

THE
FOOT
SOLDIERS

Gerald Seymour



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For Gillian

PROLOGUE

November

“What’s the bet he’s a dangle?”

“You reckon? A dangle?”

“Could be.”

“It’s a tasty one for them. Drop him in, lead us on a song and dance. Waved in front of us and we leap up like it’s Christmas come early. Well briefed on what to look for, listen for. Learns what we know, then does a runner. That’s what I call a dangle.”

Wally said, “Looks cocky enough, doesn’t he?”

Doug said, “Cat with a bowl of cream.”

“And us running around after him like blue-arsed flies.”

Neither were well humoured. Both had been roused out of their pits a little after three in the morning. It should have been Doug’s youngest’s birthday party later that day and should have been a visit to a store with his wife for Wally to look at a tumble dryer before the present one burned their home down. They were private military contractors: hired muscle. They were where the employment was. One was a former Royal Marine and the other had been a Protection Officer with the police up north. They had been at the airport at six, had been met by Frances, who’d seemed calm enough and clean and smart in a neutral way. In the departure lounge they’d shared the use of an electric razor and been on the first flight of the day to Copenhagen. Had been picked up at the airport by the team from the Denmark station – Griff and the Embassy security guy, Brian – and driven to the hotel, rather nice, decent view out over a bay. He’d shown up about an hour later.

The two of them, Wally and Doug, might have been at a county agricultural show, examining a bullock in the ring. It came from proven and tested land and should have been the proper business. If it were the proper business, then this bullock was doing a handsome job of confusing them.

He had introduced himself as Igor.

They'd spotted him when he had driven into the hotel parking area. He'd taken a grip bag out of the boot, then had slammed down the lid as if he were no longer the proud owner of that top-selling little Japanese car, not important to him any longer. He'd looked around him briefly, checking to see he was not tailed. Wally knew the Service jargon better than Doug did. Wally had suggested the guy could be a "dangle", but earlier had muttered something about competent "dry cleaning" . . . It was the sort of talk that they enjoyed when having a quiet beer somewhere far from eavesdroppers, and both could take the piss out of their employers and the language that the staffer spies used which was thought to enhance elitism. Wally could handle any weapon from an anti-tank missile launcher through a heavy machine gun and down to a marksman's rifle. Doug was blessed with good eyes and fast hands and preferred a Glock 9mm pistol and an H&K short-range assault weapon. They were not armed. Had nothing between them other than competent unarmed combat drills. It would have been comforting to have had some sort of firearm tucked into a belt and out of sight below their heavy fleeces, if only because he was a Russian, bent – so he had said – on defection, and there must have been a chance that his brothers and sisters in their Embassy would come after him and not been coy as to what methods of force they'd employ to get him back. Two of the Danish PET boys, perimeter security they supposed, were lounging in chairs outside the room that had been arranged for them; they'd have had firepower, but it would have been a moot point if they'd use it. Right at the start, Wally had run an eye over the PET boy pair and had said from the side of his mouth, "Don't look much like Vikings to me . . ." And had been answered, in a stage whisper, "They were Vikings a thousand years ago, a proper

lot of water under that old bridge since then.” Brian, the Embassy security chief, would have carried gas and pepper stuff in the shoulder bag that dangled off him, but not a shooter. And time was ticking and they’d not be on the move before the heavy mob came into town.

Truth was, and Griff had already said it: “He’s brought next to nothing with him. I said to him last night that he should clear out every bloody file he could get his fingers into. The more the merrier. Paper and discs. Go for broke because he’s not going back, emphasised it. Had to have a complete clear-out of their system . . . I mean, I knew of him, but he wasn’t a target. We didn’t rate him as an A-list celeb, only a bit of a gofer. There he was, and I’m on the beach walking the dog. Comes up to me . . . bold as brass . . . not furtive. ‘You are Mr Griffin? Yes?’ I must have looked blank, perplexed. ‘Come on, Mr Griffin, it is not necessary to be shy. Where I work, we have a good file on you, a fat file, and you are respected.’ I told him that he would need to excuse me as my dog needed walking. Did not faze him. ‘Mr Griffin, I think you should be quite pleased, I am . . .’ Gave his name, and his rank, said he was GRU, and that he intended to defect to us in the morning, and I gave him the usual splatter about coming to an arrangement and staying in place – which he ignored. ‘No, Mr Griffin, it is tomorrow morning, and I am coming to you and no turning back and I will not look behind me. That is it, a decision made.’ So, then it was all the stuff about clearing out every file he could lay his hands on last night, enough for a wheelbarrow load, or three.”

That’s what Griff had said. They had heard the first questions that the station chief had put to the Russian, and the answers were in good English, clear sentences but not vernacular. First up was the answer that very little had come with him. He was an officer in the Military Intelligence section attached to the Embassy. He had the rank of major in the Glavnoe razvedyvatel’noe upravlenie, and he should have been a treasure trove. Both Wally and Doug had heard the response to the question “And what have you managed to bring out with you?” GRU was top of the pile, the best quality

intelligence-gathering organisation they had in their Federation, but he had shaken his head and had said with a dismissive waft of the hand – as if it were a trivial matter – that there had been colleagues in the inner sanctuary of the Embassy on Kristianiagade, white stucco and modern, and he had not thought it prudent to be seen downloading, printing, stacking material in a bag, nor hitting the keys and filling a memory stick. He had brought very little with him, and that he had detailed. They had seen the frown knit deeper on Griff's forehead. The man had shrugged and had said that he had plenty to say, that he would be most useful and had launched into a brief monologue of attitudes and policies emanating from the current Kremlin apparatchiks.

They were brought more coffee and a plate of biscuits.

Wally said, "Thank you, ma'am."

Doug said, "Grateful, miss, appreciated."

Not a hint of a smile in reaction, but she told them in a clean, clear, quiet voice, "Actually I'm not called Miss, Ma'am, or even Frances. Always known as Frank . . . Excuse me."

Griff came over to them – looked in poor humour.

"Talked my head off, haven't I? Need to know and all that crap, and I'm gossiping to a degree that would embarrass a good old-fashioned fishwife. Why am I spreading my supposed wisdom so far and wide? Talking too much because there's bits not making the best sense, so I'm trying to bounce it all at you. Breaking every rule in the book, but you would have heard his responses. Could have read that off the front page of any British broadsheet. Can I tell you something, boys?"

"Feel free."

"Unburden, usually the best way."

Both were looking past Griff across the room. The Russian was standing at the window, had opened it wide, his elbow on the ledge. Rain spattered the arm of his jacket. He had already tossed three fag ends out of the window into the jungle of bushes below. There was a No Smoking sign by the window. He had a good head of hair, thick, with a haphazard parting, and his eyes were darting and his gaze penetrating so that he seemed to strip into

the thoughts of those who watched him, and a strong nose that was bent at the bridge as if it had been damaged, and when his glance traversed them he seemed to smile as if he were everyone's friend, except that these friends were now becoming boring and displaying indecision.

Griff said softly, "Just my fucking luck. Forgive the vulgarity, lads, but it's how I feel. Pretty much at the end of my stipend with the Service, only half a year to go, and right now that cannot come fast enough. I've been a Sixer for twenty-seven years. Russia oriented for the last fifteen of them. In that time, I've never had a sniff of one, not a proper full-blown defector. I have propositioned, done the first feeble chat-up lines with about as much success as trying to seduce a Mother Superior. Never been near to getting one. Then this joker pops his head up over the fence. Got really excited, know what I mean. The Mother Superior gives me a come-on, that excited. Hot flushes at home last night, put a bottle of bubbles in the fridge for tonight after I've dumped him into your tender hands and the cavalry coming from Vauxhall. Off home and I'm the hero of the hour. I don't think so. Think he's left us with rather a problem."

The woman who wished to be known as Frank served coffee to Brian who sat close to the Russian but who had made no comment on the quality of the preliminary debrief, nor on the violation of the no smoking edict. Both Wally and Doug would have appeared less than smart and the fast shave had done little to tidy them; they oozed the fact that they had been dragged out of their beds in answer to an emergency call. She looked tidy, showed no sign of lost sleep and her hand did not shake as she passed Brian the cup and saucers. The Russian, Igor, eyed her and held his glance in a way that might have embarrassed most other men and seemed to expect to make contact with her. He smiled at her. She ignored him.

Griff said, "Could be that he's just looking for a gravy train ride. Thinks we'll be a soft touch. Monty will sort him out."

He bit his lip. Wally wondered if he would start dribbling blood . . . Not that they were strangers to blood. After leaving the

Marines, Wally had gone into the short-term, well-paid world of PMC work. Not altogether glamorous . . . taking convoys into Baghdad from the airport, Route Irish and seven and a half miles of arse-pucker journey, and had been shotgun-riding between Kabul and the Bagram base and on the bad run down to Kandahar – he was familiar with blood. Doug had done escort with a Secretary of State in Northern Ireland and high-risk prisoner escorts in Liverpool but had also spent time mentoring trainee police units in Iraq. They had similar personalities and a good understanding about keeping the lid on drama when crisis came calling. For both of them work in their field of Guns For Hire was diminishing and they would have been grateful to have been called in the night and packed off to Copenhagen. With a flick of an eyebrow the woman signalled to Griff that she had come off her phone and had more detail. He went to join her by the door. Not hard for them to understand his disappointment.

Wally said, “I’m not an expert.”

Doug said, “Thank God for that.”

Wally had a gallows grin. “A defection package does not come cheap.”

Doug grimaced. “We had a guy in Iraq who used to come to the camp I worked at, been in Europe when the Soviet thing collapsed. He said they had busloads of old KGB, colonels and brigadiers and a few generals, offering themselves, hoping to be taken on by us so they didn’t have to drive taxis or pick potatoes or protect gangsters,. Like it was ‘Form an orderly queue, and here’s a sheet of paper and a pencil so you can tell us what you know about the nuclear stuff, chemical warfare, germ weapons.’ They were turning them away before Mr Putin showed up. Like a tap was turned off.”

“The package costs plenty and the joker getting it has to have plenty to offer.”

Griff was back with them.

Something about a hotel in Aarhus in the north and where the main assessment team for the Russian would gather. They were in the air now out of London’s Heathrow. Chiswell and Barker and

Symonds and little Benedict were coming. Should have been Toni as well but she had babysitter problems and had cried off, and Monty was on the flight . . .

Another fag, half smoked, went out of the window and the sleeve was damper. The Russian had lifted his coffee cup and saucer and clipped them together, making a sharp little rattle to gesture that he'd like the cup refilled. Wagged the cup again, like Frank was a skivvy and should have come running. She did not hurry, showed no annoyance. When she reached out to take his cup and saucer he seemed, imperceptibly, to lower his hands so that she had to bend further forward to retrieve them. Wally understood. Doug murmured something about a "shitehawk". She took the cup and saucer from him and turned away, and Wally saw the guy's smirk. Doug muttered "arsehole". Might have thought that making her bend would give him a cleavage view or force her hand down closer to his groin. She glided away to the table with the coffee dispenser and Igor gazed at her ankles. It had all been noted.

Brian was up off his chair, dropping the magazine he had open but which would have gone unread. He crossed the room, stood close to her as she poured the coffee. Indicated, "I'll do that, Frank, if it's all the same to you," and managed a smile for her and she shrugged.

It might have been one of those moments as Wally would say when "a whole load of excrement is about to hit the fan". A moment of perfect calm before a storm broke. Doug had sensed it too like they were wired together. Brian was the Embassy security officer, had been a warrant officer in the Parachute Regiment, would never have taken a backward step and the cup of coffee was balanced on the saucer, and his hand was rock steady. One of those moments which prefaced total anti-climax, or one that precluded a few seconds of stress-laced tension: Brian could purposefully tip the scalding contents of the cup into the Russian's lap and let him howl – which did not happen. The coffee was handed over, Brian was thanked. He responded with civility, called the guy "sir", went back to his chair and resumed gazing vacantly

at his magazine. The coffee was noisily drunk. Another cigarette was lit.

Wally had his mouth close to Doug's ear. "Did I imagine all that? Were we close to Armageddon? Real or not real?"

"Had me wondering. But then we're not minding a kindergarten. Table manners aren't the big issue."

Griff was back with them.

Griff said, "They're down. About five minutes, then we leave. If that's what's going to happen."

Griff turned away from them, crossed the room, stood in front of the Russian.

"I'm saying this, maybe it is the last time. We are about to get moving. Unlikely, once we do, that you can change tack, back down, reckon this never happened, and return to your Embassy and your office . . . Or you can pretend that it did happen and you want to make an arrangement with us, be well rewarded financially, and again go back and become a more permanent asset to us."

"I have no doubts, Mr Griffin."

"I want to hear you say it."

"I am defecting to you. I had a meeting with the Resident and my colonel in GRU, which was due to start fifteen minutes ago. I am not there. I would usually be punctual. They will wait perhaps another five minutes. They will send someone to my apartment. He will have a key, of course. He will see I have gone, he will also see that my car is gone. Where am I? First questions, then annoyance, then anxiety, then anger . . . and the bridge is burned. I want to piss before we go."

Brian escorted him.

Griff was back between Wally and Doug. Frank was tidying, piling the used cups, mugs and plates on the table and then she'd check around for anything dropped.

Wally asked, "Bit of a cheek, Mr Griffin, and you're entitled not to answer. Can you chuck a defector out?"

Doug quizzed, "Sorry, not today, maybe another day? Show him the door – thanks but no thanks?"

“Talking too much, breaking a lifetime’s habits. Getting de-mob happy and this was going to be the final hurrah. Doesn’t look to me as if he has what we’d want . . . but shut him out, shut the door on him? Not easy. And it sends a message. Getting our hands on a traitor, anyone prepared to snitch their country’s secrets, is a shade harder, in the Russian theatre, than extracting blood from a stone. We give some Joe we’ve lined up, and worked bloody hard to get him on board, all that stuff about how much we value him. The Joe goes home from the contact, believing all the sugar we’ve ladled on him, and he switches on the TV. Who does he see? Sees our little friend, Igor, major in GRU, based in Copenhagen and defending the Motherland from there. What does he say? Says he was kidnapped. Says he was tortured. Says he escaped because of his excellent training and belief in the rule of Comrade Putin . . . We are damaged and our prestige is screwed. I am not saying we have other agents in play, and I’m not saying we haven’t. Just doesn’t sound good, fourth rate . . . We’re stuck with him, however useless, unless he has a bag of code books secreted deep up his back passage which he has so far omitted to tell us about.”

Wally said, “Sounds a bit of a shambles.”

Doug said, “Has us by the short and curlies.”

Griff said, “Should have been weeks of planning, a job like this, and we’re rushed into it. I really thought my podium moment had come. Doesn’t seem likely. We have to stay with him even if he’s fool’s gold and a freebooter . . . Or, and I heard what you said early on. Might just be a dangle. But that’s for Monty to sort out.”

They went out into the rain. Reluctantly, the Russian carried his own grip bag, and the keys to his car were handed to a porter and a bank note was palmed him and the car would be “lost” somewhere. They went fast across the parking area and loaded up. Wally thought the guy was either a dangle or had made a life-changing move, stepped over a cliff and would not know how he would land, but seemed calm enough, chirpy, and had given the girls on Reception an eye as he passed them, and as they approached the car was watching the swing of Frank’s backside. There was nothing to like about him, but neither Wally nor Doug

was paid to like, enjoy the company of, be a best friend to, the principal they were tasked to protect. They scrambled into their seats and the rain came down hard. The PET boys would be in the lead vehicle with their own driver. In the second car would be Igor and Griff, and Frank. At the tail, with another Embassy driver, would be Brian and Doug and Wally . . . There seemed to be, as the storm blustered around them, a further delay. The Russian appeared to want Frank to sit in the back with him, but would have to do with Griff. Might have been told to “shut the fuck up” because tension was ratcheting.

Wally said to his friend, “What’s the bet it all ends in tears? Chummy’s tears. Has that feel. A time for tears, or he’s planted and swung in front of us.”

Doug said, “We’ll know soon enough.”

“Think I’m following your drift.”

“They’ll come after him, that’s their style, if he’s not a dangle. Always do. They get powerfully angry with a turncoat . . . Come after him hard.”

“If they come knocking, hope I’m not around – expect I bloody will be.”