

No Chance
A Novel by Nigel McGimpsey

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Chapter 1: The Ghost in the Glass

London

Alex Chance watched the neon glow of London's streets blur through the condensation-streaked window of the pub. The pint in front of him was warm, half-drunk and abandoned in favor of the cigarette smoldering between his fingers. It wasn't a great pub, but it was quiet, and quiet was a rare commodity in his world.

He was waiting. Not for anyone in particular, at least, that's what he told himself. He told himself a lot of things these days. That he was fine, that the past didn't weigh on him like an anchor, that he wasn't looking for a way back into something that made sense. Lies had a way of becoming habits.

Alex had expected more from life. By now, he thought he'd have something to show for the years spent in uniform—for the blood, the scars, the sacrifices. A family, one that he would be part of providing perhaps greater purpose that didn't slip through his fingers like smoke. But all he had was the quiet hum of a pub, a pint he didn't want, and a gnawing sense that somewhere along the way, he'd missed the turn that led to the life he was supposed to live.

The television over the bar flickered with images of political unrest in the Middle East, followed by a segment on AI surveillance advancements. He

ignored both, focusing instead on the rhythmic throb of music from the speaker overhead. The world was spiralling, and he was watching it happen from the bottom of a pint glass.

A man entered the bar and looked over at Alex who was seated in the dim light. Alex Chance looked every bit the rugged, disciplined figure shaped by years of service. Standing 6'2", broad-shouldered and muscular, he sat with the quiet confidence born of experience, not ego.

The man approached Alex. "You look like a man who's lost something."

Alex turned his head slightly. The man standing beside him was in his late fifties, impeccably sharp, not just in dress, but in mind and manner. His hair, once jet black, was now salt-and-pepper, with pronounced greying at the temples, it gave him a distinguished air that somehow makes him seem even more formidable. His eyes are a piercing slate grey, cool and unreadable, the kind that seem to see three moves ahead, and see straight through you. It made Alex's skin prickle. MI5 or M16 maybe ex-military, definitely not someone who had stumbled into the pub by accident.

"Depends on who's asking," Alex replied, flicking ash into an empty tray.

The man chuckled. "Not who. What." He took a sip of his whisky. "Purpose. You look like a man without one."

Alex spoke slowly deliberately slowly. "I get by."

"Is that enough?"

He didn't answer. The man smiled, fishing a business card from his jacket pocket and sliding it across the bar. "There's an address on the back. If you're tired of getting by."

Alex picked up the card without looking at it. By the time he glanced back, the man was already gone.

Later, he stood on the rain-slick pavement outside his flat, turning the card over in his fingers. The front bore no name, only an embossed crest, MI5.

The back had an address and a time: 10:00 AM. Tomorrow.

For the first time in a long while, Alex felt something other than exhaustion.

Curiosity.

Or maybe, just maybe, hope.

Alex didn't go home right away. Instead, he walked through the wet streets of Soho, hands in his jacket pockets, the card pressed between his fingers. He checked his phone again, no messages, at least none from his son Tristan. The city hummed with life around him, taxis splashing through puddles, late-night workers huddled under doorways, cigarette smoke curling into the night. The world kept moving forward, but for the first time in months, he felt as if he was standing at a crossroads.

He ducked into a late-night cafe, ordering a coffee he didn't really want. The waitress barely looked at him, dropping the steaming cup onto the table before retreating behind the counter. A faded newspaper sat crumpled on the seat next to him, and he unfolded it absentmindedly, scanning the headlines. More financial corruption, more global instability, another war on the horizon. Different day, same story.

He flipped the card over again, running his thumb across the embossed crest. MI5. Why him, why now? He had made a life out of being invisible since leaving the military. Security work, bodyguard contracts, odd jobs that paid well enough but meant nothing. He didn't make waves.

But the man in the bar had known him. Not just as another ex-soldier drowning in cheap pints, but as someone useful, or expendable...

His fingers clenched around the card. The old itch, the one that had kept him alive in war zones and hostile territories, stirred in his gut. He wasn't just curious. He was hooked.

At 9:58 AM the next morning, he stood outside a non-descript office building in the backstreets of Westminster. The kind of place that people passed by without a second glance. A single brass plate by the door read: Horizon Consulting, which was probably the most generic cover name they could think of.

He hesitated only for a moment before stepping inside. He checked again for any messages from Tristan, there were none.

A receptionist, too polished to be just a receptionist, glanced up from behind a sleek desk. "Mr. Chance?"

"That's what they call me."

She didn't smile. "Second door on the right."

The hallway smelled like fresh paint, the kind that covered up years of history. He walked past closed doors, the sound of his footsteps muffled by thick carpet. When he reached the second door, he knocked once and pushed it open.

Inside, the man from the bar sat behind a simple desk, flipping through a file. He didn't look up. "You're late."

Alex glanced at the clock on the wall. 10:01.

"Didn't realize MI5 ran on the King's schedule."

The man closed the file and finally met his eyes. "Sit down, Alex. Let's talk about your future."