreviation for Yochanan - had to make his way to the office in the early morning hours, so that he would manage to start the working day alongside the offices of his employer's company, oversees.

Today, he left his soulless Tower Bridge serviced apartment, which was rented for him by the firm, even before the clock struck five. It was his fourth month in the kingdom's capital, a gig which had started as a temporary project assignment, and subsequently took shape as a rather permanent posting to the firm's London offices. And yet, he didn't mind. At 30 winters old, John – single and unattached - was happy to spend time in one of the world's most buzzing cultural cities. It sure as hell beat the provinciality of being back home.

John was unmistakably a handsome man. He was six foot tall, and had an upright and self-confident posture, which was not apparent under the oafish black winter coat. His brown hair was mostly hidden under the black beanie hat he wore only until he was to reach the office, just at the end of Liverpool street station. Despite his relatively young age, John's face was already entwined with a hint of some wrinkles, especially underneath his big, olive colored eyes. He yawned, his fatigue was a direct outcome of the numerous working hours he was putting in (along with the drinking nights with the English colleagues).

He picked up his pace, stepping over the large, crooked, cobble stoned sidewalk, going past the lorry drivers and the merchants who were unloading in the entrance to Leadenhall market. These were the first signs that Wednesday had begun, though for John yesterday never truly ended. He had been up all night running possible scenarios in his head, for possible failure of the computer program he had been working on in the past six months.

John's firm was situated in the east end of the City of London, right by the big banks and brokerage firms. This location was not coincidental, as his firm was developing online trading and banking applications for exactly this clientele base. Today's software launch would determine John's future with the firm. Success meant prestige, an assured continuation of the London based project and a nice five figure incentive bonus; whereas failure would most likely send him to the unemployment office back home.

The pavement felt rough under his frozen feet, and he stumbled as the path curved to the left. A garbage truck pulled up beside him, and burly garbage workers, equipped with bright yellow jumpers, nearly ran over him on their way to the big dumpster bins of the crossroad, where the avenue becomes Bishopsgate. The commotion they caused woke him up, and sharpened his senses, as he was pacing faster in order to keep warm... and maybe to distract the pessimistic notions regarding his project.

As he reached the gargantuan building of Liverpool Street Station, he took out a pack of cigarettes and lingered at the entrance. He never used to smoke before midday, but since he was up for already a day and a half, he figured he could get away with it. The warm smoke engulfed his cold lungs made his throat tingle. He felt dizzy and after three more puffs, threw the cigarette to the curb.

Walking on the lower level of the station was his best route to reach the company's offices in Broadgate Circle, at the end of the station. Plus, the sheltered station provided some protection against the chilly outdoors. Several people were already waiting in the station for the early trains to arrive.

The number of people already standing at the heart of the station, underneath the train departure board, made it slower to walk through, and on a warmer day he would have gladly avoided the hubbub and would have overtaken the station from the outside. At these hours he was still not accustomed to interacting, no – he was not a morning person at all. It was only with the double espresso he would drink in about an hour's time that his hostility towards the world would start to dissolve.

“STOP! WE JUST WANT TO TALK TO YOU!” A shout was heard through the dozens of people standing in the station. Everybody immediately turned their gaze toward the source of the cry and started moving uncomfortably to either clear the way or to locate the person responsible for the racket.

Abruptly, an elderly man emerged from in between the crowd, running frantically towards John. He ran into a young man’s shoulder and kept running while pushing another woman and mumbling apologetic words. He was wearing a brown suit with a tweed jacket that had seen better days. His skin looked clammy, a result of his overwrought run.

The old man’s eyes were darting all over the place, and he had a panicky look on his face. His eyes were trying to focus on something that seemed not there, rather than concentrating on finding a safe route between the people. John was transfixed by the scene like a deer staring into the lights of a vehicle at night, and was unable to move aside as the man picked up his run and headed straight towards him. The collision was imminent.

With a loud thud John fell to the ground with the man lying on top of him. “I am sorry ... I am sorry” cried the old man, trying to pick himself up from John, neither accepting nor being offered any help from the bystanders. In the corner of his eye, John managed to see two men, dressed in black leather jackets, heading towards them. His first thought was that these coats are too thin for this cold weather, as if they were meant

to impress others rather than to actually protect the pursuers. He immediately dismissed the thought as irrelevant and lifted himself while aiding the man to his feet.

“The Queen... the queen ... where she is seated... they are all standing there behind her” John gave a baffled stare to the man, who seemed incoherent and spoke with a foreign, maybe east European accent. “THE QUEEN – come on – they are all standing!” he begged, as his eyes shot a penetrating stare into John’s.

As the leathered gentlemen drew near, the man shot off again and John thought he heard him mumble “remember the queen”. As soon as one of the chasers reached John, the other kept running after the old man. He touched John’s shoulder and straighten his coat, gently frisking him as if he was looking for a weapon of some sort.

“You ok mate?” the guy asked, though something about his smile seemed phony, or at least not sincere. Meanwhile the elderly man ran through an open gate to the trains’ platform. John was still overwhelmed and before he could begin to answer a shriek was heard throughout the station’s hall.

The screeching noise of a train trying to brake filled the air and scorched John’s eardrums. More screams were now heard and a boy started crying. Dozens of people started to run towards the platform, where the man had apparently thrown himself to the oncoming locomotive, which was just arriving at bay number two.

“Did he hand you anything?” the man asked John abruptly with annoyance. “No,” John stammered “I mean, I don’t think so ... he just knocked me over.” he found it hard to compose himself.

The man drew out a business card and stuffed it into John's palm. "Give me a call if you remember anything-" he spoke in a raggedy cockney accent, and never mentioned his name "-just a mad geezer, hey mate?!" The man's smile was broad and seemed inappropriate. He disengaged and headed rapidly towards the escalator leading to the top floor of the station, signaling his friend as they both made their way away from the scene of the incident. Met and transport police officers were already congregating near the platforms.

"Yes..." John murmured, but the guy was long gone.

Chapter 2: Grey

The alarm clock went off aggressively and woke him from a dream that now he had trouble remembering. He looked through his bedroom's Victorian window. It was 6 am, and the Londonian morning was bluish-grey with no sign of the sun still hiding behind the horizon.

He got up, installed his glasses and went into the bathroom. He washed his face and studied his own reflection. A middle aged man, greying hair with a hint of its former brown and deep wrinkles around his bright blue eyes. Even at 55, Adam Grey was a handsome man, who used his charm for constant nightly conquests. Yesterday was not one of these nights; in fact he had found it hard to sleep for all the wrong reasons.

He briskly brushed his teeth and shaved. He put on a deep blue pinstripe suit over a whit-and-blue plaid dress shirt and installed a pair of golden cufflinks. He tied a dark grey tie in a double Windsor knot – like he learned in Eton - and finished the look with a dark grey handkerchief folded into a triangle and slid into the suit's breast pocket. Whenever he tied a tie he remembered his old all boys' school. Between the useless classes and the cricket games, the lectures and the banter, the image of the immortal headmaster Crouch's constant shouting was the one that stood out the most. 'Grey! If Windsor castle were to be built the way you tie your Windsor...' he never did finish the sentence.

Grey wondered what headmaster Crouch was doing today. Probably in some nursing home, if still alive. He shook the thought away.

Heading south from Elizabeth Street towards Sloan Square, Grey encountered the familiar Victorian scenery. The three story high white house gleamed brightly in contrast to the somber English day. Occasionally a renegade ray of sun managed to penetrate through the dark clouds and light up his way. He had inherited the house when his parents passed away. He and his

brother split the house into a two-flat conversion, three bedrooms each. His brother sold his flat a long time ago, and Grey had to cope with living alongside a family of Turks, along with their two rattling children that insist upon playing ball indoors. He sighed.

His walk along Chester Street was uneventful, and he noted his home pub “the Duke of Wellington”, which was naturally still closed at this early hour. It had been five years since Grey retired from the service. There was something eerie about breaking his retirement routine: A daily jog starting at Eaton Park going all the way to Hyde Park, then a tube ride back, a shower and breakfast at “Thomas Cubitt”, a bar restaurant located half a block from his flat at Elizabeth Street. Not today.

He entered Sloan Square and crossed the road in front of the John Lewis/Peter Jones department store. He took a left turn and entered the underground station. He climbed down the steps leading to the platform, and waited for the east-bound train. The number of people on the platforms at this hour was ridiculous, he thought, all heading towards the City of London in an obsessive pursuit of money that would bring them neither joy nor happiness. While queuing in line to board the next train, he could not help but reflect on the events of yesterday that had sent him on his way to Liverpool Street Station.

Yesterday, at exactly 5 pm the phone rang in his Elizabeth Street flat. After three rings the phone went silent, and Grey, who was just coming from the kitchen where he had been waiting for the kettle to boil, presumed he simply had not reached it on time. As he went back to the kitchen, the phone rang again once and went dead. He immediately recognized this pattern of rings for a familiar pre-arranged code from his days in the service. The first thought that went through his head, was that if this person had his home number, it must be someone from days of yore, who believed Grey to be still serving in active duty. But who? And why now? He knew that unless he rang a prearranged number in a short pre-determined period of time, he might never know the answer.

He then picked up the phone and dialed a familiar number.

“Operator. State your business please,” A man said on the other end of the line.

“Grey. Three times five – two – one – eight”

“Please hold sir”

A few moments later, a young man answered the call.

“Good evening Mister Grey. Were the old golf courses booked solid today?”

“Funny kid. What’s your name?”

“Roger. Roger Potter sir”

“Listen up, Potter.” Grey heard the young man swallow hard at the other end of the line “I just received a code that hasn’t been used since the eighties – three rings. Precisely one minute interval – then one ring.”

“hmmm-”

“Please find out if there’s an active protocol with this code with my cases as a cross reference, and if there is – give me the number. We need to call ASAP.”

“I am not sure it is within my privilege to give out this information – should it even exist, Mr. Grey.”

“Listen kid, normally there are about thirty minutes to place the return call, or the agent is instructed to disengage any further contact. I have no desire to ever come back to active duty, but if you want to stay in one, I suggest you find me the number so I can check the matter, and report back to you.”

“Please hold, sir.”

Another five minutes passed until the on-duty officer, a man in his early forties named Finch, took charge and got on the line. He was far friendlier than Potter, probably remembering Grey from his days in the service. Finch gave Grey a public phone number in the Tower Hill area, and suggested that they indeed had thirty minutes (now roughly twenty remaining) to call back. Finch added: “I had to look manually into your old files to locate the number, hence the delay. This is a protocol that was last used more than 25 years ago. Whoever this is - must want you specifically, otherwise he would have used far more conventional methods of getting in touch. I am arranging a guest pass for you to come to Babylon tomorrow morning. I want you to schedule a meeting with this source for tomorrow, then head here straight after, for debriefing. We will pick it up from there. It’s a new world here, Grey – it took balls and nerves of steel to entertain old agents – the service doesn’t have what it takes for this nowadays.”

The train seemed to Grey like a humongous plastic worm – squeezing into the platform space like paste out of a toothpaste tube. He just barely managed to get into the crowded car, which was stuffy and hot. His brown wool overcoat only added to the airlessness feeling.

To make the call yesterday, Grey had gone down to an old payphone located just by his house on Elizabeth Street. It’d been quite a while since he last placed a call from one of these things, which were a very sought after commodity in the eighties and nineties, the prehistoric era – before mobile phones. Standing in one that was serving most probably as a urinal for the

homeless, he swallowed hard, shoved a twenty pence coin to the slot and dialed the number Finch gave him. He didn't need pen and paper to memorize a few numbers. Still got it.

As the tube made its way through the stations, with only a few stops to go, Grey recalled the conversation that had sent him on his way today.

"Murray, is that you?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

The voice was old. Old and unfamiliar.

"Ephraim."

Ephraim. It was the code name for an agent Grey knew long ago. It was 1982. Grey was a young lad just coming back from a simple posting in east Europe. The lack of sufficient human resources, and an exposed mole in the service that had done considerable damage, meant that Grey was getting – at his young age – the responsibility for running all the agents in the Greater London area. It was the swan song of the old espionage game, or so it seemed, as the technology got better – it was the Sigint professionals that got the resources and the attention of the brass upstairs. With nobody left who really cared, young agents like Grey got their chance on some good old fashion spying games. He remembered Ephraim. He remembered all his men. Ephraim's real name was Henry Haft, a mid-grade consular worker at the Polish commission. Grey calculated swiftly that Haft had to be over 80 years old today, and to the best of his knowledge, was never "made".

"What is it, Henry?" Grey sounded impatient. He had used his real name. He had no patience for nostalgic agents. "I thought we were both retired," he added. "Where did you get my number? Why not contact the service directly?"

“Your service is rotten, it is part of it. How I got a hold of your number is immaterial now, Mr. Murray.” Murray. It was one of many forgotten aliases that Grey once used. “Listen to me,” Ephraim continued with a deep Polish accent that had not subsided despite years and years of living among the English. His voice sounded exhausted and weak. “I have to meet with you urgently. I have an envelope I have prepared for you and you alone I can trust. Tomorrow, 7:30, Liverpool Street Station, I will be sitting in the Merchant with the Times. If the newspaper isn’t open – keep clear.”

"Grey was speechless. He started to say something, then stopped."

“Murray, you would want to see this.”

There were four missed calls on his phone display as he emerged from the tube station at Liverpool Street. He dialed the number.

“Operator”

“Grey. Triple five – two – one – eight.”

“One second please-“

The line went silent and a man picked up

“Grey?”

“In the flesh.”

”It’s Finch. The number that tried reaching you yesterday-“

“An old source. I doubt it is of any interes-“

“Henry Haft?”

“How did you know?” Grey was on his toes.

“He jumped to his death in front of a train in Liverpool Street Station, about an hour ago. The police are in the station still.”

Grey was silent. This was shocking. Had the old man truly came across something of value and as a result found his death? Back in the old days, assassinations were made to look like accidents or suicides on a regular basis. Ephraim’s words set heavy in his mind “Your service is rotten, it is part of it” and a chill went through his spine.

“Grey? Are you there?”

“Yes,” he almost whispered.

“There’s a police officer in the station waiting to brief one of ours. Should I send Potter?”

“I am there. I’ll handle this.”

* * *

It was supposed to be a triumphant day. The Software had been branded a theoretical success, with just a few minor bugs that could be handled by the outsourced team in Romania. Eran, the IT guy from the local office, confirmed that the management was indeed very happy with John, and that the London posting is not in any danger, so far.

Having no direct manager in the London office was a pure advantage. John could easily play hooky when he decided to, and today was a great opportunity to exercise that privilege, since he couldn't let his mind rest from the morning's events. As he was walking on Old Broad Street, heading towards Bank of England, he felt the chill of the British winter penetrating his bones. 'The queen ... where she is seated... they are all standing there behind her.' Was it some sort of incoherent prophecy? He couldn't give this sentence a rest, it made no sense at all. The English papers' websites had already branded the incident "A suicide in a train station", and there were no words written about the two chasers that had frightened the old man. He was terrified. His name was not made public as well, a fact that seemed most peculiar to John, especially if this was a simply suicide.

He entered the big round hall of the Royal Exchange building. What used to be the center of the British financial system was no more than a posh, high-up shopping mall, with a bar in its center. It was grand and luxurious with boutique shops like Tiffany and Bvlgari around it. He greeted the tall French waiter, with whom he was friendly from before, set on the bar, and ordered a Bloody Mary.

Meanwhile, Adam Grey was walking slowly along a small passage off London Wall. The police officer debriefing had been utterly useless. The CCTV in the station did not have footage of the incident: strangely enough it seemed to have stopped recording from early in the morning. The young Met Police officer was more than glad to officially hand the case over to the service, and Grey – having presented himself as from Scotland Yard – had to call the operator again so this could be verified, in case of inquiry. He then received a call from an Inspector Matthews, the

shadow Yard person assigned to the case, who offered help in any means possible. That was a courtesy call, and Grey was all too familiar with such things. That which hath been is that which shall be, and that which hath been done is that which shall be done; and there is nothing new under the sun.

Debriefing TFL (Transport for London) workers was far more fruitful. A tall black guy called Mitchell who had been stationed near the south entrance to the Tube Station, inside the station, had managed to see the entire scene, and gave a description of the two chasers. Mitchell also described a young fellow, who had contact with the chased man. A further look into the CCTV from earlier that morning, a use of the Yard's identification programs, courtesy of Insp. Matthews and a match was found: Yohanan, or Yochanan Daniel, who was currently employed with a tier two working permit visa. All the details showed that the company paying for his visa was just around the corner, and indeed, a brief chat with his coworkers in AlgoTrade advised Grey to check either the guy's serviced apartment near Tower Hill, or the Royal Exchange bar, where he could be found when he was giving the work the "old slipperoo". Grey's gut feeling pointed to the bar.

Grey entered the grand space of the Royal Exchange. The round bar was centered in the middle of it all, and around it were dozens of wooden stools, but only few were occupied. The designer boutiques and jewelry shops around were practically empty, as were the tables scattered around the bar.

Grey moved the chair that was to John's right, and addressed the barkeeper, "house Whiskey, one cube. Thanks."

John glanced at him.

“I suppose it’s a bit early for whiskey” he smiled at John “But I had a rough day, you see, I saw a man killed this morning – just there in the station”.

John raised his eyebrows in bewilderment. But he remained silent.

“I suppose you had a rough morning as well.” he pointed to the nearly empty glass of Bloody Mary in front of John.

“I saw the same thing,” He mumbled, and downed his drink with a brisk movement.

“That’s exactly what I wanted to talk to you about, Mr. Daniel.”

John’s slight apathy quickly changed into pure outrage. “Who are you? How do you know my name?” he protested.

“Easy now, I am one of the good guys,” Grey Said, keeping his deep tone calm. He had miles and miles of interviews and debriefing behind him, he knew every trick in the book, and yet he decided that with Mr. Daniel, the direct approach would be the best. “I didn’t actually see the incident. I was assigned to investigate from the Scotland Yard, as the reports I have received were inconsistent with a simple suicide. I also have a bit of a personal stake – let’s call it that - in the matter.”

“You knew the guy?” John asked

“Yes” he hesitantly answered.

John felt a bit relieved. He thought that the case had been signed, sealed and delivered to the public as a mere incident, as if a drunkard had fallen to the tube or off London Bridge. He would happily cooperate if he thought this would help shed some light on the matter, but he

didn't really know what to make of this morning's events, nor of the brief conversation he'd had with the man, if one can even refer to it as such – "conversation".

"I had a report stating you had direct contact with this man," Grey continued. "Can you tell me in your own words what happened there?"

"He was being chased," John answered.

Grey took a heavy sip from his whiskey, put down the glass and took out a ten pound note from his pocket. "Let's go talk somewhere more private," he said.

- Thanks for reading!

I hope you enjoyed enough to place a pre-order at this link:

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Thank you - Jon

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