# The Killing Ground

## Jack Higgins

## Published by HarperCollins

Extract

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Now the field of battle is a land of standing corpses; those determined to die will live; those who hope to escape with their lives will die.

Wu Ch'i

# The American Embassy London

# 1

Blake Johnson was received with courtesy at the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square, as befitted President Jake Cazelet's most important security adviser, the head of a secret White House operation known simply as the Basement. An aide took him to the Ambassador's office, a fine young Marine captain in dress uniform bearing medals from Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan.

'The Ambassador's hosting a cocktail party, mostly for those who weren't invited to Brussels for the conference.'

'And who would that be?' Blake asked.

'The dregs of every embassy in London, Major.'

'I know the feeling. And it's not Major – Vietnam was a long time ago.'

'Once a Marine always a Marine, Major. My dad was in Vietnam, and my grandfather was in North Africa and in Normandy on D-Day.'

'They must be proud of you. That Navy Cross speaks for itself.'

'Thank you, sir. I'll alert the Ambassador.' He went out. Blake helped himself to Scotch from a decanter on the sideboard and moved to the french window opening onto the terrace and looked into Grosvenor Square, the roads shining in the street lights, rain pounding down.

He stood under the canopy, inhaling the freshness, savouring his drink, and the door opened behind him. He turned and it was the Ambassador, Frank Mars, a friend of many years' standing. As little more than boys they'd served together in Nam. Mars shook his hand warmly.

'It's good to see you, Blake, but also a bit of a surprise. I thought you were in Brussels with the President.'

'Well, at first I wasn't going, but the President decided that his meeting with the Prime Minister and President Putin might veer into my territory, so he decided he wanted me in Brussels anyway. I'm meeting Charles Ferguson tonight and we're flying over together.'

Ferguson was the head of the group of special operatives often referred to as the Prime Minister's private army. Blake had run many operations with him, and the tempo had only picked up of late.

Mars topped up their glasses and they stood there, looking into the square. 'All the years I've known this place and now I have to look down at those great ugly concrete blocks

protecting us. The terrorists have accomplished what two world wars could not.'

'Not to mention the Cold War,' Blake said. 'Still, it all helped lead to this, those years of strife, the atomic submarines, the cancer of communism, East versus West.'

'We got it wrong with Berlin in 1945,' said Mars, 'allowing Russia to take the city. That's when they first sensed they could roll over us. I remember the first trip I made behind the Wall in Berlin. It chilled the soul.'

Blake gestured to the left of the square to the statue of Eisenhower on its plinth. 'What do you think he'd make of it? After all, it was he, Roosevelt and Winston Churchill who were responsible.'

'I'd remind you that Joseph Stalin had something to do with it,' Mars pointed out.

Blake nodded thoughtfully. 'And now we have Vladimir Putin. Think the Cold War is on its way back?'

Frank Mars put a hand on his shoulder.

'Blake, old friend, it's not on its way, it's arrived. From the moment Putin became President of the Russian Federation he had an agenda. We've seen it unfold bit by bit, and he's got the money to back it up, all that gas and oil. I think he's capable of anything. And there's something else about him that's very dangerous indeed.'

'And what would that be?'

'He's a patriot.' Mars swallowed his drink. 'But enough of that. Come and let me introduce you to my guests.'

* * *

Most of the guests were not too important, mostly minor attachés of one kind or another; the big fish were either in Brussels already or on the way there. After a little bit of talk, Blake stood in the corner, and soon Mars joined him.

'So, if you're flying off tonight you're not staying at the Embassy house off South Audley Street.'

'Right. My luggage is there, though, and I'm expecting Sean Dillon and Billy Salter to pick me up and deliver me to Farley Field to join Ferguson.'

'Ferguson's promoted young Salter to be an agent in the Secret Intelligence Service, I understand.'

'Yes. Mind you, Ferguson had to obliterate Salter's criminal records from the files to get him in. But he and Dillon make quite a team.'

'You could say that. An East End gangster and the most fearsome enforcer the Provisional IRA ever had. Quite a combination!'

As they talked, Blake noticed someone observing them, a man with Slavic features, an excellent suit and an eager smile. He was going heavy on the vodka, and, as Blake watched, took another from a waiter's tray.

Mars half-turned and murmured to Blake, 'Colonel Boris Luzhkov, senior commercial attaché for the Embassy of the Russian Federation. Of course, he's actually Head of Station for the GRU. They're all *something* else over there. Would you like a word?'

'If I must.'

Mars waved. Luzhkov gulped another vodka and rushed

over, smiled ingratiatingly and shook hands. 'A great pleasure, Mr Ambassador.'

'Why, Boris, I thought you'd be in Brussels.'

'That is reserved for those more important than I.' He glanced inquiringly at Blake.

Mars said, 'Mr Johnson is on his way to Brussels this evening. It seems the President can't talk to your boss without him.'

'Blake Johnson? Mr Johnson, your reputation goes before you.' Luzhkov shook hands; his hand was damp and shook a little.

'Yes, well, just another day at the office,' Blake said, and suddenly had had enough. 'You'll excuse me. I must thank you for the offer of the Embassy house, Frank. I'll stop over another time.'

'Of course.'

Luzhkov watched as Blake went to fetch his raincoat, then immediately went into a corner and called a number on his mobile phone. 'He's on his way now, to the Embassy house. Yes. Do it now.' He switched off and went down to the cloakroom.

Blake refused a car and accepted an umbrella, went down the steps into the square and walked towards South Audley Street. He made a brief call on his mobile and was answered by Sean Dillon in the passenger seat of Harry Salter's Aston Martin. Billy was driving.

'Where are you?' Sean demanded.

'Moving down to the Embassy house. I felt like the walk, the rain, all that stuff. The romance of a great city.'

'You damn fool. You know you're a marked man. Anybody special at the Embassy?'

'As a matter of fact, yes, a guy called Boris Luzhkov, Station Head of the GRU, apparently.'

'Idiot,' Sean said. 'You know the moment you landed here the GRU were on to you, don't you?' He switched off.

'Where is he?' Billy demanded, pulling his hat down.

'Near the Embassy house. Make it fast. Pass him, in fact. Go straight up that little side lane. Turn in there. Whoever's up to no good is probably parked by the house. I'll bail out fast and you can join me. Are you tooled up?'

'What do you think?'

Billy moved out to pass three parked cars and then Blake, the umbrella over his head. They ignored him, moved into the turning by the house and noticed a small sedan. Billy slowed, and Dillon pulled a Walther PPK with a silencer from his raincoat pocket, opened the door of the slow-moving car and rolled out. The car carried on. He pulled open the door of the waiting sedan and menaced the two men waiting inside. One of them was just clutching the driving wheel, but the other had a Browning, which Dillon wrenched from his hand. Billy arrived a moment later, opened the car door and relieved the driver of a Colt .25 from his waistband.

'Here, what is this?' The driver protested. It started, the usual bluster.

'I hate people being stupid,' Billy said. 'Don't you?'

'Absolutely,' Dillon told him, and at that moment Blake turned the corner and approached.

'What's going on?' he demanded.

'Just go and get your luggage and we'll be on our way, idiot,' Dillon told him. 'Get moving.'

'Did I have company? Ah well, I knew I could rely on you two.' Blake laughed and went to the front door of the house.

'Assume the position, both of you,' Dillon said, which they did with reluctance. Billy went through their pockets, did a quick check and found a wad of fifty-pound notes. 'Two thousand,' he said, counting. 'Must have been more originally. Had to be.'

Dillon stuck his pistol in the first man's ear. 'Who put you up to this?'

'Get stuffed,' the man said. He sounded cockney. The driver stayed silent.

'Stupid *and* arrogant,' Dillon said. 'A lethal combination.' And he shot half the man's left ear off.

The man cursed and moaned at the same time, and Dillon said, 'If you want the other one taken care of as well, that's all right with me.' He slipped the two thousand into the man's pocket. 'You can keep this. Just tell me who it was.'

'George Moon,' the man said, gasping. 'Runs the Harvest Moon pub in Trenchard Street, Soho. Farms out work.'

'And pretty dirty work, too, if that old sod's still at it.'

'And who was he representing?' Billy said to the driver. 'You might as well come clean.'

'Russian guy. Moon said he was called Luzhkov. He met

us in a pub in Kensington across the High Street from the Russian Embassy.'

'And the gig was to kill off Blake Johnson.'

'Something like that.'

Dillon gave him his handkerchief. 'It's clean. Now piss off and find a hospital.'

They couldn't get in the car fast enough.

Billy said, 'Nice and generous of you, letting them keep the two grand.'

'It helped grease the wheels, Billy. A little pain, a little reward.'

The front door opened and Blake came out carrying a couple of flight bags. He put them in the back of the car. 'Anybody dead?'

'We wouldn't do a thing like that.'

Blake said, 'Who was it?'

'Couple of small-time hoods, hired by Luzhkov.'

Blake said, 'Interesting. He wouldn't have done that on his own.'

'Don't worry,' Billy said. 'We'll sort that lot out. It'll be a pleasure.'

They drove off. Dillon lit a cigarette and leaned back. 'Foot down to Farley Field, Billy. Ferguson won't be pleased if Blake's late.'

At Farley Field the rain fell relentlessly. Ferguson's pilots, Squadron Leader Lacey and Flight Lieutenant Parry, busied themselves with the aircraft, while the General drank coffee

and a Bushmills whiskey and stood at the window of the small lounge staring out at the rain. He was indeed not best pleased.

'You're late.'

'Well, if you can be bothered to wipe the scowl from your face, General dear, I have news for you,' Dillon told him.

Ferguson's face became wary. 'And what would that be?'

'A couple of gentlemen of evil intent tried to hurry Blake into a better world.'

'Explain. Billy, I need another drink.'

He sampled the Bushmills and listened while Blake watched, amused. 'What I want to know,' said Ferguson, 'is what's with all this bloody game-playing? A third-rate colonel working for Russian military intelligence wants to shoot the President's key security man, and the best he can do is hire these incompetents? Somebody's head is going to roll.'

'All right,' Billy said. 'So where does that get us?'

'Well, obviously we're going to have to look into whoever put Luzhkov up to it, but that will have to wait until I return in four days. After Brussels, Putin visits Germany, and the Prime Minister and the President will be trying desperately to knock some sense into France.'

'I'll be glad to help with the France thing,' Billy said.

'Very funny. I've got something else for you to do. We've had a tip that some very bad actors may be flying in during the next twenty-four hours. Don't know who or from where, but it bears checking out. Sean, you know a lot of these people by sight – you and Billy, go to Heathrow and haunt passport control, see who's flying in from nasty places.

We've got other men there, too, but they haven't got your experience.'

Dillon nodded.

'Meanwhile,' Blake said, 'we have to be off. Coming, General?' He boarded the plane, and Ferguson turned on the steps. 'I'll send the Gulfstream back in case of emergencies. Use it at your discretion if something comes up. You might also want to check in at the Holland Park safe house. Major Roper's just got in a new batch of satellite computer equipment. Very powerful stuff – you'll find it interesting. And Greta's there now – I thought it would be good experience for her.'

He was referring to Major Greta Novikova, once employed by the Russian army in Chechnya and Iraq. Circumstances had made it seem sensible for her to transfer allegiance to Ferguson.

The door closed, the plane started to move, and they walked back to the Aston and drove away. Dillon called Billy's father, Harry Salter, at his pub, the Dark Man.

'Are you on your own?'

'Roper and Greta are here, that's all. Managing a steak with all the trimmings, with Sergeants Henderson and Doyle eating fish and chips in a booth in their best blazers and flannels and trying not to look like military police. Can't say they're succeeding. Are you coming round?'

'No, but you can do me a favour.'

'Anything.'

'Tell Roper that Luzhkov was hanging around having drinks at the Embassy.'

'Huh. Light a match close to that one and the vodka would explode. What a clown.'

'Yes, well, that clown arranged for a couple of nobodies to take out Blake, who was rather foolishly walking down South Audley Street in the rain. Stupid because he knows it's open season on him.'

'Here, we can't have that. What's the game?'

'Oh, Billy and I sorted it with a little ungentle persuasion that left one of them with only half an ear. But it was Luzhkov who laid it on, and our old friend George Moon who did the hiring. Paid them two grand, apparently.' He gave Harry the rest of the details.

'George Moon? I didn't realize he was still breathing. Had a nice little wife, Ruby. She was straight, he wasn't. Right, it's taken care of. Are you coming to the pub?'

'No, Ferguson's got a job for us.'

'Well, enjoy yourselves.' Harry switched off the mobile and nodded across to his two minders, Joe Baxter and Sam Hall. 'I'll have a large Scotch, I'm thinking. Vodka, Greta?'

She was most attractive, wearing a black silk Russian shirt and trousers and knee-length boots. Her hair was tied at the nape of her neck.

'Why not?'

'A large one?'

'Is there any other one for a Russian?'

'Probably not. What about the Major?'

Roper sat in his state-of-the-art wheelchair wearing a reefer coat, his collar turned up to his bomb-scarred face. He

didn't get a chance to say no because Dora brought the drinks on a tray and distributed them.

'Good girl, Dora,' Harry said. 'What are we going to do without you? She'll be leaving in a week. Australia. Got a daughter and two girls. Wants to test the water. Might never come back. Here's to her.'

Greta swallowed her vodka. 'Knock back that whisky,' she told Roper, 'because I know you're eager to get back to your machines. That's all he ever does,' she said. 'Eats sandwiches, drinks a bottle of Scotch a night, smokes, hardly sleeps, and plays around on those damn machines.'

'Yes,' Roper said. 'It's a wonderful life.'

'Let's move it, gentlemen,' Greta called to the military police. 'Take it easy, Harry.'

The policemen took the chair out to the special van, loaded it, and a few moments later drove off to Holland Park.

'Another one, boss?'

Harry shook his head. 'No, I've got a mind to see a bit of action. Remember George Moon?'

'And his boyfriend, Big Harold,' Baxter said.

'A couple of years ago they tried to run Roper into traffic in his wheelchair.'

Sam Hall laughed. 'I remember. The Major shot Harold in the side of the knee and Moon through the thigh. The word to the police was they'd been attacked by muggers. The cops didn't have much sympathy. They would have been only too glad to do it themselves.'

'So what's the point?'

'On behalf of a Russian geezer who is no friend of Dillon

and Billy, George Moon produced a couple of low-lifes who tried to take out Blake Johnson for two grand.'

'Anybody damaged?' Baxter asked grimly.

'One of them left minus half his left ear, and the other one told Dillon the score.'

'So that leaves George Moon in deep trouble.'

'I'd say so.' Harry got up. 'So let's pay a visit to the Harvest Moon, home of the worst pint of beer in London. And make sure you're carrying.'

Trenchard Street was Victorian, and the Harvest Moon even more so. They drove in the Bentley over cobblestones to the pub, with its half moon over the door.

Harry told Sam Hall, 'Wait by the car. Anything could happen in a dump like this.'

Hall nodded, lit a cigarette and paused. At that moment the pub door swung open and a rough voice called, 'I told you to lock up.'

Ruby Moon stepped into the rain trying to put on a mackintosh. Big Harold came out behind her and pulled her hair, making her cry out. 'Cry? I'll make you cry,' he said, and then slapped her twice across the face. 'You need discipline. I'll enjoy taking care of that.'

Harry turned to Joe Baxter. 'Look at that. Neanderthal man come back to haunt us from the Stone Age, and it slaps girls around, too.'

Harold pushed Ruby to one side and she burst into angry tears.

'Won't do,' Harry said and removed his smart military trenchcoat which he placed over her shoulders. 'Do you know who I am?'

Ruby stopped crying. 'Oh God, I think so.'

'Maybe you know my nephew, young Billy?'

'If he's who I think he is, I do.'

'That's good. Slip up to your bedroom. Find a few necessaries, put them in a suitcase and come back. Anything else you can get tomorrow. I'm losing Dora at my pub, the Dark Man at Cable Wharf, and you can take over the bar. Now hurry.'

'But this animal? What's he going to do? He won't let me go.'

'Dear me, I was forgetting.'

Harry offered his hand to Baxter, who passed him a .25 Colt with a silencer, and as Big Harold tried to step back Harry shot him through the fleshy part of the thigh and shoved him back on the step.

'Find him a towel in the gents,' Harry said. 'And you get upstairs, girl.'

She ran into the pub, and Harry and Baxter followed her.

Inside, George Moon was peering through a half-open door, and Harry could see a room lined with books behind him. Moon was small, balding and generally unsavoury and, just now, sweating profusely. He retreated to his desk and sank into a chair.

'Harry, my old friend, is that you?'

'Old friend? You must be bleeding joking.'

Salter put his gun on the table and walked to a sideboard. 'Whisky – a large one, and feel free yourself, Joe.'

'Certainly,' Baxter said.

Moon didn't have the nerve to reach into the desk for his gun. Harry said, 'I'm in a hurry, George, *old friend*. A couple of geezers tried to knock off an actual friend of mine tonight, but Dillon and my boy Billy managed to turn things around.'

'On my life, Harry, I swear . . .'

'Nothing. You pain me in my backside. Just confirm that a Russian named Luzhkov approached you for two hard men.'

'All right. It's true. It was for two grand, and I gave him two men – good men. I was just brokering the deal.'

'For two grand? That's rubbish money these days. Give me the truth.' Harry slapped the Colt across the sweaty face. 'I'll do for you, I swear it.'

'Christ, all right, I'll tell you. They met me in a Daimler in Hyde Park. Luzhkov was driving. The passenger was also a Russian, smoking a cigar, drinking vodka out of a flask, laughing all the time. He had a bad scar from his left eye down to the corner of his nose. He gave me a briefcase with ten grand in it.'

'So you pocketed eight and gave those two guys only two? Very naughty.'

'Harry, I wasn't sure what to do.' He struggled for something good to say. 'I know who the other one was, though. I saw him in the Dorchester Bar one evening and got his name out of a waiter. Max Chekov.'

'Yes, ten thousand quid would make more sense.' Harry turned to Baxter. 'See if the safe works.'

Moon moaned, 'Please, Harry,' but the safe did work and there was even a key in the door. Baxter held up a briefcase. The contents spoke for themselves.

'Excellent. Ruby can buy some nice things. Go and get her into the car.'

'Yes, boss.'

Baxter went out. Harry made for the door, and paused. 'Dear me, I was forgetting. Ruby is leaving you.' He shot Moon through the right thigh. Then he said, 'It would be wise to get some medical help for that. These days terrible things happen – street robberies, guns. It's a shame.' He shook his head. 'Get me?'

He left, the room was quiet, then there was only the sound of the limousine driving away. Moon groaned and reached for the telephone.

In the Bentley, Harry passed the briefcase over. 'You'll need a savings account.'

Ruby examined it. 'My God, this can't be happening.'

'It is happening. You'll do a great job running the pub. I'm never wrong about people. Happy days, sweetheart.'

At Heathrow it wasn't busy, possibly due to the lateness of the hour and, though the customs and passport officers on duty regarded them with deep suspicion, they knew better than to object to Dillon and Billy's presence.

They'd been there a couple of hours, with no one particularly interesting coming through, when a new entry on the arrivals screen caught Dillon's attention.

'Well, look at that, Billy,' he said. 'An old friend. Hazar.'

Billy stopped smiling and shivered a little at the memory of the ordeals they'd gone through in that desolate Middle Eastern country. 'Dear God, Kate Rashid of blessed memory.'

'Is that how you remember her?'

'She was some woman.' Billy shook his head at the thought of the woman who had sworn to kill them, and almost succeeded. 'If I never see that place again I'll be only too happy.'

'A long time ago,' Dillon said. 'But thinking of her brings events flooding back, enough to want to take a look at who's doing night runs from Hazar these days.'

As the queues lengthened, a supervisor called over the loudspeaker for people travelling from Hazar to move to a special section, which they did with surprisingly little fuss.

Caspar Rashid was one of them. His was a tall, handsome man, comparatively light in colour, his chin and mouth covered by a beard that was almost blond. He had one piece of folding hand luggage and a briefcase.

Billy said, 'He looks like a Bedouin.'

'That's because he is, Billy. Let's join him.'

As they approached, the passport officer had already opened the passport and was examining it. 'Mr Caspar Rashid? Address?'

'Gulf Road, Hampstead,' Rashid told him.

'Country of birth?'

'England.'

'Would you like to have a look, sir?' The passport man passed it across, and Rashid waited impassively while Dillon stepped back and examined the pages.

Finally Dillon said, 'Fine,' and handed the passport to Rashid, who gave him a wonderful smile and walked away.

'He has, you would agree, a great smile,' Dillon said.

'Yes, I suppose so, but then he's a good-looking guy.'

'But that isn't why he's smiling. He's smiling because he thinks he's got away with it, and I'm smiling because I've caught him. He's hiding something, Billy. I don't know what, but he's hiding something. Let's go.'

Rashid was tired from the flight, and obviously beyond caution. His vehicle was a red hire car on the ground floor of the car park opposite the exit. Rashid unlocked the door, including the luggage compartment. They were close enough to get a good look when Rashid heaved out the spare tyre and started to lift up the carpet.

'Get him, Billy.' Dillon said. They moved fast, and Rashid turned to face them. Dillon produced his Walther. 'Hands behind your neck. See what you can find, Billy.'

Billy struck gold straight away, lifting out a cloth in which were wrapped a few tools – and a pistol. He held it up.

'.38 Smith & Wesson automatic. Loaded.'

'Cuff him.'

Billy did as he was told. 'Do we take him in?' he asked.

'No. He interests me.'

'Why?'

'You didn't need to be Sherlock Holmes to know he was up to no good. His passport indicates that he arrived in Cairo last week by plane from London. Took a train to Mombasa,

then a ferry from Mombasa to Hazar. He didn't even stay a full day before flying back to London. Why did he do all that? Why not fly from London to Hazar and back?'

'I see what you mean.' Billy nodded. 'Probably because he didn't want to be noticed.'

'And there was a better chance of that by the roundabout route.'

'So why didn't you want to be noticed, Mr Rashid?'

'Because,' Rashid said, his face twisting with emotion, 'I couldn't be. They might have killed me. They might have killed her. I had no choice.'

'Wait a minute,' said Billy. 'Who are we talking about here?'

'Al-Qaeda. And the Army of God.'

A chill ran through them at the mention of the two terrorist organizations.

'What did they want with you?' asked Dillon.

'They called me. The man spoke excellent English and perfect Arabic. He told me I was under surveillance and could be killed at any time. He said I had to think of him as the Broker. He gave me no connecting number, but said they wanted to talk to me in person. That's why I went to Hazar, that's why I took such a roundabout route, they told me no one must know. The gun was given to me in London. It appeared in my desk drawer, but I didn't know what to do with it, and I just wrapped it up in the cloth and stuck it in the car. I'm not a terrorist, you must believe me.'

'But why did they call you?'

Rashid's face contorted again. 'To talk about my daughter.

My beautiful thirteen-year-old daughter, Sara. They were – they were brought in by my father. He is very wedded to the old ways, and when he told us he intended to marry Sara to a cousin, a person we had never even heard of – a thirteen-year-old girl! – we refused, my wife and I. She's English too, a doctor. We refused – and then he just took her. Took her away. And now Sara is in Iraq.'

'Bloody hell,' Billy said.

'Please, I don't know who you are, but you must be with the government in some way. Can you help me? I'm not a terrorist, but I've learned a lot about the Army of God. I can tell you everything I know if you only help me get my daughter back. Please.'

'Take off the handcuffs.' Dillon lit a cigarette. 'Leave his car. We'll use the Aston Martin.'

Billy did as he was told. 'Where to?'

'To see Roper.'