The Increment

Chris Ryan

ONE

Jack Matram ran his eyes across the two men sitting behind him in the car. Simon Clipper was the taller of the pair: six foot three, with short blond hair, green eyes, and a gentle, sloping smile. In his George jeans from Asda, and a blue cotton T-shirt, he blended in naturally with the neat rows of suburban houses stretching into the background. Frank Trench was shorter: about five foot eight, with jet-black hair, blue eyes, a crooked smile.

They had a rugged, easy charm about them. In civilian clothes, the pair of them looked just like any two men on their way down to the pub. Perfect, decided Matram.

Twelve months into their two-year tour of duty with the Increment, Matram knew he could rely on them. Clipper had eleven assassinations under his belt, Trench eight. All of them had been textbook. Lie in wait, move in quickly, dispatch the target, and come back to base without even breaking into a sweat.

They would do what they were told. Killers didn't come any better trained than these two.

'Barry Legg,' said Matram softly. 'That's the name of tomorrow's target.'

Clipper and Trench looked down at the photo Matram had just handed each of them. Maybe thirty-five, with brown hair and a round face, he looked as unremarkable as the modern housing estate on the outskirts of Swindon where he was now living. Both men folded the picture in half, tucked it into the breast pockets of their shirts, then looked silently back up at Matram.

'On Wednesday, his son Billy has after-school football practice,' said Matram. 'It's about a mile across open fields from this estate to the training ground. The practice finishes at seven, but Legg likes to watch the boys kicking a ball about so he's usually there a bit early. He should be passing this precise spot sometime around six tomorrow evening.'

He paused, pointing out towards the fields. 'You'll be waiting here for him. Follow him into the field, then kill him. He shouldn't give you any trouble.'

Clipper nodded. 'Will he be alone?'

'Almost certainly,' answered Matram. 'If he isn't, you may have to take out whoever is with him as well. But I'll be watching from a distance. If I don't like the look of anything, you'll hear from me.'

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'Guns OK?' said Trench. 'Or knives?'

'Guns,' said Matram. 'I want this done fast, and I want it done clean.'

He glanced down at his watch. It was just before seven, and the evening light was already starting to fade. In the distance, he could see a pair of young mothers lugging their buggies home. Past them, two guys were walking towards the pub for an early-evening drink. Another quiet night in the Swindon suburbs.

The sound of glasses being clicked together and of chicken and steaks frying on the grill greeted Matt as he stepped into the back room of the Last Trumpet. He pulled the sweat-stained T-shirt off his back, chucking it towards the pile of dirty clothes stacked up in the washroom.

A shower, and then a beer, he decided. Looks like a fine evening ahead.

The run had done him good. It had been a hot start to the summer along the southern Spanish coast. Now it was June, the temperatures were hitting the early forties. A five-mile jog along the beach had left him drained and dehydrated but also sharpened up his mind. That was what Matt liked about running. As you pushed your muscles, you also pushed your mind.

In truth, there wasn't much to worry about, Matt had reflected as his feet pounded against sand that had baked bone dry in the midday sun. There was money in the bank from what he had promised Gill was absolutely the last job he would ever go on. Their debts on the Last Trumpet were all paid off, and although the bar and restaurant only ticked over financially during the winter and spring months, it should start making some real cash over the summer. The hard core of regulars, mostly Londoners who had decamped to the Costa del Sol for a few years, meant it could always break even: the tourists who tumbled off the easyJet flights into Malaga through July and August, their pockets bulging with euros, provided the profits for the year. It was a solid, dependable business, one that could be relied upon to make a good enough living to support a family. And the house they were building half a mile down the coastline was almost finished. True, JosŽ and his gang of Moroccans who actually seemed to do all the building work for him had slipped a bit on their deadlines. But a Deptford boy like Matt wasn't going to get worked up about a few cowboy builders. Everyone has to make a living, he told himself. And right now, he could afford a few extra expenses.

I've hit the good groove. All I have to do now is hold that note.

He stepped out of the shower. The water was dripping off his shoulders as he wrapped the towel around himself, and started searching around for a clean pair of chinos. Matt paused, as he felt a pair of warm lips brush against the back of his neck. He remained still, letting her tongue tickle the back of his ear. Slowly, his hands moved backwards, pulling her groin closer towards him.

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'Let me guess,' he said, still not turning round. 'It's that slapper from Reading I saw at the back of the bar. Fresh off the Luton flight, too many cocktails, not enough sun cream, and now completely off her face even though it's not even sunset. We'll have to make it a quick one, babe. My fiancée's knocking about the place somewhere.'

Gill gripped him tighter, her arms circling around his chest. 'And what would this fiancée of yours say,' she whispered, 'if she caught you with another girl?'

Matt chuckled. 'Chop us both into little pieces. Got a bit of a temper.'

Matt turned round, kissing Gill on the lips. Her fingers ran along his chest, slipping into the towel he had wrapped around his waist. The flimsy white cotton dress she was wearing flapped in the light breeze blowing in from the sea, and as Matt ran his fingers along her back, he could feel her skin softening beneath his touch. He buried his face into her neck, pulling her body tight in close to his. Her hair fell across his face, stroking his skin.

No matter how many times we make love, she is always fresh and different each time. Maybe that's why I'm marrying her.

With one swift movement of his hand, the strap holding the dress broke away. It dropped to the floor, and Gill stood naked before him.

The bar was livelier than Matt had expected. A Tuesday night, you didn't always get that many people. The English along the coast got hammered at the weekend, then slowly nursed themselves back into shape. It wasn't until Wednesday they started drifting back into the bars and restaurants, and it was Friday before they were ready for a long session. They might be a thousand miles from home, but their drinking habits, along with their accents, never changed.

He recognised several of the faces. Bob, an ex-army guy who worked as a security consultant for some of the Russian tycoons who had houses along the coast. Sharing a pint with him was Keith, an old London lawyer who'd spent the first half of his working life as a prosecutor trying to extradite some of the villains who lived out in Spain, and was now spending the second half defending them from getting shipped back home. There were men growing comfortably old while Keith spun out appeal after appeal, and some of them were regulars here as well.

We ask no questions, Matt had decided when he first opened the bar. Any man who can settle his bill is welcome at the Last Trumpet.

At one of the tables looking out on to the sea, Matt could see Penelope and Suzie. The more times Suzie dropped the phrase 'late thirties' into her conversation, the more you knew she was never going to blow out that number of candles on her birthday cake again. Both women had been divorced in the last two years, and they were sharing a bottle of Chilean white. Matt didn't need to listen to know what they were talking about. They were complaining about their ex-husbands, and gossiping about any new available men who might get snapped up.

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Many of the villains along the Spanish coast traded in their wives every time a fresh job hauled in a new lump of cash. These two were like a pair of late-model Ford Sierras: still useful for getting around in, but there wasn't much demand now their men had all upgraded to Mondeos.

But, of course, whatever their faults, Matt found it hard to dislike anyone who spent money in his bar.

One man he didn't recognise. About forty, running to fat, with sandy-blond hair. He was sitting by himself, drinking a glass of port, a rare drink among the bottled beers and cocktails with bright hats. He was wearing a crisp white linen suit, and a sea-blue cotton shirt, open at the neck, and with the initials GA embroidered into the cuff. He stuck out like a mackerel in a butcher's shop, Matt reflected.

A copy of that day's Wall Street Journal was lying open on the table, but he wasn't reading it. He was just looking out at the waves, his expression confident and peaceful. Matt could see Suzie throw a glance at the fat man.

Checking out the suit and the paper. Nobody reads the Wall Street Journal for laughs. It means they have money. And that's what she finds attractive in a man. 'You think it's hot here, you should see what it's like back at home,' said Bob, handing Matt a bottle of San Miguel.

He took a hit of his beer, his first of the week. Like most of his customers Matt tried to keep his head clear Sunday and Monday. Back in south London where he grew up, his dad had known lots of men who owned pubs, and he'd passed on some advice when Matt talked about opening this place. 'Nobody ever went broke owning a bar, that is unless they take to the drink themselves.'

'What's happening back in Britain?' said Matt.

With the work he'd been doing, getting the bar's accounts straight, and getting the new house sorted, Matt had hardly opened a newspaper in a week. Prince Charles could have been caught in bed with Posh Spice, and Beckham could have left her for Nancy Dell'Olio for all he knew. Anyway, after checking the City pages to see how his portfolio of shares was coming along, Matt had little time for the papers. The longer he stayed out of Britain, the more trivial many of the headlines seemed. He had his own life out here. He had the sea, fresh air and money in the bank. That was all that mattered.

'Heatwave,' said Bob. 'Phew, what a scorcher and all that! Thirty-nine in London yesterday apparently, the hottest day ever. Couple of tube trains broke down. Hundreds stranded for hours underground.'

'Record jams on the road,' said Keith, looking up from his two-day-old copy of the Daily Mail. 'Everyone was heading down to the coast to try and cool off. There were tailbacks of four or five hours on the M32 down to the Kent coast. Ambulances had to come along the hard shoulder giving people bottles of water. Then some soldier somewhere lost it completely, started shooting.'

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Bob drained his bottle of beer and ordered another one. 'The whole country's falling apart. We're better off out here. Say what you like about the Spanish, you can move about a bit on the roads.'

'What happened to the soldier?' asked Matt. 'Anyone we know?'

Keith shook his head. 'Can't remember the details. Some guy in Shropshire. Engineers Corps, out a couple of years I think. Topped his wife and stepchild, then did himself.'

Matt gazed out into the sea. The waves were crashing into the rocks in the bay that tumbled down from the foot of the restaurant. In the distance, he could see a pair of trawlers hauling in their nets, making the first catch of the night. The moon was rising in the sky, its light merging with the embers of the sun fast disappearing over the horizon. Some clouds were forming in the distance - the big, thick thunderclouds that drifted across from the North African coastline all through the hot summer months. It doesn't matter what's happening at home, he reflected. We're a long way from it all here.

'When's the wedding, Matt?' said Keith.

'September sixth,' replied Matt. 'A bit cooler by then. Otherwise, I'm going to be sweating like a pig. Gill will get one whiff of me and run screaming from the church.'

'She will anyway,' said Keith, 'if she's got any sense.'

Is there any truth in that? wondered Matt. The wedding was only two months away now. A full-blown affair back in south London where they had grown up together. Matt wasn't particularly looking forward to it. The service was scheduled for four, then a reception that would last all evening. Damien, Gill's brother and Matt's best friend from his childhood, would be the best man. A couple of hundred people were coming. Why so many, Matt wasn't sure. Left to him, the list wouldn't have come to more than a dozen people. But Gill wanted it that way. Second cousins, great-aunts, the girl she did a French exchange with when she was twelve; it seemed vitally important to her that they were all there on the day.

After breaking up with her once, I can't make it difficult for her again.

'Matt Browning.'

From the tone of the voice, it was hard to tell whether it was a question or a statement. Matt looked round. It was the man in the white suit. He was looking straight at him.

'Yes. Who are you?'

'My name is Guy Abbott. We need to talk.' The man paused, looking towards Bob and Keith. 'In private.'

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Matt followed him reluctantly towards the back of the restaurant. He didn't like the look of Abbott, and he could feel Penelope's and Suzie's eyes tracking them as he walked across to a table tucked into the far corner of the dining patio. A mosquito was crawling over the table. Without blinking, Matt hammered his fist down on to it.

A way of saying, I wish I could do the same to you.

'Nice place you got here,' said Abbott. He pulled out one of the black metal chairs and sat down. 'If I was a cockney gangster with a taste for leathery blondes and overcooked chicken this would be the place I'd come. Bloody marvellous.'

Matt sat down, resting his forearms on the table. 'Who are you?'

'Like I told, you, the name's Guy Abbott. I work for a little outfit based in Vauxhall. Big green and beige building. I think you'd recognise it if you saw it.'

He fished a cigarette from his pocket, sticking it into his mouth, holding the flame of his lighter a few inches from his face. Its pale light illuminated his blotched, reddish complexion: the skin of a man who spent too much of his time behind a desk. 'You've got an account with our firm, my old fruit. And we'd like you to settle it.'

Matt looked away. The clouds were drawing closer, and somewhere out at sea he could hear the rain starting to fall. The Firm was what everyone in the regiment called it, or British Intelligence to give it its proper title. That was what he was talking about. Of that there could be no question.

I always knew they would come back for me. One day. When they wanted something.

More than a year had passed since the last job had finished. Matt and four men had done a hit on al-Qaeda, organised by the Firm. They had taken thirty million dollars in gold and jewels from a boat running the gear across the Mediterranean for the terrorists. It had been worth ten million after it was fenced. But Matt came within an inch of losing his own life.

We kept the money. And we kept some bad memories as well.

He looked back up at Abbott. 'There's no account. I don't know what you're talking about.'

Abbott smiled, revealing a set of crooked teeth. 'Why don't we get a drink? It's much more civilised to discuss these things over a glass of wine. You must have some decent stuff at the back of the bar somewhere. A nice Rioja, or something.'

Show-off, thought Matt, as he walked back to the bar. He took a bottle of red from the case, and started looking for the corkscrew. He knew exactly where it was, but made a show of searching around. I need to buy myself some time - decide how to handle this.

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He'd always known there would be a reckoning one day. For himself, he had no regrets about what he'd done. The money was rightfully his. But that didn't mean the Firm would see it that way. The Firm wasn't like that.

Matt wrenched the cork free from the bottle, grabbed two glasses and started walking back towards Abbott. A dozen different thoughts were racing through his mind. What could they want? Another mission? How could they hope to make him cooperate? They knew he wasn't going to go back to fighting. He had money in his bank account, his own business, and he was about to get married. He was his own man now.

Just act like one of those helpline people you call up when your computer's broken. Whatever he wants, tell him he can't have it.

'You can have a drink,' said Matt, 'but that's as far as it goes. Whatever it is you want me to do, I'm not interested.'

Abbott poured himself a glass of the wine, swilling it around, then putting it to his lips. He sipped delicately, as a woman might. 'Decent drop, this. You have to come to Spain to get a reliable Rioja, don't you think? The stuff we get at home just tastes like some Aussie muck with a few oak leaves chucked in.'

Matt leant forward on the table. 'If I want a wine guide, I'll buy a book.'

'I know everything, Matt. I know about the raid on the boat. I know about the money that went missing. The lot. It's all back on the files at head office.'

He paused, lighting up another Dunhill. 'And I don't mind. The Firm's not cross, Matt. Not in the least. We like your style. You gave a good account of yourself. Al-Qaeda was relieved of a lot of money, and we cracked open their network in Britain. There were a few hiccups along the way, but then who ever heard of a job that ran smoothly. If there wasn't some trouble involved, they wouldn't call it work, would they?' Abbott took a deep drag on his cigarette, blowing the smoke up into the air. 'We like you so much, we were wondering if you might be able to do something else for us.'

'Thanks,' snapped Matt. 'But take a look around. I'm in a different trade now.'

'Ah, yes. The Jamie Oliver of the Costa del Crime. But it's not really you, is it, Matt? You're a man of action. If this was the life you wanted, you'd have signed up for Little Chef instead of the army. You'd have been a regional manager by now.' Abbott took another long, slow sip on his wine. 'But that's not what you want, is it? You know the worst thing a man can do? Some people reckon it's lying, others cowardice, but that's all nonsense. The worst thing a man can do is be untrue to himself. And that's what you're doing, Matt. You're a man of action, not a bloody chef and barman. This is no life for you.'

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Matt smiled. A heavier breeze was blowing in from the sea now, and the clouds were drawing closer. Soon the rain would be upon them. 'I didn't realise the Firm was moving into pop psychology. Look, whatever it is you're after, I'm not interested. I've served my country, and I've got the scars to prove it. I look after myself these days.'

'Don't you want to know what it is, Matt?' There was a hint of humour in Abbott's voice, as if he was teasing him. 'At least hear what the job is.'

Matt leant back on his chair. There was something odd about Abbott's manner, something he couldn't quite place. He didn't have much experience of senior intelligence officers, but this was not how they usually appeared. Abbott was less smooth, and a lot more colourful. 'Let me ask you a question.'

'Fire away, old fruit.'

'What's the difference between the Firm and a whorehouse?'

'I think I've heard this one before,' said Abbott.

'I'll tell you,' continued Matt, ignoring him. 'In a whorehouse they take their clothes off before they fuck you.' He leant forward. 'Now, I can say it in Spanish, French, German, any damned language you like. I'm not interested. Understood?'

'OK,' snapped Abbott, 'play it your way, Browning. You got an office around here? Somewhere we can access the Internet? I want to show you something.'

Matt walked slowly back through the bar. It was filling up now, and he nodded to a couple of the regulars sitting down to dinner. One person said something, but Matt walked straight past. He was in no mood for talk. A feeling was already growing in the pit of his stomach: whatever Abbott had to show him, he wasn't going to like it.

The office was a simple annexe to the main kitchen, at the back of the building. Matt kept a desk, plus a swivel chair and a bunch of files. A Spanish accountant came in once a week to handle the books, and Janey, the manageress, did the rest of the paperwork. The papers spread across the desk were mostly architect's drawings for the new house. The computer Matt mainly used for checking his bank accounts and sending emails. He'd played the stock markets in the past but had given that up now. Like everyone else he knew, he'd lost too much money.

'This thing work?' said Abbott, pointing towards the computer.

Matt nodded.

'Switch it on, old fruit. You'll be wanting to check your bank accounts.'

Matt could feel his blood freezing. He leant across the desk, flicking the power switch on the Toshiba laptop. It took a moment to boot itself into life. Matt could hear Abbott breathing behind him, but he didn't want to look round, nor did he want to catch the man's eyes.

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If the bastard's messed with my money, he'll be lucky to get out of here alive. The fish in the ocean could always use some fattening up. There's plenty of spare meat on this guy.

Matt clicked on to the web connection. 'How do you know I bank on the Internet?' he asked, without looking back at Abbott.

'Just open it.'

'You've looked already, haven't you?' Now Matt turned round to face Abbott. 'You've no bloody right.'

'Like I said, open it,' said Abbott carefully. 'You'll discover my position gives me the right to do anything I damn well please.'

The computer was humming into life. On the screen the HSBC logo was displayed. Matt keyed in his details, then the password. The account came on to the screen. Matt pressed on Statement, the command disappearing down the modem. Within seconds, the total was flashed up on the monitor.

Zero.

He pressed Refresh on the web browser. Might as well make sure.

Zero.

Matt drew a deep breath. He clicked on the statement. The last two transactions were the hundred euros he had taken out of the cash machine in town three days ago, and a cheque for £650 he'd sent off three days ago to settle his accountant's bill.

After that, the account just dropped from a balance of £12,287 to nothing. There was no explanation. Just an empty row of noughts.

'Check the other accounts,' said Abbott.

Matt remained silent. He had two other accounts at the bank, both of them accessible online: one was a deposit account where he was keeping some of his spare cash, earning a miserable couple of per cent interest a year. The other was a dealing account, where he'd put the bulk of his money into a series of rock-safe bond funds. It didn't earn much of a return, but at least it was still there. Until now.

'They're empty,' said Matt, not looking away from the screen.

'Empty as the jolly old Gobi Desert on a Sunday afternoon,' said Abbott. Matt could tell he was pleased with the stunt he'd just pulled. Now he was walking round to face Matt, and sitting on the edge of the desk. A small cloud of cigarette smoke was wafting above him.

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'Great bunch of boys, al-Qaeda. Ever since the events of September 11, my lot have more power than we know what to do with. Want an account blocked anywhere in the world, you just put in a request and they do it faster than you can say Osama bin Laden. None of that boring old stuff about proving reasonable suspicion.' Abbott leant closer into Matt's face. 'The accounts get frozen, and your bank won't even tell you. Right now, you haven't a penny in the world, old fruit.'

Matt moved back in his chair. Sweat was starting to form on the back of his neck. He'd faced many different types of danger in his life, and most of them he could meet with equanimity. But he'd been born poor, and like many people who started with nothing, he feared going back to the gutter.

I've done my time there, and I don't want to repeat it.

'What do you want me to do?'

'Like I said, there's a job that needs doing. You're the right man for it.'

Matt stood up. He walked across to the window. The rain had moved in further from the coast, and was spitting against the bar. Penelope and Suzie had grabbed their wine bottle and rushed inside. The few customers at the Last Trumpet were huddling for shelter around the bar.

'I've been broke before, and survived,' said Matt. 'Money comes and goes. I've made it before, and can make it again. Doesn't matter how many times you block my account, you can't make me do something I don't want to.'

'You're not thinking straight, Matt.' Abbott nodded towards the window. 'It's not just about some money in an account. With just one phone call I can have you charged with murder. Oh, and that pretty little fiancée of yours. Gill. I reckon she must be an accessory to murder as well. At least.'

Matt stepped forward, the veins in his face bulging. 'I risked my life for my country on that job,' he said, his voice low, determined. 'I should have got a bloody medal. But I just wanted to be left alone to get on with the rest of my life.'

Abbott nodded, a smile creasing up his lips. 'Should have asked for the medal, old fruit,' he replied. 'Medals we can do. Glory and honour? That can all be arranged. We might even run up a statue if you ask nicely enough. But leaving people alone?' He shook his head. 'No, we can't do that.'

A fresh cigarette jabbed into his mouth, Abbott moved towards the open door. He pulled the collar of his linen jacket up around his neck to protect him from the rain, then looked back at Matt. 'So here's the deal. You be a good boy and do what we ask you to do. Then we'll unfreeze your accounts, and we'll make sure you get a pardon for any connection you might have had with any unpleasantness. Then again, you can turn me down. You're a free man, and I can't make you do anything you don't want to do. But your money will remain frozen, you'll be a penniless bankrupt, and

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you and Gill will be charged with murder.' He stepped out into the rain. 'Think it over, and let me know tomorrow.'

Matt turned round, sitting back down at the desk. Taking the mouse in his right hand, he clicked open his account again. Still zero. He clicked on to the other accounts. Zero.

It doesn't matter how many times you look at it. The number's always the same.

His fist smashed down on the side of the desk. The computer shuddered as the force of the blow ricocheted through the machine, and a pair of folders fell to the floor. He wanted to run after Abbott, and beat some respect back into him. Abbott talked tough, but his flesh looked weak and flabby: a few hard blows would level up the score.

Get a grip, Matt commanded himself. Sure, you could probably kill the jerk with a pair of well-placed bare-knuckle jabs just below the temple. He'd seen it done, and he'd have no qualms about taking Abbott down. But it would make no difference. One Abbott would be followed by another, then another. The Firm had an endless supply of them.

No. If I'm going to fight my way out of this corner, I have to do it with my mind, not just my knuckles.

He stood up, and walked out of the office. Somewhere near the bar he could hear Gill calling for him, but he ignored her. Kicking away his shoes, he took the shirt from his back. Dressed only in his shorts, he jumped down the small, rocky pathway that led down from the restaurant to the sea.

The rain was beating fast against the beach as Matt climbed down. He could feel the tepid water seeping into his skin. Maybe the storm will come down hard, and blow that bastard away.

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