

PREOPERATIONAL BACKGROUND

CHACE, TARA F.

For Tara Chace, it was the fall that did it, the absurdly long pause that came between missing the handhold and slamming into the ground. Like all falls that are too far, this one lasted long enough for her to realize what had happened, and what, as a result, would inevitably happen next. It was a moment of perfect clarity; not of vision, but of self-awareness, and Chace saw herself then as she had only four other times in her life. She saw herself as the woman she was, frankly, honestly, without self-pity, judgment, or false modesty. Who she was, who she had been, and who she wished to be.

Then she hit the ground, her back impacting first, followed almost immediately by her skull.

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The first such moment of clarity had occurred when she was only ten years old, the day her mother, Annika Bodmer-Chace, informed Tara that, come the spring, she would be attending a boarding school in Cheltenham, England, and would no longer be living in Switzerland with her mother and father. The conversation – if it could be called such – had occurred in the sitting

room of the Geneva house, with Chace seated in a chair so large it had threatened to swallow her, and her mother on her knees before her, speaking gently and sweetly in French, holding both of her child's hands in her own as she imparted the news. When Chace looked past her mother and out the window, she could see snow falling with a sedate grace.

“For your education,” her mother, told her with the same, bright smile that made men and women alike wonder what other sweet lies and promises it concealed. “You must be educated like a proper lady.”

“Like you?” Chace asked.

The smile broke wide, Annika laughing. At thirty-four, she was a near-perfect mirror for the woman Chace would grow to become, the same golden blond hair and pale sky-blue eyes, strong and fine-boned. The only marked difference were in the first creases of age in her flawless skin, lines made by laughter that Chace would never share.

“No,” Annika said. “A proper lady.”

The understanding had been sudden and complete, then. The cascade of dueling infidelities between her mother and father had reached its breaking point. Chace knew they were separating, and understood that divorce would follow, that it would be ugly, that it would be brutal, and that her mother would never, ever change. She saw in her mother a vision of herself as she might be, selfish and spoiled and utterly oblivious to the pain she inflicted upon others, a woman-child who would never grow up.

Which meant Chace was going to have to, and quickly.

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The second of such moments occurred when Chace was twenty-two, in her last year at Cambridge but down to London for a long weekend with a group of her peers, amongst them the only one she would call a friend, Rachel Beck. This was in the days on the cusp, after the Cold War but before the Global War on Terror, before SIS had been reduced to advertising openly for new recruits. For two years, Chace had been vetted with slow deliberation by the Firm's talent-spotters at the university until, finally, assured of her loyalties, intelligence, and potential, she had been invited to a discrete – read: secret – meeting in a small office situated in the basement of one of London's finer hotels the night before. Chace, who had long since developed a strong suspicion of what was really going on, had attended the meeting, in part to assure herself she'd been correct, but mostly because the secrecy and deception involved had appealed to her.

Arriving for the interview precisely at twenty minutes past three in the afternoon, Chace had found an empty room, two chairs, a table, and a tea set on the sideboard. Touching the pot with the back of her hand, she'd found it scalding hot. She'd ignored the refreshment, taken a seat, lit a cigarette, and had begun contemplating smoking another when a small and rather sad looking man had entered the room. He made no apology for keeping her waiting, and Chace had liked that, because, of course, she'd understood the delay as intentional. She was certain she'd been followed to the meeting, and would've been surprised if she hadn't been under surveillance within the room itself.

The man gave his name as Mr. Smith, and producing a file from his bag, he proceeded to relate a comprehensive and remarkably thorough accounting of her life up to and including that

very day. Everything was laid bare in the most clinical fashion, her family, her friendships, her education, her vices, her lovers, her indiscretions, including one or two that Chace had tried to forget herself. It was a recitation of facts, devoid of all judgment but her own.

Then Mr. Smith had said, “There are those who feel you could be of great service to your country, if you chose to dedicate yourself in such a direction. I speak, Miss Chace, of a lifetime of service, of challenge and sacrifice that will be known to only a very few at the highest levels of Government. It is a life without common recognition, without common reward, but it is, at its heart, greater and more vital. A secret life, to be sure, but one where what you do and say can – not to overstate it – alter the course of history.”

Mr. Smith had paused, perhaps to give Chace the opportunity to speak, but she didn’t take it. After several seconds, he continued.

“Very few people are invited to this calling. Of those who answer, even less actually succeed. You could be one of them.”

Chace remained silent.

“Certainly, this is not a decision to be made with haste,” Mr. Smith said. “By the same token, it is not one that can be indulged. An answer is required before midnight Sunday.”

Chace nodded, smiled, and Mr. Smith recited a phone number for her to remember. If she was interested, she was to call the number and say that she was staying in London for the week. If not, she needn’t bother to call at all.

She left Mr. Smith in the basement, making her way on foot to meet Rachel and the others near Sloane Square, struggling with her thoughts. By the time she reached them, though, she had come to a decision: she would forget Mr. Smith and his phone number, along with everything else he'd said, as well. There was an appeal to the offer, to be sure, and it wasn't a fear of failing that restrained her; she had no doubt that, of those few who were called, she would certainly be one to succeed. But it was that same vanity, ultimately, that held her in check.

She loathed, with passion, the idea of being anonymous.

The dinner that evening had been a typically indulgent affair, catty and gossip-laden, lubricated with alcohol, which Chace enjoyed, and a smattering of recreational drugs, which she eschewed. This was followed by dancing and more drinking at a string of clubs, all of them deemed fashionable for one reason or another. Rachel, unlike Chace, was nouveau riche, and while her father had substantially more money than any number of them put together, to the Sloanes she was not, and never would be, one of them, try though she might, and try heroically she did. While no one was ever overtly unkind to Rachel's face, as soon as her back was turned the knives promptly emerged to carve out a hundred imaginary faults and sins.

To Chace, who'd met Rachel her second year at boarding school and now had known her for over a decade, it was painful to behold; her friend, desperate to believe that she had been accepted, only to be reminded again and again that she would never belong; while at the same time, Chace herself was welcomed with open arms through no effort of her own, simply an accident of birth.

At two in the morning, stumbling into cabs outside of yet another too-dark and too-loud dance club, Rachel had doubled-over vomiting, apparently sick drunk, much to the amusement and relief of Chace's fellow Sloanes. Chace was urged to send Rachel home in a cab so that the party might roll onto its next port of call.

That was the moment. With one hand on Rachel's back, the other holding her friend's hair out of her face, smelling the petrol and alcohol and vomit, hearing this gaggle of inbred and overly privileged young women laugh and mock, Chace saw herself as one of them, and she hated herself thoroughly for it.

She spent the next day nursing Rachel through one of the worst bouts of food poisoning Chace had ever witnessed. That night, with just under an hour to spare, she dialed the number Mr. Smith had given her.

"I'm thinking I'll be staying in London for the week," Chace said.

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The third moment came five years later, as Chace stood on the balcony of Tom Wallace's flat in Gosport, looking out at the lights glimmering on the water, a glass of whiskey in her hand. Wallace stood beside her, and they were both a little drunk and very well fed, and surrounded in the warmth of contented, companionable friendship.

Following her entry to SIS, Chace had been sent to the Firm's training facility in Gosport, near Portsmouth, for the requisite sixteen week induction and education course required of all fledgling spies. The Powers That Be had marked her early on as an analyst due to several factors,

not the least of them being her raw intelligence and the fact that she already spoke three languages outside of English fluently, and could pass as native in both French and German. Her career trajectory had already been planned by the time she'd unpacked her things in the School dormitory. She would complete her training, be posted as a Number Two to some low-priority theatre to get her legs, and provided she acquitted herself well, would be reposted to a more active theatre in due course. She would serve out her tours, and if all continued as planned, would return to London to a job in the Intelligence Directorate, working for the Director of Intelligence, perhaps heading up one of the Desks herself. If she proved particularly brilliant, she might even find herself named D-Int one day.

No one had bothered to inform Chace about this, however, and it was shortly after the introductory lecture, where the hierarchy and divisions of SIS were broken down for all new recruits, that she began asking questions about the Special Section. About those agents who were tasked directly under the Director of Operations. The Special Operations Officers, the ones who worked out of headquarters in Vauxhall Cross, who were expected to dash around the world at a moment's notice. The agents who, when feces sailed en route to fan, were expected to intercept and leave not a trace behind.

They were called Minders, Chace was told, and she'd be much better off forgetting about them, as their life expectancy was short, their pay was horrible, their new boss was a nightmare, and they hardly did real intelligence work, anyway. Minders were to be tolerated, not admired. Minders were an evil, and many argued not even a necessary one. If she thought they were James Bond, she was sadly mistaken, because James Bond didn't exist, and if he did, he'd have died

long ago from terminal stupidity. Wouldn't she much rather continue her studies in cryptography?

Yes, thank you, Chace said, and I'd also like to take the Fast Driving Course, and the Escape and Evasion Course, and Advanced Small Arms Training, please, if you'd be so kind. And Flaps and Seals, of course. And Locks and Safes. And Explosives. And Night Operations. And anything else that you think a Special Operations Officer might need to know.

Right, look, she was told, we can see where you're going with this, and believe us, it's not going to work. First of all, Minders are almost always drawn from the military, understand? Prior experience, prior service, the SAS and Royal Commando blokes, they already know how to kill a man with a set of bicycle clips and a banana, they're halfway there, you see? That's one. And two, forgive us for saying it, but you're a woman. And there's never been a woman in the Special Section, and the new D-Ops, Paul Crocker, sure as Hell isn't going to make you the first. And third, did we mention the part about Minders dying? Because they do that, quite a lot, actually.

So just forget about that, and if you really dedicate yourself to your Russian studies, why, what would you say to being posted to Moscow as the Station Number Two?

By the fourteenth week of the course, it was clear to all who were paying attention that Tara Chace was on her way to being one of the most brilliant agents to ever pass through the School. Her test scores, across the board, were stellar, as was her learning curve and her retention. She went from having never fired a gun to rating as an expert in both small arms and rifles. She became so vicious in hand-to-hand training that her fellow students first loathed, then

actively avoided, sparring with her. When she was sent into Portsmouth on a practical to acquire an asset, given four hours to get from that asset not solely personal details, but also their passport and bank account numbers, Chace not only returned in three with all of the afore-mentioned information, but with her target's Jaguar, as well. That she'd targeted a lieutenant in the Royal Navy who should have damn-well known better was simply the icing on the cake.

So it was that, when Paul Crocker, less than six month in as D-Ops and suddenly down to two Minders because of an unfortunate turn of events in Sudan, saw Tara Chace's file, there was really no decision for him to make. Contrary to what had been said to Chace at the School, Crocker didn't give a rat's ass that she was female; she could do the job, and he needed a warm body. But it wasn't enough that she looked brilliant on paper, and the last thing Crocker could afford in the Section was anyone – man or woman – who fancied themselves the star of their own action film.

Chace was summoned to London for an interview, and by the time it was over, the School had received a call saying that she would not be returning, but instead was being posted to the Special Section immediately as Minder Three. Could they please send along her things?

It was as the new Minder Three that Paul Crocker walked her into the Pit, the basement office where the Special Section made its home, and introduced her to Tom Wallace, Minder One, her Head of Section.

For almost five years, Chace worked with Wallace, initially as Minder Three to his One, then as Minder Two when the desk was vacated. He took her under his wing, taught her everything he knew. He lead her by example, both in the field and in the office, and it was from

Wallace that Chace learned that her most dangerous enemies, her most vicious battles, would be fought in the corridors of Vauxhall Cross and Whitehall, not in Mozambique or Vietnam. They fought together and suffered together and laughed together and worked together and the friendship that grew between them was the most precious and sincere that Chace ever had in her life. It was a friendship of equals, and in a world of secrets, bound by equal parts honesty and trust. They came to know one another at their worst, and at their best.

When Wallace left the Section to teach at the School, it nearly broke her heart, and Chace didn't understand why.

Then she stood on his little balcony in Gosport, watching as he stepped over the window sill to join her, and all the illusions were swept away. She saw him as he was, herself as she was, and she knew she loved him beyond friendship, beyond anything she had ever imagined herself capable of feeling. She loved him absolutely and completely, and she understood that it was returned in full measure, and she saw how frail a thing it was, and how precious.

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The fourth time was when the nurse at the hospital in Keyleigh put her newborn daughter in her arms, the baby girl she named Tamsin, after her father.

The daughter that she and Tom Wallace had conceived less than a week before he was murdered in Saudi Arabia.

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Lying in the mud at the base of the climbing wall, pelted with rain and soaked with sweat, Chace came back into herself, her head still ringing. Atop the wall, Minder Two, Nicky Poole, was shouting down at her, asking if she was all right. Chris Lankford, Minder Three, was already on his way down, and the drill sergeant who oversaw the obstacle course was sprinting towards her, telling her not to move for God's sake, carrying his first aid kit.

Chace closed her eyes, seeing again what had been so obvious, so clear to her, as she'd fallen. It wasn't simply that she'd missed the handhold. It was that her left arm hadn't been able to fully extend to reach it, locking suddenly with the memory of the pain a man in Uzbekistan had caused her almost three years before. Things had gone wrong in Uzbekistan, and she'd ended up in a basement room at the Ministry of the Interior where she'd been stripped, beaten, tortured, and nearly raped.

Now the pain was gone, only exhaustion remaining, and that, too, was being replaced by something else, the sense of a burden being lifted; the flooding relaxation that follows when a struggle has reached its end.

Three times a year, Paul Crocker sent the Minders back to the School for a refresher course. Three times a year, the Minders would spend two days going over what they already knew, acquainting themselves with new techniques and equipment. Three times a year, they would recertify in weapons and hand-to-hand, in cars and explosives and all other manner of tradecraft. Three times a year, they would run the obstacle course, crawling beneath barbed wire through mud and climbing the wall.

She couldn't count the number of times she'd run the course as a recruit. As a Minder, this had been her eleventh.

This was the first time she had ever fallen.

With a smile, Tara Chace resolved that it would never happen again.