SAMPLE CHAPTER

Due North

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THE US KIDNAPPED A FOREIGN PRESIDENT.
WHAT IF THE TABLES WERE REVERSED?

A political thriller about the price of truth, the cost of justice, and the thin line between patriotism and treason.

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ONE

Acceptable Losses

THE ASSET'S NAME WAS Halverson, and he was already dead by the time Major Sophie Duchamp reached him.

Not literally. He was standing in the doorway of a shipping container at the western edge of the Klaipeda freight terminal, wearing a wool coat two sizes too large and the expression of a man who had spent fourteen months deciding how afraid to be. His breath made small clouds in the January air. He was alive in every technical sense.

But the man who had walked into the Stockholm embassy fourteen months earlier. The one with the careful dossier and the careful English and the very specific intelligence about three NATO systems he had been paid to compromise. That man was gone. What stood in the doorway was what remained after the people who had paid him realized he was talking to the other side.

"Rover One to Three." Duchamp kept her voice flat, one eye on the tree line beyond the terminal fence. The wind off the Baltic was doing its level best to strip the warmth out of everything. "Package is visual. Mobile but he's been worked over. We move on my mark."

"Copy." Chen's voice in her ear, steady as soil underfoot. "Four guards on the north perimeter. Two more at the vehicle. One variable near the eastern fence I don't love."

"The variable a problem?"

"Not yet. He's smoking. Smoking men get distracted."

She almost smiled. Fourteen years in JTF2, and she still appreciated Chen when he made the complicated sound workable. It was a kind of gift, less of a reassurance than a recalibration. A reminder that difficult was not the same as impossible.

They went in four minutes later, clean through the northern gap Chen had mapped three times in the preceding forty-eight hours. The guards were good, but they were not expecting anyone, which mattered more than most things. Halverson moved when Duchamp told him to move. He asked no questions and did not slow down, and when one of the eastern guards turned at the wrong moment, Chen was already between them, and then the guard was on the ground and they were back on schedule.

Arsenault was on the eastern perimeter, twenty meters back, covering their withdrawal.

The northern entry and the extraction vehicle were on opposite sides of the terminal; the withdrawal vector ran parallel to the eastern fence for forty meters before it cleared the container line, which was why Chen had flagged the smoking man and why Arsenault was where he was.

The drive to the extraction point took eleven minutes. Nobody spoke. Halverson stared at his hands.

The one variable Chen had not loved was the smoking man near the eastern fence. He made a decision nobody had briefed him to make, and Corporal Arsenault took a round through the upper arm that would have killed him had it landed three centimeters to the left. He lost the arm six days later in a hospital in Landstuhl, Germany, which the surgeons described as the best possible outcome. Arsenault said the same thing himself, with a sincerity Duchamp found she had no way to answer. He had been selected for Joint Task Force Two (JTF2) at twenty-two. That door was now closed.

The mission was a success. That was the official designation. Duchamp wrote it in her report and meant every word, and it was also not the whole truth, a distinction the people who read her reports had learned not to press.

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She was back in Ottawa six days later, and Ottawa in February looks exactly the way it always looks: pale and precise and slightly disappointed in itself. The notification came through channels on the morning of her second Monday back. It wasn't a phone call, not an email, but a memo formatted with the particular care that meant someone senior was being very deliberate about creating a paper trail.

Review Board. Internal. Room 4C, third floor, the building on Bronson Avenue that did not appear in any public directory. Fourteen hundred hours, Thursday.

She knew better than to be surprised. Halverson had been processed and debriefed, and the intelligence he carried turned out to be worth considerably more than one arm; that arithmetic was routine in her profession and which she had learned to sit with. But extracting him through a freight terminal in a Lithuanian port city on a Tuesday night had created friction. That was the word appearing in the preliminary correspondence. Friction.

It meant that the people whose terminal they had moved through were not pleased. It meant diplomatic relationships were involved that sat above her operational brief and always had. It meant the mission had worked, and she was being reviewed anyway, because working was not the same as being convenient, and convenience she was learning mattered more than she had been trained to believe.

Chen called the night before. He did not ask how she was feeling about it, because that was not how they talked to each other. What he said was: "You want me to pull the operational log? I can have it annotated by morning."

"They have the operational log."

"They have their version of it. I can make ours easier to read."

She told him no, leave it as written, and thanked him in the way she had, which was mostly by not saying anything unnecessary. He said he would be in the building if she needed him. She told him to go home.

He did not go home. His vehicle was in the parking lot the next afternoon when she came out.

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The room on Bronson Avenue had three windows painted shut and a table that had hosted these conversations many times before. She could tell by the way the chairs were positioned, angled just enough toward the center to suggest openness while maintaining the geometry of an interview.

Four of them. Duchamp knew two by name. The others were introduced with job titles instead, which meant they were either very important or very careful to appear so. The one who did most of the talking was a man named Forsythe, who had the manner of someone who had spent his career in rooms like this one and considered that an accomplishment.

"We want to be clear," Forsythe said, "that this is not a performance review."

"I understand," she said.

"The operation achieved its objectives."

"It did."

"The concern," he said, pausing with the care of a man choosing between several available words, "is the approach taken. The diplomatic sensitivity of the region. The nature of the facility. The timing, given ongoing negotiations at the bilateral level."

She waited. She had learned to wait in rooms like this one. Forsythe was building toward something, and the thing he was building toward would arrive faster if she did not help him carry it.

"There were conversations happening," he continued, "at a level above your operational brief. Conversations about access, about intelligence-sharing frameworks, about the shape of the relationship going forward. What happened at the terminal complicated those conversations."

She looked at him steadily. "The asset would have been dead by Thursday. The window was what it was."

"We understand that."

"Then I'm not certain what we're reviewing."

Forsythe set his pen down. It was a considered gesture, the kind that signaled he had arrived at the part he had rehearsed. "The question, Major Duchamp, is not whether you made the right call given the information available to you. The question is whether you should have been given that information in isolation from the broader context."

She sat with that for a moment. Outside the painted-shut windows, the city moved with its usual pale efficiency. Somewhere in this building, Chen was waiting in his vehicle with the engine running.

The broader context. She turned the phrase over. What Forsythe meant, and what he was carefully not saying in a room full of people creating a paper trail, was that agreements were being made above her, about access and relationships and what the intelligence-sharing landscape would look like in five years. Those agreements required patience, a willingness to let things develop slowly. Halverson's timetable had been an inconvenience to their timetable, and one man losing an arm to a bullet was a more acceptable loss than a diplomatic conversation losing its momentum.

She did not say any of this. Forsythe knew she understood it. That was what the room was for: to communicate things clearly without stating them.

"We'll be in touch," he said, which meant the review was ongoing, which meant she was stood down pending resolution, which meant the

operation had succeeded and she was being managed.

The drive back to her apartment took twenty minutes. She didn't remember having made it. Coffee got made and ignored, going cold on the counter while she sat at the kitchen table with the city visible through a window that actually opened. She sat thinking about bilateral frameworks and ongoing conversations and broader context, and about Arsenault telling the surgeons it was the best possible outcome.

Someone had decided that patience was the same as action.

She was no longer certain that they were wrong.

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