

THE CLEANER



**THE
CLEANER
MARK DAWSON**



WELBECK



Published in 2020 by Welbeck Fiction Limited, part of Welbeck Publishing Group
20 Mortimer Street London W1T 3JW

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN: 978-1-78739-462-9
Trade Paperback ISBN: 978-1-78739-471-1

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd., Croydon, CR0 4YY

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Prologue

The road through the forest was tranquil, the gentle quiet embroidered by the gurgling of a mountain rill and the chirruping of the birds in the canopy of trees overhead. The *route forestière de la Combe d'Ire* was potholed and narrow, often only passable by just one car at a time. Evergreen pine forests clustered tightly on either side, pressing a damp gloom over the road that was dispelled by warm sunlight wherever the trees had been chopped back. The misty slopes of the massif of the Montagne de Charbon stretched above the treeline, ribs of rock and stone running down through the vegetation. The road followed a careful route up the flank of the mountain, turning sharply to the left and right and sometimes switching back on itself as it traced the safest path upwards. The road crossed and recrossed the stream, and the humpback bridge here was constructed from ancient red bricks, held together as much by the damp lichen that clung to it as by its disintegrating putty. The bridge was next to a small enclosure signed as a car park, although that was somewhat stretching the truth; it was little more than a lay-by cut from the hillside, a clearing barely large enough to fit four cars side by side.

It was a quiet and isolated spot, the outside world excluded almost as if by the closing of a door.

Milton had parked his Renault there, nudged against the shoulder of the mountain. It was a nondescript hire car; he had chosen

it because it was unremarkable. He had reversed into the space, leaving the engine running as he stepped out and made his way around to the boot. He unlocked and opened it and looked down at the bundle nestled in the car's small storage space. He unfolded the edges of the blanket to uncover the assault rifle that had been left at the dead drop the previous night. It was an HK53 carbine with integrated suppressor, the rifle that the SAS often used when stealth was as important as stopping power. Milton lifted the rifle from the boot and pressed a fresh twenty-five-round magazine into the breech. He opened the collapsible stock and took aim, pointing down the middle of the road. Satisfied that the weapon was functioning correctly, he made his way towards the bridge and rested it in the undergrowth, out of sight.

Milton had scouted the area and knew it well. To the north, the road eventually led to Saint-Jorioz, a medium-sized tourist resort that gathered along the shore of Lake Annecy. The descent to the south led to the small village of Chevaline. The village made its living from farming, but that was supplemented by renting the picturesque chalet farmhouses to the tourists who came for cycling and hiking. Milton had stayed in just such a chalet for the past three days. He had spent his time scouting the area, departing on his bike early in the morning and returning late at night. He had kept a low profile, staying mostly inside the chalet apart from those trips out.

Milton heard the engine of the BMW long before he saw it. He collected the rifle and slipped behind the trunk of an oak, hiding himself from the road but still able to observe it. The wine-coloured estate car was in second gear, struggling a little with the steep camber of the road. It emerged from the sharp right-hand turn, its lights illuminating a path through the gloom.

The car slowed and turned in towards the Renault. Milton held his breath, his pulse ticking up, and slipped his index finger through the trigger guard of the rifle. The driver parked alongside

THE CLEANER

and switched off the engine. Milton could hear music from the interior of the car. The passenger-side door opened, and the muffled music became clearer: French pop, disposable and inoffensive. The passenger bent down and spoke sharply into the car, and the music was silenced. For a moment, all Milton could hear was the crunch of the man's shoes on the gravel, the rushing of the water, and the wind in the leaves. He tightened his grip on the rifle and concentrated on keeping his breathing even and regular.

The driver's side door opened, and a tall, dark-skinned woman stepped outside.

Milton recognised both of them. The passenger was Yehya al Moussa. The driver was Sameera Najeeb.

He stepped out from behind the oak and brought the HK53 to bear. He flicked the selector to automatic and fired off a volley of shots. The bullets struck Najeeb in the gut, perforating her liver and lungs. She put her hand to her breast, confusion spreading across her face, and then pivoted and fell back against the side of the car. Yehya shrieked, moving quickly, ducking down beneath the line contour of the car. Milton took two smooth sidesteps to his right to open up the angle again and squeezed off another burst. The scientist was trying to get back into the car; the bullets tattooed his body in a line from throat to crotch.

The fusillade sounded around the trees for a moment. Frightened birds exploded into the air on wingbeats that sounded like claps. The echo of the reports died and faded away, and then, short moments after the brutal outburst of violence, all was quiet again: the wind rustled through the trees, the water chimed beneath the bridge, a nightingale called from high above.

Milton paused. There was another sound.

A second car approaching.

Hiding would have been pointless; the bloody tableau would give him away. The car emerged from the mouth of the forest.

It was a Renault Mégane painted blue with white and red chevrons screen-printed across the bonnet. The policeman in the front of the car must have seen him immediately. The Mégane came to a sudden stop fifty feet away.

Milton ejected the magazine and slapped in a replacement.

The officer opened the door and stepped out of the car, his hand on the butt of his holstered pistol. "*Arrêt!*" he called out.

Milton did not pause to think. His reaction was hard-wired, a response that had been so drilled into him across years of combat that now it was automatic, an expression of muscle memory without conscience, sudden and terribly deadly. He swung the rifle around and squeezed the trigger for a longer burst. The car was peppered with bullets, half a dozen slamming into the radiator and bonnet, another handful into the windscreen. The officer was struck in the face and chest, stumbling backwards and then dropping onto his back, where he lay for a moment, twitching horribly. Milton walked towards him, the gun cradled low, and put a final bullet into his head. Finally, the man lay still.

Peacefulness returned, ornamented now by the sound of the shards of glass that fell to shatter on the road from the breached windscreen.

Milton crossed the road to the Renault. He opened the boot and wrapped the rifle in its blanket, then stowed it away carefully beneath the spare wheel in the false floor. He pulled on a pair of latex gloves and collected the ejected shell casings from the rifle. There were forty of them, and they were still hot to the touch. He dropped them into a small evidence bag. He crouched by Najeeb's body and frisked her quickly and efficiently. He found her smartphone and a USB stick and bagged them both.

He went around to the other side of the car and lowered himself to examine al Moussa. The door was open, and as he raised his gaze from the body to peer inside, he saw a small, pale face staring

THE CLEANER

back out at him. Milton did not rush. There was no need. The face belonged to a young boy, perhaps five or six years old. His skin and his hair were dark, and his features recalled those of his parents. He was cowering in the foot space, a streak of blood across his forehead as if it was paint that had been thrown over him. It was not his blood: it was blowback from his father.

Milton reached for the Sig Sauer he carried in his shoulder holster, his fingers brushing against the butt. The boy held his eyes. His face was white and quivering with fright, but he did not look away. He was brave. Milton felt a swell of vomit in his throat as his memory cast him back twenty years and a thousand miles away. He remembered another young boy, a similar age, the face peaceful despite the obscenity of his death.

He lowered his hand from the Sig and stepped back. He gently pulled the man's body onto the muddy surface of the lay-by and went back to the car.

"Stay there," he told the boy. "Help is coming."

He closed the door. He checked that he had removed the evidence of his presence and, satisfied, got into the Renault, put it into gear and drove away.

He turned to the north, upwards, and drove towards the lake.



PART ONE
THE CLEANER



The man was on the bed, his hands clenched into claws over his heart and his teeth grinding over and over again. His eyelids flickered, and sometimes he moaned, strangled words that would have made no sense if anyone had been there to hear them. His body was rigid with tension, sweat drenching his body and the sheets. The dream came more often now, sometimes every night, always the same. He was lying prone, flat in the cushioned warmth of sand dunes. The sun was directly above him, a midday sun that pounded the desert with a brutal heat that made the air shimmer, the mountains in the distance swaying as if viewed through the water of a fish tank. The landscape was arid, long swathes of dead sand that stretched for as far as the eye could see. The only vegetation was close to the banks of the slow-moving river that eventually found its way into the Tigris. A single ribbon of asphalt was the only road for miles around, deep drifts of sand blown across it.



Chapter 1

Control squinted through the windscreen of the Jaguar XJS as he pulled into the empty fast lane and accelerated past a lumbering articulated lorry. The sky had been a bloody crimson last night, and when the sun returned in the morning, it had risen into a clear, untrammelled blue sky. There was heat and light in those early rays, and he angled the blind to shade his eyes. The radio was tuned to the *Today* programme and the forecaster predicted a week of searing heat. The seven o'clock news followed the weather—the lead item was the shooting of two tourists and a policeman in the French Alps. The victims had been identified, but as yet, a motive for the killing had not been found. It was “senseless”, a French policeman concluded.

That, Control thought, was not true. It was far from senseless. The operation had been the result of long and meticulous planning, six months spent cultivating the targets and gaining their trust and then weeks setting up the meeting. The objective had been successfully achieved, but it had not been clean. There were two errors that would need careful handling, errors that raised doubts over the performance of the man who had carried out the operation.

The fact that it was Number One was troubling.

It had been Control's operation. He knew the targets intimately. Yehya al Moussa had been an atomic research scientist. Sameera Najeeb was an expert in microwave technology. They were married,

and until recently, both had been in the employ of the Iraq Atomic Energy Agency. Following the fall of Saddam, they had been recruited by the Iranians, and with their help, the Ahmadinejad regime had made progress towards its goal of becoming a nuclear power. A decision had been made, somewhere in MI6, that the couple was too dangerous to live. That decision had been rubber-stamped in another anonymous grey office in Whitehall, and their files had been marked with red and passed to Group Fifteen to be actioned. It was important, and because of that, Control had selected Number One for the assignment.

As he turned the Jaguar off the motorway at the exit for Central London, Control reviewed his preparation. The two scientists had been in France under the pretext of a long-deserved holiday. The real reason, however—and the reason for their diversion into the Alpine countryside—was to meet an employee of Cezus, a subsidiary of Areva, the global leader in the market for zirconium. That metal was used, among other things, for nuclear fuel cladding. Iran needed zirconium for its reactors, and al Moussa and Najeeb had been led to believe that their contact could supply as much as they needed. But there had been no employee. There was no zirconium. There was to be no meeting, at least not the rendezvous that they had been expecting.

Control tapped out a rhythm on the steering wheel as he passed into London. No, he thought, the preparation had been flawless. The problems were all of Milton's making. The dead *gendarme* would give the French police a strong personal motive to locate the killer; one of their own had been murdered. It would make them more tenacious and less likely to shelve the investigation when the trail went cold, as Control knew that it would. That was bad, but even worse was the boy. A child, orphaned by the killer, cowering in the car as he watched his parents' murders. That was dynamite, the hook upon which the press would be able to hang all of their reporting. It ensured the story would run and run.

THE CLEANER

Control slowed and turned the Jaguar into the underground car park beneath a small building huddled on the north bank of the Thames. It was a sixties build, constructed from brick and concrete without style or grace. Five floors, anonymous. The car idled as the garage door rolled up with a tired metallic creak. The sign painted onto the door read GLOBAL LOGISTICS.

He drove inside, pulled up next to the secure elevator, and got out of the car. The lift arrived, and he embarked, pressing the button for the third floor. The lift eased to a halt, the doors sighed open, and he stepped out into the bustling open-plan space beyond. Analysts stared at monitors and tapped at keyboards, printers chattered, and telephones chimed incessantly. Control passed through the chaotic space to a corridor lined with thick carpet, following it around to the right so that the clamour behind him faded to a gentle hum of activity. A number of green baize doors faced the corridor, and he picked the one at the end, pushing it open and walking through.

David Tanner, his private secretary, looked up from his computer. “Morning, sir,” he said. Tanner was ex-military—infantry—like Control and all of the other operatives who worked for him. Tanner’s career had been forestalled by an IED on the road outside Kabul. It had cost him his right leg below the knee and the posting to the SAS that he had craved. He was a good man, easy-going and pleasant to share a drink with, and he guarded access to his commanding officer with fierce dedication.

“Morning, Captain,” he said. “What does the morning look like?”

“You’re speaking to the director at midday. Wants an update on the French situation.”

“I’m sure she does. And Number One?”

“Waiting for you inside, sir.”

“Very good.”

He went through into the office. It was a large room that offered an expansive view of the river. There was a central table with a bowl

of flowers, and two comfortable club chairs on either side of the fire. There were no filing cabinets, and nothing that looked official.

Milton was standing at the wide window at the other end of the room, smoking a cigarette and looking down on the broad sweep of the Thames. Control paused by the door and regarded him; he was dressed in a plain dark suit that looked rather cheap, a white shirt and a black tie.

“Good morning, Number One,” he said.

“Morning, sir.”

“Take a seat.”

He watched as Milton sat down. His eyes were implacable. He looked a little shabby, a little worn around the edges. Control recalled him when he joined the service. He had sported Savile Row suits, shirts from Turnbull & Asser, and was perfectly groomed at all times. He did not seem to care for any of that any longer. Control didn't care what his agents looked like, so long as they were good at their job, and Milton was his best; that was why this latest misadventure was so troubling.

There came a knock at the door. Tanner entered bearing a tray with a pot of tea and two bone-china cups. He set the tray down on the sideboard, and after confirming that there was nothing else that Control needed, he left them alone.

Control got up and poured the tea, watching Milton as he did so. One did not apply for a job like his, one was chosen, and as was his habit with all the operatives who worked for him, Control had selected him himself and then supervised the year of rigorous training that smoothed away his rough edges and prepared him for his new role. There had been moments when Milton had doubted his own suitability for the position, and Control had not so much as assuaged the doubts as chided him for even entertaining the possibility that his judgment might have been awry. He prided himself on being an excellent judge of character, and he had known

that Milton would be the perfect field agent. He had been proven right. Milton had started his career as Number Twelve, as was customary, and now, eight years later, all his predecessors were gone, and he was Number One.

Milton was tense. He gripped the armrest of the chair so tightly that his knuckles whitened. He had not shaved that morning, the strong line of his jaw darkly stubbled. "The boy?" he said.

"Traumatised but otherwise fine, from what we can gather. As you would expect. The French have him in care. We don't think they've spoken to him yet. Did he see you?"

"Yes."

"That could be awkward."

Milton ignored him. "Did you know?"

"Know what?"

"That he'd be there."

"We knew he was in France. We didn't think they would bring him to the meeting."

"And you didn't think to tell *me* that they might?"

"Remember who you're talking to," Control said angrily. "Would it have made a difference?"

Milton's cold stare burned into him.

"There's no point in pretending otherwise—the boy is a problem. The damned policeman, too. It would've been tidy without them, but now—well, they're both loose ends. They make things more complicated. You'd better tell me what happened."

"There's not much to say. I followed the plan to the letter. The weapon was where it was supposed to be. I arrived before the targets. They were there on time. I eliminated both. As I was tidying up, the gendarme arrived. So I shot him."

"The rules of engagement were clear."

"Indeed, sir. No witnesses. I don't believe I had a choice."

"You didn't. I'm not questioning that."

“But you’re questioning something?” Milton said.

Again, his tone was harsh. Control ignored it. “You said it yourself. *No witnesses.*”

“The boy? Why I didn’t shoot him?”

“It might be distasteful, but you know how clear we are about how we conduct ourselves on operations.” Control was tense. The conversation was not developing as he had anticipated, and he was not in the business of being surprised. There was a whiteness around the edges of Milton’s lips. The blue eyes still stared blankly, almost unseeingly.

“I’ve seen a lot of dead bodies since I’ve been working for you, sir.”

Control replied with as much patience as he could manage. “Of course you have, Milton. You’re an assassin. It goes with the territory.”

He might not even have heard him. “I can’t keep pretending to myself anymore. We make decisions about who lives and who dies, but it’s not always black and white when you’re in the middle of it. As you say, the rules of engagement were clear. I should have shot him. Eight years ago, when I signed up for *this*”—the word carried a light dusting of contempt—“I probably would have shot him. Like a good soldier.”

“But you didn’t.”

“I couldn’t.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Eight years is a long time for this kind of work, sir. Not many in the Group last as long. And I haven’t been happy lately. I don’t think I’ve ever really been happy.”

“I don’t expect you to be *happy*.”

Milton had become agitated and pressed on. “I’ve got blood on my hands. I used to tell myself the same things to justify it, but they don’t work anymore. That policeman didn’t deserve to die.

The boy didn't deserve to lose his parents. We made a widow and an orphan because of a lie. And I'm not doing it any longer, sir. I'm finished."

Control spoke carefully. "Are you trying to *resign*?"

"You can call it whatever you like. My mind is made up."

Control rose. He needed a moment to tamp down his temper. This was perilously close to insubordination, and rather than lash out, he went across to the mantelpiece and adjusted the photograph of his family. He spoke deliberately: "What's the Group for, Milton?"

"Elimination."

"Jobs that are too dirty for Her Majesty's security services to touch."

"Quite so, sir."

"And your job?"

"Cleaner."

"Which means?"

"From time to time Her Majesty's government needs to remove people whose continued existence poses a risk to the effective conduct of public order. The government requires particularly skilled professionals who are prepared to work on a non-attributable basis to deal with these problems.' Cleaners."

Control smiled without humour. That was the job description he had used when he recruited Milton all those years ago. All those neutral euphemisms, all designed to make the job easier to palate. "It takes a special kind of man to do that kind of work. There are so few of you—and, unfortunately, that makes you rather difficult to replace." He paused. "Do you know how many people you've eliminated for me?"

Milton replied without even thinking. "One hundred and thirty-six."

"You're my best cleaner."

“Once, perhaps. But not anymore. I can’t ignore it any longer. I can’t keep my mouth shut just to avoid being unprofessional. I’m lying to myself. We have to face facts, sir. Dress it up however you like—neutralisation, elimination—but those are just euphemisms for what it is I really do. I’m paid to *murder* people.”

Control was not getting through to him. “*Murder?*” he exclaimed. “What are you talking about, man? Don’t be so soft. You want to moralise? You know what would happen if the Iranians get the bomb. There’ll be a war. A proper war that will make Iraq look like a walk in the bloody park. Thousands of people will die. Hundreds of thousands. Removing those two made that prospect a little less likely. And they knew the risk they were taking. You can call it murder if you like, but they were not innocents. They were combatants.”

“And the policeman? The boy?”

“Unfortunate, but necessary.”

“Collateral damage?”

Control felt he was being goaded. He took a breath and replied with a taut, “Indeed.”

Milton folded his arms. “I’m sorry, sir. I’m done with it all. I’m finished.”

Control walked up to Milton, circled him close, noticed the tension in the shoulders and the clenched fists. “No one is ever really finished with this. You can’t *resign*. You can’t *retire*. You’re a murderer, as you say. It’s all you know. After all, what can you chaps do after you leave? Your talents are so specialised. What else could you do? Work with children? In an office? No. You’re unskilled labour, man. *This* is what you are.”

“Then find yourself another labourer.”

He banged a fist on the mantelpiece in frustration. “You work for me for as long as I bloody well want you to or I’ll have you destroyed!”

THE CLEANER

Milton rose to face him. His stature was imposing, and his eyes were chilling. They had regained their clarity and icy focus. They were the eyes of a killer, and he fixed him in a pitiless gaze. “I think we’re finished, sir, aren’t we? We’re not going to agree with each other.”

“Is that your final word?”

“It is.”

Control put his desk between them and sat down. “You’re making a terrible mistake. You’re on suspension. Unpaid. I’ll review your file, but there will be discipline. Take the time to consider your position. It isn’t too late to repair the damage this foolish stand has caused you.”

“Very good, sir.” Milton straightened his tie.

“You’re dismissed.”

“Good day, sir.”