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Rory Harden

THE
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CHANGE
MAN

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Cover photo of lion in South Africa by Nancy Crockett.

For Nancy Crockett

'My belief is we will, in fact, be greeted as liberators.'

- A famous warmonger.

CHAPTER 1

It was the safest town in Africa. And the oddest place in Namibia. It was a little German town that had strayed from its origins — and from the nineteenth century — and had anchored itself to the scoured-empty Atlantic coast of southern Africa.

It was a town of salt roads and sea fog, with cool, damp mornings and German street names — most of which had survived a general and recurrent mood to Africanise them.

It was a town of Bavarian gables and Teutonic brick, where you could hear German spoken on the street and where you now saw Volkswagens where once there had been ox wagons.

It was a town alone, menaced by a giant and relentless neighbour, the great Namib Desert, that sent its hummock dune infiltrators into the town's southern and south-eastern outskirts and wanted to suck the moisture from them.

It was a town where you could escape the beaten-down heat of the interior, or of the capital; where you could park without difficulty most of the time; and where you could enjoy a beer and a pizza at very reasonable prices.

It was a vacation town, created and maintained — like its vast and ancient companion — by the uncaring and unpredictable Benguela current, which pumped cold Antarctic water by the cubic kilometre up to the African coast and fluctuated according to its own concerns.

You could dip your toe in the Atlantic here; you wouldn't keep it there for long.

You could explore the dunes, in an environmentally tactful way and in a Land Rover, and marvel at their complex ecology.

You could admire the salt works.

You could motor, if you drove carefully and with your lights on — count the little shrines by the roadside — south to the modern and uncharacterful port town of Walvis Bay, once a strategic enclave of the old South Africa and, before that, a possession of the British Empire. If you were young, had travelled little, and had exhausted the local possibilities, you might think it worthwhile.

You could drive north, if you chose, to a lonely and downbeat resort village.

You could take the salt road to the north-east, heading for Damaraland and its famous prehistoric rock paintings, and lose yourself in the desert. Your tyre tracks might be visible for years.

The town was called Swakopmund because it lay at the mouth of the Swakop river. The river, in accordance with Namibian custom, flowed rarely. But when it did — when the annual rains, if any, reached the interior — it was forceful, a brown torrent full of debris.

Mund is the German word for 'mouth'. Swakop means 'rubbish' or, some say, 'shit'.

A new bridge had been built, some years before, at what had seemed to the town's citizens great expense.

It was the safest town in Africa and it was the town to which George Fischer had chosen to retire after a life and valiant career, as some would have it, in some of the continent's least safe.

His neighbours probably thought him a gentle, patient little tub of a man, if reserved. They couldn't have known that he lived every day in the grim conviction that his past was out to get him.

George, who Anglicised his first name but not his last, was the owner of George's Desert Garden Hotel. It was a sound business, but one whose fortunes varied — in a way that depressed his fellow hoteliers — with the pattern of events hundreds or even thousands of kilometres distant.

Tonight, George had ten rooms and six guests. Three couples. He provided breakfast and, if asked in advance, a simple evening meal. Today, no one had asked.

The walled compound at the back of the hotel, that served partly to deflect the encroaching dunes, had been secured; the guests' rental cars were safe.

His garden had been watered. As far as he knew — and this was an issue that excited him — he had the only green lawn, with pond, of any hotel in town. And it was the end of the dry season, too.

Roberta, his part-time assistant manager, had tidied the bar-restaurant area and the lounge and had retired to her tiny office to catch up on the day's paperwork. Her light was on and her door was half-open. She leaned forward at her desk, face hidden. Her hair flowed over the back of her chair. She had her strong, thin calves hooked around the chair legs, her plastic sandals about to fall off.

As he watched, the left sandal fell, and then the right, taking her foot with it. He almost laughed out loud. She wouldn't have been offended, but he stifled the impulse anyway. He'd paid for the artificial foot out of his own money, which back then, of course, had been burning one hole in his pocket and another in his heart. It was the best to be obtained in Hamburg in 1983.

He listened. Her worn-down fingers tapped at the worn-away keyboard and the worn-out printer slogged its way through the month-to-date expenses. George's admiration was boundless. Next year he would buy a new computer, if business held up.

'You don't have to finish that tonight,' he said. 'It's not necessary.'

But she didn't seem to hear.

Normally his guests returned from dinner at about ten or ten-thirty. It wasn't a late-night town. This particular group of six all seemed to know each other; they might want a drink before bedtime.

Later, he would go into the bar and loiter, just in case.

Meanwhile, he would relax here in the lounge and watch a little TV. Since most of his guests were German, he kept the satellite system on a German-language news or entertainment channel. He left it on most of the time, with the sound turned down low.

He settled down in front of the TV. From here he could also survey the lobby, the spot-lit garden and the main gate.

A movement at the edge of his vision startled him. What was it? There: a large, white four-wheel-drive, parked in the street with its front passenger window aligned perfectly with the hotel's iron gate. The street was dark; he couldn't see the driver. High walls either side of the gate hid the rest of the vehicle.

Was that a shadow, or was the driver still in the car? It looked new, expensive — too expensive for a local. And even here, no one would park such a vehicle in the street overnight. Just visiting someone, perhaps.

The printer choked to a halt and buzzed as if in pain. Roberta cursed. George heard her shake and slap the machine in a way that suggested she'd done so before. It got the message and went back to work.

The white car was still there. Perhaps he should take a look...

There was a movement inside the car — a hand raised from lap to chest and then lowered again, like a man checking that he had remembered to stow his wallet in his jacket.

He strode over to the office.

'Roberta. The front gate is locked?'

'Yes, of course.'

'The guests have a key?'

'Yes, they do. They have the blue key.'

'The blue key.'

'On the blue key chain.'

'Yes. Thank you.'

He went outside and stood on the door-step, hands on his hips, the conscientious property-owner checking that all in the garden was as it should be.

It began with a scuffling, a sudden hubbub and a mob scene at the gate: the guests. A woman's laughter like an adolescent hyena. The scraping of key in lock. A second attempt. The offering of advice. The gate flung open and swinging back against the wall with a force sure to weaken the hinges — except that he'd reinforced them.

Welcome home, he ought to be saying. Trust you had a pleasant evening. One at a time, please. But something kept him from speech.

The gate was narrow, deliberately so. Nevertheless, the guests approached in pairs. A commotion of squeezing and bumping, mock embarrassment.

Six of them. No, not six — seven. At the back, a powerfully-sized man, a little older than his oblivious new companions, moving with contrasting caution. A heavy and voluminous jacket, possibly suede. Short wiry hair and a belligerent moustache.

George slipped back into the house.

'Roberta. The guests are back. They are going to make some noise, I think. They are still in the party mood. Let me close the office door for you.'

He closed it, went back out into the garden and held open the door for the guests.

'Welcome home! Please! Did you all have a good time? Did you see what night life we have here?'

One English couple; two German. They seemed to have met on the road, or at another lodge, and had obviously forged a lifelong alliance. Unsurprisingly, they all spoke English.

'Yes! We see the night life!'

This from the elder German male, who had assumed the role of patrician and was bringing up the rear, or so he thought.

An advance party — the rotund and predictably sunburnt but otherwise pretty Englishwoman and the younger German girl, blonde and short-haired as customary — negotiated George's twisty garden path, picking their way between the spotlights, elbows entwined for mutual support. The rest of the pack swayed along behind, a tableau of bleary gratitude. Some shushing, some fingers on lips. They were trying to keep the noise down.

Normally he would have been concerned for his pond. Tonight, he was concerned for his life.

Arnie Muller had come to see him.

*

Arnies Muller was big, loud, and full of ridiculous stories; he was George's dumbest, greatest friend from the good old times in the bad old days. No, don't ask, George told the guests, you'll embarrass him! Arnie hadn't seen his best chum in years, and now here he was — just think of it!

And Arnie Muller was a performer. He was shocking, he was funny. He was an old campaigner — one end of the continent to the other since he was *this* high. He'd seen everything, George, hadn't he? First time for these nice people? African virgins! Ask him anything! The guests couldn't believe their luck.

George avoided looking at Arnie. Instead, he watched the guests. Would Arnie fool them?

Visitors to southern Africa from the more comfortable parts of the common European home, encountering the white South African male of a certain age, outside his home country, often felt ill at ease. At least, the more thoughtful ones did. They saw men who looked like Arnie and who worked for the big safari companies in remote spots in Zambia, Botswana or Namibia — and they wondered. Could they tell that these were men who used to be estate managers or farmers or special forces? Now they were writing eco-audits for young graduates in Johannesburg and serving afternoon tea. You didn't need to ask them what they thought of their home country these days; they let you know. You didn't need to scratch to smell the resentment.

Of course, Arnie was a special case; he had a brutal talent for opportunity. And tonight he had George's guests entranced and they loved him. He had bush-glamour and tales to tell.

'George! Come along with the drinks here. We're all getting thirsty.'

Arnie giving orders again. Hasn't lost the taste.

'What are you looking at over there? Some bad guys trying to break in?'

They're already here, George thought.

'Don't listen to him,' he told his guests. 'When he was young, he was in the South African security forces. The stories he could tell. If he was allowed to.'

Did Arnie find that provocative? No, he was enjoying himself too much.

The guests took their drinks from the tray. George caught Arnie's gaze for the first time. Two decades later, and those eyes had changed. More patient? Perhaps. Softer? No.

'We were comrades,' Arnie said. 'But that was a long time ago.'

'So Arnie, what did you get up to in the security forces? Sort of SAS stuff, was it?'

A diffident inquiry from the English girl's paunchy, tight-shirted husband or boyfriend, who was trying to look like someone who might have joined up himself if he hadn't had other priorities. If he only knew what he was asking. And who.

'Two things,' Arnie said, with gravity. 'Security. And force.'

They took this for wit, and smiled accordingly.

Arnie's not happy, George thought. He's wants them out of here. Roberta? Keeping still and quiet, in her little den.

'Are any of you people flying up to the Skeleton Coast?'

They wanted to, but it was too expensive.

'Ah, but you must!'

Then, for a full twenty minutes, the story of the wartime fliers who crashed on the coast and their improbable rescue.

Impressed by Arnie's sweeping narrative and his grasp of African history, the younger German couple — they'd been debating this on their own account, it seemed — had a question for him.

'Why must there always be so much war in Africa?'

Good girl. Asking the right man.

The blonde girl propped her chin on her fists and peered wistfully up at the once and future mercenary. Her boyfriend slipped his arm around her waist and played with his drink.

'You must know the answer, I think,' she added.

Now they're asking, George thought. Arnie doesn't know. Doesn't care. He's just thankful for it. Tell them about Angola, Arnie.

A flicker of something — but not shame and not disgust — on Arnie's face. Was he going to give them his whole bloody tailgate philosophy? Let's hope not, George thought; they don't deserve it.

'It's tribal,' Arnie said. 'They can't help it.'

Liar. Coward. No money in tribal, Arnie, you bastard.

The guests signalled for another bottle of wine. Arnie left them, shambled up to the bar and helped himself to another beer. He spoke quietly.

'There's a job for you, if you're not stupid. I need you. They're running me ragged. Good money,' he said, sighing.

A shimmer of the old Arnie: self-pity and aggression.

'I already have a job.'

'How much can you make out of idiots like these?'

'It's enough. The exchange rate —'

'That's rubbish. You want dollars, George? They're going around with suitcases. Suitcases. It's true. Why are you bothering with this nonsense? Why do you want to live here?'

'That must be obvious.'

'Come back. It's different now. They have new people in charge. Everyone knows what they're supposed to do. They run it like a business. It *is* a business. You will have an executive role. You can call yourself a consultant.'

'I'm a hotel owner.'

'You don't own it. The bank does.'

'Leave me to my business, Arnie. I have nothing to offer you.'

'What about your friends?'

'What friends?'

'Your friends in Windhoek and Luanda. Your SWAPO guys, and all the others. Your bush buddies. Some of them are big men, now.'

'Don't call them that.'

'We know you talk to them. You can talk to them for us. You think they'd even look at me? And you can supervise transactions. It's a white-collar job. Very clean, if that's what you're worried about. Lots of paperwork.'

George said nothing.

Arnie glanced over at the guests, who were taking photographs of one another.

'What did you do with all the money, by the way? Did you spend it? Invest it? Buy a villa in Marbella for your ageing and devoted parents? Donate it to Amnesty International? Or did you give it all to that black girl?'

George said nothing.

'George, you've got to help us.'

'I can't.'

'We had a guy in Jo'burg, but he had to step down. Now they're recruiting an idiot Englishman in London who thinks there's a place for him in the master race. Don't quote me on that. But he's just handling the finance and I think he's only temporary. Disposable. Name's Vickery. He's only been to Africa once. On vacation. With his bloody awful wife.'

George uncorked the wine.

'Have you talked to your SWAPO chums recently? Ask them about Pasquale.'

Pasquale, the Angolan oil minister until a month ago. Sliced in two inside his Mercedes, which was supposed to be bomb-proof.

'Ask them about Muñoz.'

Hector Muñoz, economic advisor to the Angolan government, whose recent and cogently-argued report had recommended against liberalisation of the oil industry. Found in a tree.

George delivered the wine to the guests, finding a hushed debate raging in German. The blonde girl was agitated, flushed. The patrician looked concerned.

The English girl leaned back in her chair with her eyes closed. Her boyfriend looked at the floor.

'George.'

Arnie summoned him back to the bar.

'They're going to push the Chinese out of Luanda once and for all,' he said. 'What passes for a régime up there? It's gone. I know what you're thinking. All that bloody investment! But they'll all be better off, trust me. The MPLA is corrupt as hell. You, of all people, know that. They're all buying themselves Mercedes and private bankers while the food rots in the warehouses. There's no access to information, no free enterprise. It's your stinking Marxist bureaucracy.'

So this is it, George thought. Arnie's persuaded the CIA, the Pentagon and the military-industrial complex to overthrow the legal government of Angola. Or thinks he has. He's going to be a big wheel in the Transitional Authority or the Provisional Administration. Why not? He has at least one conviction for fraud. One hand on the tiller, the other in the till, to use an English expression. Of course, there's as much Marxism in Angola as there was poison in Iraq. But there's oil. And since when has Arnie been interested in free enterprise — as opposed to free loot?

The guests had abandoned their drinks and were shuffling towards the exit.

'I don't want to know,' George said.

'You don't want to know. So that's your attitude these days. You don't want to know about me. You don't want to know about the future. You don't want to know about your own past. Perhaps you don't want to know about your American friends, Mr and Mrs Ellis, either? Bill and Elaine? You remember? But how could you could forget?'

How indeed. George said nothing. The guests had gone — without their complimentary schnapps, without the friendly good-night from their host to which they were entitled. George started after them.

'Now there's a family beset by tragedy,' Arnie said, grabbing George by the arm and holding him back.

'I need to —'

'Don't you remember?'

Yes, he remembered.

He saw the dirt track, the bridge over the stream, the shattered culvert. He saw the Jeep with its wheels on fire, the splintered trees, dripping blood.

No, he thought, don't replay it now; this is not the time.

Arnie was talking. But George didn't hear. Instead, he heard his own voice describing the scene.

There's me, lying in the ditch, holding my knee together. Over there, on the other side of the track, that's Roberta sitting up working on her foot, or what's left of it; she's seen this happen to other people. Here come Bill and Elaine and the others, running up from the second Jeep, which is unharmed. What's that mess in the front seat of our Jeep? That's the Ellis girl.

And here comes Mr Moreland. What does he have to say? This is his expedition. Arnie was waiting for him.

'What's happened to them?' George said.

'Nothing yet, but it's any day now. They'll be detained for helping terrorists.'

'What are you talking about? There are no terrorists in Windhoek. In Namibia. It's absurd. Bill's the ambassador.'

'You are completely out of touch, George. They are everywhere. If you don't take that seriously, it's as good as helping them. Your friend Bill may have assisted a proscribed organisation.'

'What organisation?'

'My personal opinion, his wife put him up to it. She has a vendetta against Douglas Moreland. And we all know her political views. They're going to pay the price. It's very sad.'

Arnie gripped George by the wrist.

'Go up to Luanda. Talk to your old chums. Find out who's in and who's out. You can make two lists.'

'Let go of me, Arnie.'

Arnie twisted George's wrist.

'Tell them the new administration will require their services. We're not going to purge the whole lot of them.'

'You will start another war. Another twenty-five years.'

'And then go to Windhoek. Tell them if they know what's good for them they won't interfere. Make a contribution to SWAPO funds for the next election. Find out if there are any hard-nuts left.'

Arnie released George's wrist and pushed him back from the bar. George stumbled.

'If they want a guerrilla war, they can have one. It won't matter. They won't have the Russians to help them. Or the Cubans. The Chinese won't fight. Once we move in, we stay.'

George was silent. Arnie turned his head as if he'd heard a noise somewhere.

'Is there someone else here?'

'No.'

Arnie stepped away from the bar.

'I have only so much time, George. I will have to cut this short.'

'Get out.'

'I can't believe you don't want to help your friends Bill and Elaine. After what they did for you.'

'I know what they did.'

'You owe them, George. Where's your new-found honour?'

Bill and Elaine, George was thinking — spiriting their Mr Fischer away, with their daughter's blood all over him. And Moreland thinking he was a spy for the Cubans.

Now Moreland was back to kick Angola again.

'So George. Are you going to help them or not?'

'No.'

Arnie rubbed his rings.

'You never told them, did you? Bill and Elaine?'

'Told them what?'

'How it came to be there. On that particular day. That particular landmine. Of all the landmines in Africa.'

There was nothing to say, nothing to think. He was hollow, he was a shadow, he was nothing. If he could, he would stand here until the dunes covered the town and obliterated him. He should never have come to Africa. He should never have existed.

Arnie smiled.

'So. Let me ask you again. Don't you want to know if there's anything you can do to help?' he said.

George nodded.

'Come with me.'

He followed Arnie into the lobby.

'Give me the key. Wait here.'

Arnie went out to the four-wheel-drive and returned with a shopping bag. Inside were a mass of cables, two small black boxes and a satellite phone.

'Sat-phone,' Arnie said. 'Keep it charged up, keep it on. Brand new, top model, very expensive. But don't worry — you don't have to pay for the calls. Very private. They can't even break it at Fort Meade, not that they'll be trying. If it rings, you answer. Are you with me?'

George nodded.

'It works best outside.'

'I know.'

'Good. Now, if you don't mind, I'll leave you to entertain your bloody guests yourself.'

He glanced pointedly over George's shoulder at the door to the office. Then he slapped George across the shoulders and walked out.

George watched him drive away, then dropped the phone on the floor and went back to the bar. It was empty; the guests hadn't returned.

He felt Roberta's hands on his shoulders.

'Don't worry,' he said. 'I will not do this. I will not be involved in this. I just wanted to get rid of him.'

She looked back at the shopping bag in the hallway and then put her arms around his waist and hugged him.

CHAPTER 2

Dale Summers couldn't figure out whether he'd just had a good day — or a really, really bad day. He was a junior diplomat at the US embassy in Windhoek, Namibia. Or a senior gopher, as it more often seemed. His job was supposed to be economic development, not that many people back in Washington took *that* seriously these days.

But the point was this: it wasn't *his job* to deal with hostages.

That would be *Jay's job*. But Jay hadn't been around. And Ambassador Bill, for some reason, had picked on Dale.

No one had expected that the kidnapped New York banker — her name, Jennifer Ross Lenehan, now firmly imprinted on Dale's fevered consciousness — would be dumped on the Embassy's doorstep that very morning by persons unknown. That kind of shit never happened. And, if it did, it was Jay's job to take care of it.

The newly-freed hostage had not been in poor condition, luckily. Dale had organised a medical check-up and later, at Ms Lenehan's insistence and with an armed escort, he'd accompanied her on a trip to Independence Avenue to buy new clothes.

Now, she was safely installed, under Bill and Elaine's supervision, at the residence. Dale had bid her goodnight and sleep well, and had then mentioned that he was going home to his wife.

But he had lied like a dog. He hadn't gone home. And he needed to get his head straight before Jay found him.

Thus here he was, perched at the expansive and, by local standards, expensive, curved bar of the Quiver Tree Brewhouse and Restaurant. He often came here to admire and, occasionally, to shoot the breeze with the beautiful, dreadlocked manager of the bar. The locals still referred to her as 'manageress', amazingly. Namibia — so beautifully, politely behind the times. He hadn't quite mastered her name yet. Began with a 'K'. But, after eighteen months in Windhoek, he was proud of his growing and sophisticated appreciation for the subtleties of African customs and culture. Not bad for a Southern boy.

His secondary purpose was to delay, for a few hours, his return to Sheryl and the apartment. (His rank at the embassy, modest as it was, ought to have brought him a small house, but rising rents in Windhoek and rising paranoia — security, Dale! — in Washington had dictated otherwise.) This reluctance was shameful. But he had to forgive himself; nobody could say he wasn't trying his hot-damn best there.

And, besides, what if Jay were waiting for him there?

As for Ms Lenehan, the former hostage, he had to ask himself why he was so taken with her. It wasn't just Sheryl, with her gloomy eyes and jittery fingers, dropping things around the house and cursing under her breath — whatever all that was about. Ms Lenehan was like a cool breath of wind, in this hot city, from some different place.

He'd only been to New York once. The people there had seemed to him confident and assertive. Kind of loud. Maybe arrogant. Not particularly polite, unlike in the South, where he'd grown up, and here in Africa.

In New York, he'd gone to Central Park and seen an open-air play — his girlfriend at time (just her and then Sheryl; not much of a record) being an English major and adventurous. In the play, a girl had washed up on a beach — shipwrecked, probably, after having been exiled, or something bad. And of course, she's of noble birth, and has to hide the fact. Why? Well, it didn't matter. She just did. And look — here's Ms Lenehan washing up in Windhoek, out of the blue, all kind of noble and not really as arrogant as all that. Did this make any sense? How many beers had he had?

He was alone but for a bottle of Windhoek lager — his third, he calculated. An early evening bustle had subsided. The city crowd — professionals, government workers and what passed for the local media — had gone, and only the jet-weary tourists remained, mostly German and on a hot bus to Etosha tomorrow.

With a grimace of calculated vulnerability and an exaggerated gesture, he asked the manager for a small bottle of water. She gave him a lustrous smile and brought it over.

He had placed his embassy-supplied phone on the counter; it rang as he was in mid-chug. Startled, he spilt half the bottle down his shirt.

Elaine Ellis. Wife of ambassador Bill. What the hell did she want? He let it ring.

Probably setting up another boozy soirée with the girls. Doesn't want to drive. Not at night, alone. Wants me to go round and pick them all up. And then take them all home after midnight. No way. Or else she's going to bitch about something I did or didn't do, or said or didn't say, regarding Ms Lenehan. Because there's something political going on there, and they're both totally on edge. Give me a break. The ringing went on much longer than he thought it would.

She's steamed about something tonight.

A hand fell his shoulder and almost rocked him off his stool.

'Dale, my man!'

'Jesus, Jay, don't do that!'

Jay Percival, who, with typical perversity, wore raggedy bush clothing with shiny black dress shoes; who walked around like a cat on the prowl with a ferocious smile; whose tangled black hair always seemed to have dust in it; and

who was the most mysterious man at the embassy — to those unfortunates who didn't know that he was all the CIA could spare for this threadbare and unthreatening corner of the globe — had materialised and, very unusually, had decided to inflict himself on Dale.

'Hey. Come outside. I want to talk to you. You paid your tab?'

Without waiting for an answer, Jay threw some South African rand on the bar, about enough for five beers. The manager gave him the same smile she had given Dale.

Outside, Jay opened the passenger door of his over-sized, white pickup. It was a new vehicle. Jay had a reputation as a reckless driver. The truck had been blasted with dust: it was cemented into the gaps around the lights; sculpted over the fenders and the running boards; blown into a miniature dunescape in the back. He'd been out of the city on the gravel roads, probably going way over the semi-official embassy speed limit of eighty k's.

So he'd been out of town, missed the fun, and come hammering back to get a play-by-play from Dale. Well, let's keep it short here. Tell him Sheryl's not well and, you know, *major shit storm* if you're not home in, oh, twenty minutes. Don't want to be running errands for mister spy-man. Bad enough with Elaine and Bill.

'Uh, Jay, Sheryl's not too good, and —'

'Sheryl's not too good and you're sitting in a bar? Listen up, Dale. Where is she?'

'In the apartment.'

'Not Sheryl. Lenehan. Jennifer R. Lenehan. The Union Bank woman.'

'At the residence. But they're shipping her out tonight.'

'Where to?'

'Don't know. Ask Bill.'

'Who's doing the shipping?'

'Got me.'

'Sure you don't know? You hear anything? I know you hear stuff.'

'Nope.'

Jay gave his lip-sucking, peeved look — generally the alternative to the cat-grin. Dale stuck his hands in his pockets and rocked his weight from one foot to the other.

'Okay, Dale. So *you* were doing my job today. I want to see how good you did. Get up here.'

Dale climbed up, grudgingly. Jay got into the driver's seat and started the engine.

'Shut the door.'

Dale shut the door, too hard.

'Hey, hey, cool it. And buckle up.'

Actually, that would be a smart move. Seeing who was driving.

They drove — slowly and calmly, to Dale's puzzlement — out of the restaurant parking lot and through the commercial centre of the city, past the neat but slightly gaudy little office blocks favoured by the local business elite. There was little traffic. They cruised along Sam Nujoma and Nelson Mandela, slowing in advance at intersections.

Jay said nothing, his jaw slack with concentration, both hands on the wheel. He was looking in the rear-view too much. Threat of remedial driver's ed? No more trucks for you, if you trash this one? Or just the usual paranoia with these guys, when they're left to their own tricks?

On the fringe of the government district, they parked outside a pizza restaurant. Inside, a smart black couple were about to finish their meal. Just in view, at the end of the street, on the left, was the corner behind which the US embassy crouched. Jay turned off the lights and killed the engine.

'So Dale. Did you see what happened? This morning?'

Now right here, Dale had a problem. He *had* seen what had happened. There he was, sitting at his desk, staring out of the window, wondering if Sheryl would let up on the What Do You Like So Much About This Place Anyway theme if only he could get them a house instead of the apartment. And he had seen it all. Like a movie. On the other hand, he had been at the back of the crowd when everyone went outside to fetch her in.

So he could just tell Jay that, until Ambassador Bill had picked on *him* to take care of her, all he'd gotten was the back-row view of a mob scene.

Plausible deniability. Keep out of the cat's clutches.

But overriding all this was one growing conviction: Ms Lenehan was in trouble. The best thing to do was to play dumb and hedge, until Jay revealed his angle.

But be careful — this guy's a pro.

'Uh, some, I guess.' A poor start.

'So you're sitting at your desk, looking out of the window and you see the whole thing.'

Shit!

'Well, kind of, yeah.'

'All righty. Tell me what you saw.'

So much for subterfuge.

'Okay, sure, fine. But look — Ms Lenehan, is she in trouble?'

'What do you think?'

'I think she is.'

'You're damn right. Want to tell me what you saw now?'

So he spilled the whole deal — the white Nissan; Ms Lenehan in the trunk; the two men, with their faces hidden; how he, Dale, had untied her wrists and ankles; how she was all scratched-up physically but pretty cool mentally; how her co-worker was still in captivity and in bad shape; how they hadn't blindfolded or hooded her — which had struck him as weird; and how he'd tried to comfort and reassure her.

They were disturbed by the owner of the pizza parlour, who banged on Jay's window and offered to present them with a take-out menu. Jay accepted it with grace and pretended to study it.

Dale moved on to the doctor's visit and the clothes-shopping trip, elaborating his tale, as he became more confident, with observations on Ms Lenehan's character and personality, which — he didn't mind if Jay knew it — he generally admired. He proceeded to speculate about why the terrorists, intimidated by her obvious resilience, had been forced to dump her.

But Jay interrupted.

'The Nissan. What model was it?'

'Maxima. Old one.'

'Thank you.'

'Welcome.'

'Okay. Now, let me ask you this: what instructions — exactly — did Bill give you about whether or not you were to say anything to anyone outside the embassy about what happened today?'

'Talk to nobody. You know, until the appropriate channels — all that crap.'

'And you talked to nobody?'

'Nobody. Absolutely nobody.' He tensed. 'Except Karl.'

Jay sat up straight.

'Who's Karl?'

'Guy from the radio station. You know — *heat on the street*. He was at the Quiver Tree.'

'*Beat on the street*. You talked to Karl from the radio station.'

'Yes. Yes. I did.'

A leopard-sized smirk spread across Jay's face.

'Thank you, Dale. Thank you again. Such a pleasure doing business with you.'

Why he was so pleased wasn't clear. But, relieved, Dale figured he must have done the right thing.

The pizza man came back to pitch for an order, but Jay waved him away and started the truck.

They drove around Robert Mugabe until they reached the intersection with Hilltop Road. Jay parked the truck half up on the sidewalk, under a jacaranda tree.

'Welcome to spy school, Dale,' Jay said. 'We're going to sit quietly and watch. This is your free introductory lesson.'

They waited for about an hour and a half.

At eleven-forty, Dale saw two black Chevrolet Blazers exit from Hilltop Road and turn right, heading south. Jay started the truck and followed, driving very gently, using only his parking lights, and at what seemed to Dale an impractical distance. They followed the two Chevys until they saw the cars turn left on to the highway that led to the airport.

'Definitely trouble,' Jay said. 'Think we should help her?'

'Yes.' Very much so.

'Think we should follow them out to the airport?'

'Yes.'

'Wrong answer. Going to play the long game, Dale. Time to take you home.'

Jay then drove smoothly to Dale's apartment building and stopped outside. Dale could see that the lights in the apartment were all out, except for the nightlight in the hallway. But the knot in his stomach he would normally have felt in this situation was absent.

He was half out of the truck when he felt Jay's grip on his arm. The man just loved to grab you.

'So I think we have an understanding, you and I. Is that right?'

'That's right.' Frankly, he wasn't sure.

'Good. And I can rely on you?'

'You can.'

'Perfect. Come around to the back of the truck.'

While Dale peered up at his bedroom window, looking for a shadow or a twitch of the shades, Jay unhooked and lowered the tailgate. Tied down with string at the rear of the dusty but otherwise empty truck bed was a small object wrapped in a mass of sacking. Jay eased himself up into the back of the truck. He untied the string and shuffled the object back on to the tailgate in front of Dale.

'Take a look at that.'

Dale groped inside the sacking and withdrew a small metallic cylinder, coloured yellow. It was finely grooved or scored along its length. At one end two rings had been painted: black and red.

'What is it?'

'It's a cluster bomb. I beg your pardon, bomblet.'

'Jesus fucking Christ, Jay —'

'Don't worry, it's okay. Just don't drop it. Now, my question to you, Dale, is this: what could possibly be the connection between *that* and your heroic lady banker Ms Jennifer Ross Lenehan?'

CHAPTER 3

Alan Michael Vickery was annoyed, bloody annoyed. One phone call had done it. His wife Mariella, the well-known interior designer (not *decorator*, Alan — don't you know the difference?), had hit the buffers on all five of her bloody credit cards during her current side-jaunt to Manhattan, a stop-over habit she'd taken up after triumphing in her campaign to force him to buy into bloody HotJets, whose posh private planes couldn't fly non-stop from bloody London to bloody Barbados.

Now it cost him three times as much.

His daughter Sara, the well-known financial liability, had finally left Cambridge — save some cash there, hopefully! — but was demanding a job at the bloody BBC, which she seemed to think he was duty-bound to provide. Oh and, by the way, she now wanted to be known as Zara with a 'Z'. Not Sara. This vital upgrade deriving from the considered advice of an unnamed 'major player' (field of expertise also unspecified) and he and her mother were just going to have to lump it. No offence, Daddy — honest.

And, as if that wasn't enough, the Conservative Party, that well-known gang of twerps and losers, had sent back his bloody cheque. What were things coming to when you couldn't bung a quick half-million to the Party of Business? (Ah, but maybe he was in the right place now!) Bloody note had come back with the cheque, according to Mariella: sorry, Alan — love the cash, it's the Caribbean banking we have a bit of an issue with. Or words to that effect.

He'd been in the men's room (remember not to call it a *toilet*, Alan), in mid-pee, when his mobile had rung. He wouldn't have answered it except that he was expecting a call from Phyllis Ann Curtin, the woman herself, in person, and he wouldn't have missed that for anything. That was why he'd made this bloody pilgrimage all the way to bloody Philadelphia.

So he'd stood there at the urinal, unzipped, phone in his left hand, listening to all this bloody nonsense from his wife, who had called him from New York on her British bloody mobile with its monstrous roaming charges. Ever heard of a payphone, darling?

He slouched out of the men's room back into the ballroom. His annoyance faded in the glow of the splendour before him. The swanky Sheffield Park Hotel — a member of the Something Whatsit Group — in Center-City Philadelphia obviously knew a thing or two about ballrooms. They had three of them. This wasn't even the biggest. Nevertheless, there were at least a hundred large, round tables, set for between twelve and twenty people each. Three thousand dollars a plate; work it out for yourself.

There were probably five hundred people here already and it was only six-thirty; kick-off at seven-fifteen. A little more than half were standing and yakking; the rest, sitting and whispering. To Vickery's watery eye, they seemed to divide neatly into three distinct demographic groups: smart, old and rich; smart, middle-aged and rich; smart, young and rich. But, despite this diversity, Vickery got the impression that they were all talking about the same thing. Something to do with Africa? What was so important about Africa?

And there were flags everywhere. American flags, of course. Someone was making a bloody bundle.

Oh, but what had he just gone and forgotten? It pained him to realise that he hadn't washed his hands. Bloody Mariella. Well, once wouldn't matter. With maximum furtiveness, he wiped his right hand against the back of his trouser-leg. Thus cleansed, he strode confidently back towards his table.

A thick place-card, fetchingly embossed with a union jack and stuck on the top of a thing that looked like a brass candlestick, described him to his peers as the representative of the Atlantic Affairs Institute of London.

Actually, he was more than a mere representative. He owned the thing, lock stock. All paid for out of his own hard-earned. More or less.

He parked himself back on the gilt and velvet, nodded graciously at his neighbours, and then he noticed a funny thing.

Wending its way between the tables, provoking waves of laughter, snorts, whoops, yahoos, and what he thought he would have to describe to Mariella later as bloody animal noises, was a strange procession.

A small group dressed in orange jump-suits, like prisoners, wearing huge polystyrene heads like gargoyles, and generally done out like a chain-gang — not real chains, of course — was being driven from table to table, with mock ferocity, by two girls with long blonde ponytails, who were toggged up like US marines. The girls were carrying buckets — with flags on, naturally, of course — and the punters were chucking hundred-dollar bills into them. Vickery didn't recognise any of the big-headed caricatures, but the words stencilled on the back of each jump-suit gave him a clue: 'Liberal Media'.

The troupe homed in on a table of little old ladies. Much joy and hooting. Out came the cash — but slowly. Can't find their purses when they're young; can't even see 'em when they're old. One veteran aimed her walking stick — that's right, give her a little help there, please — at the lead criminal. He cowered. He shook. He pleaded. He begged. Blam. No mercy.

Vickery's neighbour, Zarnoff, elbowed him.

'Got any euros, Alan?'

Very funny.

'Don't you worry, Paul, I've got some real money.'

He'd been told that Paul Zarnoff was a wit, a top-table socialiser, a financial genius, a great guy and a Leading Free-Market Thinker. What he saw sitting next to him was a croaking, seventy-five-year-old gnome.

'You know what, Alan?'

'No, Paul, what?'

'The trouble with the old Soviet Union was...'

Zarnoff paused for effect, gunning for Vickery's chest with both index fingers.

'Rubbish economy?' Vickery prompted, helpfully. 'Too much vodka in the ranks?'

'Communism.' Triumphant beam from Zarnoff.

No, really? What a turn-up. Vickery nodded in agreement. Slow and serious, that's it.

'You understand what I'm saying — correct?'

'With you all the way, Paul. Wouldn't disagree. Listen, Phyllis is definitely coming tonight, isn't she?'

'She's the introductory speaker. I imagine she'll show. That's hilarious.'

'What?'

'Liberal media.'

'Oh, right, ha-ha. Saw it coming out of the gents,' he said, improvising. 'If I wasn't already empty, I...'

Zarnoff was giving him a look. Suspicious.

'So you know Phyllis?'

'Yes. Not personally, I mean. Through contacts. I'm supposed to meet her tonight. In the flesh. Great, great honour.' He hoped that last bit sounded sincere.

'I've known her for fifty-two years. It's all a question of command and control.'

'Is it? What is?'

'The Soviet economy. Under communism, they had command and control. They just didn't have the right command and control.'

'No, no, I see that. Stands to reason. About Phyllis. I was just wondering... Did you have any dealings with her? A connection? Business, I mean.'

'Well, since you ask, we did have a relationship at one time, but don't think I'm going to —'

'No, business. *Business.*'

'Oh, I see. Hmm. Well, we always took the view that while business should under all circumstances be free — entirely free, mark you — to pursue its legitimate aims, ultimately it must be enjoined to support the power of the state. At least in foreign policy.'

This was getting exasperating.

'I'm all for that, Paul. Just tell me one thing.'

'Anything for you, my young friend.'

'Can Phyllis, can she...'

Zarnoff was giving him a nasty but encouraging look, rather like a gnome who, having recognised a fellow spirit, was prepared to lend him his fishing pole.

'Can she get me in to where — where they make the arrangements? I'm talking about the sort of —'

'I know what you're talking about.'

'Is she the right person to —'

'She's hooked up with the best of them, my boy.'

A mountainous figure subsided into the empty chair to Vickery's left. Wheezing and creaking — Vickery thought the creaking was probably the chair — it passed its chubby right hand, in one movement, from brow (moist) to hair (oily) to Vickery's left shoulder (new suit).

'Alan!'

'Hello, Bryce. Wondered where you'd got to. Saw something you fancied?'

Bryce Kellerman: Vickery's main contact and, according to the extra-special, blue-edged ID badge on a string around his neck, the leading cheese with Kellerman Associates, purveyors of Corporate Communications and Public Policy Consulting.

'So how's the loan-sharking?' Kellerman said.

Tiresome. Does it every time. Playing to the bloody gallery.

'Pretty good at the moment, although, as you are well aware, I am a responsible and fully-licensed credit provider of the highest standing.'

'And the time-shares?'

'The market for quality shared-ownership vacation residences is, sad to say, a bit slow, Bryce. With this economy, what do you expect?'

'And, ah, what was the other thing?'

Here it comes.

'Rats. Right, the rats. How're the rats?'

'Environmental health services. Growth area, believe me.'

'So you're smokin' 'em out and you're huntin' 'em down?' Big laugh from Kellerman; quite offensive, really.

'Spot on.'

All a bit rich this, coming from a former S&L bandit, junk-bond kingpin, dot-com pluggger, sub-prime scammer, serial intern-fancier and Democratic Party chuck-out.

'Okay, great to hear you're still king of the financial jungle, and everything's sweet. Now here's the good news. Alan, you want to meet with Phyllis, right? You come all the way over the pond, you pay three thousand bucks to sit... Oh, didn't see you there, Paul, I'm sorry. How's it hanging? Alan?'

'As I recall, you promised —'

'Not a promise, Alan. But, as it happens, thanks to me, you lucked out. She's holed up on the fourteenth floor, with some people — you'll really like them, trust me — and I'm authorised to bring you up and introduce you. Now. So let's move it. You're gonna get fifteen minutes, twenty max.'

Suddenly energised, Vickery hopped out of his seat with a quick nod to Zarnoff, who replied with one of his best conspiratorial smirks, and trotted along in Kellerman's wake as he steamed across the ballroom towards the elevators.

Predictably, on reflection, the Something Whatsit Group had neglected to install an official thirteenth floor, so Vickery found himself yanked out of the elevator prematurely into an oak-panelled hallway of stirringly-named 'plutonium senior suites'. No, hang on, his error — platinum. Freudian, you call that.

'We're looking for Excellence and Achievement,' Kellerman announced, skirting Ethics and Responsibility and bypassing Leadership and Integrity.

Is he sending me up? Never mind. We're off to see the wizard. Or, in this case, wizard-ess. Or should that be witch?

They marched on. The suite names came in a swirly italic script, which was hard to read. Vickery saw it first.

'Is this it?'

Kellerman licked his lips.

'Yeah, this is it. Ready?'

'Ready.'

Kellerman buzzed. They were instantly admitted by a threateningly tall young man in a grey suit, crew cut, yellow tie and ear-piece, who must have been stationed behind the door.

Kellerman tapped his ID badge, respectfully.

The tall young man directed them across a lobby full of urns to what turned out to be a kind of conference-room-cum-den. The blinds were down and the lights were on.

Phyllis sat poker-straight at a round table with two fifty-something business types: one fat, one thin, both balding. Vickery found himself flicking his glossy mane, like a nervous racehorse.

In the corner of the room was a leather sofa, occupied by a youngish man with long hair, a roll-top jumper, leather trousers, an ear-piece and a MacBook Pro. He paid no attention either to Kellerman or to Vickery, but poked methodically at his computer. As he poked, he shifted in his seat, which was a little low for comfort. The result was a soft squeaking of leather upon leather, which made Vickery cringe — though he could see that Kellerman was trying not to laugh.

Phyllis herself was as advertised: stiff high-collar suit, in deep raspberry; rigid hair, in perma-frost; regulation pearls; cappuccino tan; petite. But the really eerie thing was her skin. Perhaps it was just the light in the room, but Vickery didn't think so. She had to be almost as old as Zarnoff, yet she possessed the barely-crinkled outer wrapping of a forty-year-old. It was like a science-fiction movie.

'Sir Alan, please...'

She nodded towards the one empty chair at the table. Vickery sat.

'Actually, I'm not quite —'

'It's any day now — right, Alan?' Kellerman managed to crash land on the sofa without disturbing Leather Man.

'Any day,' Vickery lied.

In fact, he'd been blacklisted for a *Sir* by that bitch Christine Sharp, Member of Parliament for Bitchington North (Labour, old, very), and Chairperson of the House of Commons Committee on Business Ethics and Corporate Governance. Her words might have been seared into his soul, had he been the sort of person susceptible to soul-searing.

Mr Vickery has demonstrated beyond doubt his dedication to the tax avoidance industry; however, one struggles to uncover evidence of a similar commitment to the British economy or to society at large.

So no chance until the next election, if then.

'We'll go with Sir Alan. I'm sure it's a foregone conclusion. And I think the title will work well for us. This is Raymond Priles...'

The fat one. Call him Ray.

'...and this is Martin Bazon.'

The thin one. Marty.

'We've all read your excellent reports from the AAI.'

Ray and Marty nodded, without enthusiasm.

As well they might. The Atlantic Affairs Institute consisted of Vickery himself; the two girls at the office, in sophisticated Paddington; a brace of hired pros, paid by the hour; one spotty youth for the web site; Mariella, when she was in a good mood; and an intermittent supply of Sara's dumb, aristo boyfriends. Sorry — Zara.

'Hullo,' he said. 'Great to meet you. Glad you like the stuff. We take a lot of pride. Uncompromising. Forthright.'

Wait a minute. Priles and Bazon — those names were familiar. The top cashers-in, if he wasn't mistaken, in the last big corporate bust but — what, twenty maybe? He studied the mug-shots. It was them all right. What an honour.

Ray and Marty gave him a nod each, not unfriendly, but not wholly welcoming either.

'We may have to cut this short,' Phyllis went on, 'so, if you don't mind, I'll say my piece, and then, I believe, Raymond and Martin have a proposal for you.'

'Right-ho.'

What was the name of that company that Priles and Bazon had driven down a mineshaft, having pawned the silver beforehand? One of those snappy monikers that sounds nifty but means bugger-all. MoroNet? RipCo?

'At the Liberty Club, our *mission* — like yours — is to bring to the halls of public policy debate the *finest* distilled wisdom of all of the best minds in the fields of free-market economics, libertarian philosophy and the New Democratic Consensus.'

Okay on the first two. What was the New Democratic Consensus?

'So it is not *unnatural* that we should have developed, over a long period, many valued and esteemed *relationships* at the highest levels, both inside and outside of government. As I'm sure you have.'

That would be an exaggeration, but was truer than many people might suppose. Was it PonziTech? FiberCon?

'Now *Bryce*,' Phyllis continued, with an impertinent flick of the wrist towards Kellerman, 'persuades us that you and your *organisation* may possess the requisite intellectual firepower, financial resources, and other capabilities to make possible a new and exciting international partnership.'

Kellerman appeared to be inspecting his knuckles.

'We *envisage*,' Phyllis said, 'a *coalition* of the best and the brightest, drawn from the Liberty Club itself, from among our *friends* in government, the corporate sector, academia and the churches... And *you*. Some of the *best* people are already working — so *very* hard! — in our cause; it is now time for us to bring our message of liberty to your... Your island.'

'Great idea,' Vickery said. 'Perfect. Lot of potential over there, hardly made a start.' ScamGen?

'Now, of course —'

Phyllis put her elbows on the table and raised her hands to her temples, as if to screen from her vision some imaginary awfulness.

'— the *nuts* and *bolts* of all this are not my *domain*. That I leave to my wonderful Bryce. I believe he knows of some *projects*.'

Down went the hands. Up went the intensity of the gaze.

'But I want to ask you *this*, Sir Alan: are you a *believer*?'

Crikey.

CHAPTER 4

Vickery bit his lip with great shrewdness. A *believer*? 'What in?' he almost said. Careful, now: wrong answer here and it's game over, nul points. Kellerman should have warned him.

What to say? Mariella had a stab at Buddhism, once. Any good? No, not religious enough. Say something. He opened his mouth to speak, but inspiration did not descend.

'He's an Anglican,' Kellerman said, shrugging.

Phyllis sniffed and studied the ceiling for a moment. Then, with a puzzled shake of the head and a great sigh of what could well have been spiritual fortitude, she appeared to dismiss the issue. She rose — with the possible assistance of hidden machinery — to her feet, and held out her right hand.

Vickery stood, began to reach for the handshake, and then, recalling with a jolt his dreadful sin of omission on exiting the bathroom, froze — all of him, that is, except for the vile, polluted hand itself, which trembled and — it seemed to him in his panic and his horror — glowed green. It was one of those two-second intervals that seem to last minutes. On one side of his field of vision, he saw the first blush of doubt on the faces of Ray and Marty. On the other side, he saw Kellerman's eyes begin to bulge. And, right ahead, he thought he saw the tiniest frown begin to form on Phyllis's porcelain forehead. His once-in-a-lifetime opportunity swung in the balance. The drawbridge was about to fly up and toss him in the moat. There was nothing for it.

He shook.

'I'm sure this marks the start of something *very* special,' she said, and then shuffled off to berate Leather Man, probably about the squeaking.

Vickery sat.

For a moment he felt a little off-balance, queasy. These people took everything so seriously. Well, all right, it's business, it's politics, it's serious, but — well, there's life, too, isn't there?

And he wasn't quite sure what he'd agreed to. A *coalition*? Did that mean he was going to be ordered about? Then again, any partnership with Phyllis Ann

Curtin and her mob counted as an entrée. Even if Kellerman gave him some dirty jobs, which was likely. Got to *pay to play* — as Kellerman liked to say, often.

'Hey Alan, great web site. Neat layout, quality content. My wife loves it — oh my Lord, does she. Especially the cartoons,' Ray said, in high musical tones that didn't sit well with his girth.

Cartoons? News to Vickery, but worth an extra tenner in young spotty's pay packet.

'Great,' he said, weakly.

'So you heard about TechStar, huh?' Marty said, having ceded the pleasantries to Ray.

That was the name. TechStar. Mundane, as it turned out. Marty was leering at him in a predatory sort of way.

'Read about it in The Economist,' Vickery said, half-lying.

Marty's face, red to begin with, emurpled.

'Don't believe what you read. Bullshit. Fucking smart-ass lying bullshit. There's one reason we went down. One. You want to know, I'll tell you. Those fuckers at Union Bank. They're looking at a couple of these structured things we did, and suddenly it's like, oh — I think this looks like a loan, let's tell fucking Moody's. Moody's fucks our rating, Union cuts our fucking lines, the market fucks our stock and by this point TechStar is totally fucked.'

He paused for breath. Vickery saw Ray and Kellerman turn to see how Phyllis was taking this. But Phyllis and Leather Man had absconded into a kitchenette and shut the door.

'Okay, we made some arrangements with the stock options, on a personal level. But the company is still — is still screwed, okay? Why? Why is Union doing this to us? This is the fucking question. Here's why. They got a sweet IPO deal with that fucker Tom Lester at Giraffe Corp, who just happens to be our fucking competitor, and sold us the fuck out. Take a look at your friends of fucking Tom at Union, see how much they made on that fucking deal. And his ex-wife is screwing the CEO. Did you read *that* in the fucking Economist?'

Vickery looked at Ray. Ray looked at Kellerman.

'Well, Alan,' Kellerman said, from his now even lower seat on the sofa, 'let me explain what Marty just said. Okay with you, Marty?'

No answer.

'TechStar had a banking relationship with Union Bank of New York. For reasons which are still — pardon me, Marty — in dispute, the bank woke up one day and decided that TechStar was a whole lot riskier than they thought the day before. And this led to an unfortunate series of events culminating in our old friend, chapter eleven. And an SEC investigation, not that that matters. Okay so far?'

Vickery nodded.

'Now Marty feels that this whole thing was cooked up by the bank in conspiracy — conspiracy, right, Marty? — with this little software company called Giraffe, which was a competitor with TechStar but also a favoured customer of the bank. Marty further believes that executives at the bank profited fraudulently. Tom Lester is the guy who owns Giraffe, or most of it. And he bought your software division for pennies, didn't he, Marty?'

No answer.

'Ray?'

'I'd say that's pretty close.'

'Alan?'

'Must have been awful, what a shame. Can't trust anyone, can you? Not banks, anyway. What's it to me?'

'We want you to buy Giraffe,' Ray said.

This was unexpected.

'But I don't want to buy any software companies.'

Ray seemed disappointed. Marty had slouched down in his chair and was drawing patterns on the table-top with his index finger, in some kind of funk. The room was feeling warmer.

'Never been in that business. Don't understand it. All too airy-fairy,' Vickery said, ramming the point home. 'Wouldn't touch one with a non-stick barge-pole,' he said, clinching it.

A little victory, he thought. Important to make them understand there are limits.

Kellerman stirred awkwardly in his nest, and mopped his brow.

'I think you *do* want to buy this company, Alan. Let me tell you why.'

This should be interesting.

'First, it's a great business. You don't know software, so I'll tell you. Marty's software was a crock, he'd be the first to admit it — but he had a couple of good guys and now Tom Lester's got them.'

'What happened to the others?'

'Who knows, they're on the street. Now, Giraffe's code is shit-hot. Lester knows what he's doing, he sticks to his stuff, and he doesn't have to buy three companies a month to keep up his earnings. Hey, Marty?'

No response from Marty.

'He has this thing, it's amazing. You hook it up to your funds transfer, you hook it up to your accounting, you hook it up to your back office.'

Ray was sitting up straight, a vacant beam on his face, as if he were dreaming an insider-dream.

'It comes back and it says, hey — look what's going on here. You got your insider trading, you got your market manipulation, you got your suspicious trading patterns, you got your regulatory infractions, you got your capital inadequacy, you got your terrorist finance networks, you got your money-laundering —'

Money-laundering! Shiver down the spine, as they say. There but for the grace. — and so on.'

'And it actually works?' Vickery said, with dismay.

'Pattern-matching,' Kellerman said. 'Can't beat it.'

Ray was now beaming directly at Vickery, clasping his hands together in a sinister gesture of piety and incipient joy, and generally looking as if he'd found a long-lost son. Marty had given up doodling and was rubbing his eyes.

'Well, that's — that's absolutely fascinating. Technology, I dunno... I mean, the things they can do these... But, honestly, it's not my thing, probably ruin it. Probably couldn't raise the cash, anyway.'

'No problem, Alan. Two reasons. First, you're going to get it cheap. In fact, it's not going to cost you a penny. Second, you don't have to raise any cash. Ray and Marty will provide the funding.'

'We prefer to keep a low profile,' Ray said. 'It's the right thing to do.'

So that was it. Time put your foot down. Throw a little tantrum, if necessary.

'No, I'm sorry, it's not for me. Wish you every success, and so on, but no. Can't do it. To be perfectly blunt, I don't like the sound of the bloody thing at all. Sorry, Ray, but there it is.'

There followed a pause for reflection.

'First thing we do,' Marty said, rising from the depths, 'change the fucking name.'

Another awkward moment.

'Alan,' Kellerman said, 'why do you think Ray and Marty are here? Now? With Phyllis? On this auspicious occasion?'

'Opportunism?'

'It's more than that. This software has huge, huge applications in national security. Homeland security, if you will. Lester won't and can't sell it to the Federal Government. There's some mistrust there; it goes back aways. But Ray and Marty can. What I'm saying is, with Phyllis's help, they can. And if you've got a contract with the Defense Department, then hey...'

They had him. No deal with Ray and Marty, no deal with Phyllis. Pay to play.

'Second thing,' Marty said, 'kill the fucking aid program.'

'What?' Vickery said, distracted.

'Oh, our guy Tom Lester thinks he's a philanthropist', Kellerman said. 'Gives money to Africa. Forget it, it's not important. Oh, one more thing Alan. We have a kind of a feeling — a pretty strong feeling, if you really want to know — that Lester's stock price is going take a hit. Maybe several hits.'

'That's always the problem with these personality-led companies,' Ray said. 'Think of poor old Lehman.'

'Well, well, well,' Vickery said, 'this is interesting. So very interesting. My lucky day. So glad I came. What would you have me do?'

'Just your usual, Alan, please,' Kellerman said. 'One of your layered offshore deals. Have your offshore entities buy some little do-nothing companies over here and start accumulating Giraffe stock. Watch for the price hits. Don't go over the threshold until we're ready to make a play. Ray and Marty will fund you. They'll do some swaps or some structured notes, whatever.'

'Should I be writing this down?'

'No need. Ray?'

Ray produced a folder from his briefcase and gave it to Vickery.

'Make sure you zap it when you're done. You look like a man with a shredder. Now, are you happy? You got your political ambitions, that's nice, we all agree with that. And you got a share in a deal that will make you rich. Richer.'

Well, there was always that. A point to emphasise vis-à-vis Mariella.

'It's so good to be doing this with you,' Ray said. 'Are you ever in Fort Lauderdale? We're building a house there. You should come visit with us. And a golf course.'

Ray was smiling at him. So was Kellerman. Feebly, he smiled back.

Marty's mood, perversely, seemed to have worsened; he was kicking the legs of the table. Vickery began to wonder if there was more to come. But then Phyllis and Leather Man emerged once more from the kitchenette in a flurry. Leather Man, revoltingly, had his finger in his ear.

'It's the General. He's in the building. He's got new information. The word is they've been found.'

Vickery was, all at once, off the agenda.

'Who?' he asked Kellerman.

'The General. The candidate. General Fricke. Come on, Alan, time to go.'

'Who's been found?'

'Who do you think? Come on.'

Phyllis and the TechStar twins went into a huddle. Leather Man urgently wound down his MacBook Pro. Like two unwanted guests at a wedding, Vickery and Kellerman slipped out of the conference room, glided across the urn room and, finding the door already held open for them, landed effortlessly on the hallway carpet, leaving Excellence and Achievement behind, at least for now.

Vickery trudged back to the elevators, folder under arm, behind Kellerman.

It had been satisfactory, on the whole, if you didn't count the ambush. Perhaps he could string them along and weasel out later. But there were a few points he wanted to clarify now.

'Do you think Ray and Marty can come up with the cash?'

'Just because they're bankrupt, doesn't mean they're not rich, Alan. You should know that.'

'Who's Mr Squeaky on the sofa? Is that her son?'

'No, that's her gigolo. Or toy boy, I think you say.'

'You're joking.'

'No, really. I mean, I don't think they do anything, it's just for show. She gives him stuff to do, you know — unimportant stuff. She's got a whole staff for the really important things.'

'Who's General Freaky?'

'Fricke. Frick-ee. General Wallace Fricke. Or Friggin' Wallace, as he's known to our young men and women in uniform. He's our candidate for senator. You must have heard of him.'

'So he's getting my three thousand dollars?'

Kellerman pulled up short and turned on Vickery. He held up his right hand level with his head, like an old-fashioned policeman directing traffic, or a corporate executive about to take the fifth.

'No, he is not. Listen carefully, Alan. You, as a foreign national, are prohibited by federal law from contributing campaign funds to any federal candidate. Got it? Plus, this event tonight is not for Fricke. It's for Phyllis's Liberty Club foundation. Okay? That's why it's in Philly. Fricke just happens to be the main guest speaker. And the Liberty Club is non-partisan, don't forget.'

They started walking again.

'You know, really, Alan — you got to be a bit careful about what you say. I know you've got your ironic bent —'

'Bent?'

'Bent. And your sense of humour, and all that. But this is serious. If you screw up with Phyllis you're going to be in deep shit, forget Ray and Marty. Okay?'

'Okay.'

Point taken. Worth thinking about.

'Wait a minute. General Thingy. Wasn't he the one who —'

'Yeah, that's right, he's the one. I thought you'd remember.'

'Seems to be doing all right, though.'

'Yeah.'

'Is he going to win?'

'Yeah, he's cruising.'

'Got enough money?'

'Five times as much as the other guy.'

'He was the one who blew up —'

'Yeah, yeah. You obviously know the story. So he took out the village, sure, and there just happened to be a small number of villagers left inside. He gave them time to get out. They didn't get out. Either they didn't want to leave, or they weren't allowed to. That's unfortunate. What're you going to do?'

'There's a saying...'

'Destroy it in order to save it, yeah, I know. Point is, it happens to be true sometimes. I know some of your guys over there nearly blew a fuse. But more and more people are coming to understand. Really. You know?'

Vickery said nothing.

'Oh, Alan — my fee, right? Same arrangements as usual. Only this time, not Bermuda. Make it, oh, make it Saint Vincent. Okay? You're welcome.'

In silence, they made their way back to the ballroom.

The table was now full, but for Vickery and Kellerman. They sat. Zarnoff appeared to have nodded off. Kellerman took out a tiny tablet computer and began scrolling and tapping.

'Oh, shit!' he said.

'What?' Vickery asked.

'The General's going to make an announcement. You know what that means.'

'No. What?'

'Don't you read the papers? Oh — that's right, you read The Economist. Forget it, Alan. It's bad news but it's nothing to do with you.'

'If you say so.'

Vickery brooded. Software nuts, money-laundering, golf courses, stock scams, plague of the neo-con zombies, expletive-prone executives, gigolos, that handshake: how to make a coherent narrative out of all this for Mariella's benefit? Simple: show her the money. But this intuition brought down a great weariness upon him; what a way to make a living, eh?

Phyllis was wheeled on stage, literally. Some hoots and cheers, but mostly polite applause. Zarnoff, not asleep after all, leaned over to Vickery.

'Her legs give out after about six-thirty,' he said.

Vickery gave him a blank look.

Zarnoff opened his mouth to add something, but changed his mind. Instead, he turned to the stage, rapt. He tried to make a little tent or church with his fingers, but failed and meekly put his hands in his lap.

Vickery fell into a reverie of Caribbean beaches, post office boxes, glass-bottomed boats, bikini girls, sea-shells, shell corporations, currency regulations, accommodation addresses, government officials, swimming pools, encrypted communications, lobster dinners and bearer bonds.

During this he was intermittently aware of Phyllis's address — duty, honour, morality, the stock market, charity, war, sealing the borders, godliness, the flat tax, education vouchers, Islamofascism, socialised medicine, that shameful woman Diane Pennyman who wanted to restore the death tax, school text books, the European Union, stem cells, Chinese aggression, hedge fund regulation; pretty much the normal stuff.

Then she was off and the General was on, in a suit.

Uproar. A band — somewhere — started playing. Not Hail to the Chief, but a ditty of similar intent. Shrieks, whistles, blonde marine girls jumping up and down.

But the General looked serious. He held a small piece of paper.

Eventually, the crowd got the message and a hush fell.

The General looked at the floor, scratched his eyebrow, looked up.

'I have just received some information,' he said, pausing to let this sink in and to build up tension. 'You will all be aware of the two bankers from New York...'

He looked at the paper.

'...from Union Bank... Charles A. Barclay...'

Another glance down.

'...and Jennifer R. Lenehan...'

A solemn pan from one side of the ballroom to the other.

'...who were abducted at gunpoint in Africa six weeks ago.'

He lowered the paper.

'I now have to tell you... That they have been found. They did not survive.'

A general gasp. A wail of anguish from the back.

Vickery felt a tug in his stomach. That's awful. Truly awful. Whatever your views on banks, when it comes down to it, they're only human, aren't they? Shame he has to start his speech that way. Wait a minute. Which bank was that?

He turned to his left, but Kellerman had vanished.

To his right, Zarnoff scowled like a gnome whose worst fears had just been confirmed.

'Which bank?' Vickery said, as softly as he could.

'Some big Wall Street — oh, Union Bank, Union Bank of New York,' Zarnoff said.

How curious.

CHAPTER 5

Dale Summers sat in his wife's Toyota, with the motor running and the air blasting, half up on the sidewalk at the foot of the hill upon which Ambassador Bill had leased his castle.

His hair was still wet from the shower — he'd wanted to get out of the apartment before Sheryl got up — and he was trying to dry it out in front of the air vents. (His own car, an old Cherokee, might have done a better job but Jay had asked to borrow it, and he hadn't been in the frame of mind to refuse.) He was chilling the heck out of his head and the car smelt of damp and peach — from Sheryl's shampoo.

But at the same time he was fuming and fretting, something bad.

His fingers, despite the scrub-fest in the shower, still stank, he felt sure, of that bomb or grenade or whatever the hell it was that Jay had tricked him into picking up. Dale couldn't smell it himself, but there were machines, weren't there? Everywhere, these days. What if he set off an alarm? As for Jay, the guy got off on that kind of stuff; he was a menace, one of your new-style, unbuttoned, unhinged, *humint* menaces. And what's human intelligence now? Trucks, guns, drones, and boots on the ground. Or shiny wingtips, in Jay's case.

A laundry truck drove past and started to labour up the hill. He ducked down and pretended to be looking for something under the seat. Getting kind of paranoid, hey Dale?

But here was the thing: Bill had told him — told everybody — not to talk about Ms Lenehan. Not inside the embassy, not outside, not at home. *If you please, people* (meaning: that's an order).

And he, Dale, had gone and told Karl.

He'd had this, well, exciting kind of day, he'd had a couple of beers, he'd wanted to talk to someone — Sheryl not being an option at that point — and Karl was a friend, an okay guy. It wasn't like he was the Voice of Namibia or something, or a news anchor, or even a journalist — he was just a drive-time DJ who did traffic segments and read some of the ads himself. So why should he, Dale, feel so bad? Worst case, it was a technical infraction; Bill would understand. All the same...

Okay, let's be honest: what was eating him most was the way Jay had taken the Karl thing. He'd been pleased. More than pleased. Why, exactly? Didn't say, did he? Same old arrogance: we know all this incredible stuff, and you never will, because we run everything out of the back of the store and you're just something we put in the window. Public diplomacy and bilateral trade relations — yours to run on a dollar a day.

So maybe Jay was going to tell Bill and get Dale fired. But why should Jay care? That didn't make sense. Dale and Jay hardly knew each other. And it was widely understood that Bill and Jay kept way apart. Bill wasn't dumb.

And why was Jay so stuck on Ms Lenehan? (Unless for the same reason that he, Dale Summers, a mid-level foreign service bureaucrat with marital issues, was.) Why had they driven all over the city and then staked out Bill's house?

And, really, come on — what was all that shit with the bomb?

Well, there was really only one theory that met the case. It all had to do with the great, epochal régime-change. The War in Heaven. The humiliation, purgation and resurrection of the CIA.

It went like this.

The old guys were out of the game now, and they knew it, and they were spitting about it. First, they lost their wonderful old KGB, and all that Cold War glamour stuff. Huge old peace dividend. Didn't see it coming. You can bet that was like bad news in the mail for them.

And then, second, all this new shit comes along, and the War Zones, and people are going crazy and it's like: why are you spying on these people, why don't you just kill them? But that's not so cool. That's just... Murder. The old guys don't want to do that. Most of them. So out they go.

In comes the new generation. Young. Educated. High-tech. Motivated. Ideological. Violent. Like Jay. They get a couple of months' training — because, hey, what's to know? — and they're let loose. So then this happens: a lot of freelance fun and screwing around, meaning nothing to them but a pain in the ass for everybody else.

His hair was dry now, more or less. But, like his mood today, it was kind of spiky. He turned the air down.

So the issue, now he'd really gotten to it, was this: go confess to Bill, or sit it out and hope nothing happened?

Better confess.

He jammed the car into first gear and lurched up the hill.

The guys on the gate recognised him but didn't make fun of the car, as he'd been expecting. In fact, they seemed pretty downbeat.

The main door to the house was open. He tip-toed in, aiming to avoid Elaine and the inevitable harangue on the subject of having embassy-supplied cell phones and not answering them.

He peeked into each of the main rooms on the ground floor. Nobody around. Elaine still sleeping it off, most probably.

It was still early, but getting hotter by the minute. He swung by the main kitchen. Nobody there either, surprisingly. Somebody, though, had left a milk carton open on the counter. There were pots on the floor. In fact, the kitchen

was a mess. Elaine making her views known again, probably, after a night on the bottle.

He wandered out to the veranda at the rear of the house. There was an empty wine bottle on one of the tables. The terrace hadn't been swept; it was covered with petals, leaves, bits of twig.

He scanned the garden. At first he could see no one. Then he saw a narrow figure emerge from the shadows at the near edge of the pool and swim slowly and deliberately toward the far end: Ambassador Bill doing his morning laps.

Maybe he should come back later. No, get it over with.

He put his shades on and ambled awkwardly down to the pool.

Bill reached the sunny end, stopped briefly to take a breath, turned and struck out again for the shaded end. And if there were any embassy employees standing by the side of the pool, dressed in suit and tie, and trying to attract his attention by hopping from foot to foot and flapping their hands against their empty jacket pockets then, well, the ambassador must have decided not to notice them immediately.

Discouraged, Dale took off his shades and stood still.

Bill swam back to the sunny end and stopped. He stood with his back to Dale, breathing deeply.

This didn't look too great.

Then he turned and waded over so that he stood in front of Dale, about a yard away from the edge. There was something reduced or affronted in his normally magisterial demeanour, as if someone had taken his empire away and given him this pool instead. He waved at Dale to come closer.

Dale crept up to the edge of the pool and hunkered down on his heels. He couldn't resist dipping his hand in the water. Kind of cold; not heated. The lapping of the water filled his ears. Sunlight, reflecting off the surface, almost blinded him. A whiff of chlorine made him think of the kitchen in their obsessively-cleaned apartment and Sheryl sitting down alone with her cup of coffee, not reading the newspaper.

'Um, I thought I ought to —'

'I was just trying to think.'

'Yes.'

'I didn't mean to ignore you.'

'No.'

'I suppose you know they've taken her?'

'Well...'

'There was nothing I could do.'

'Ah.'

'Nothing anybody could do.'

'No.'

'Not even Jay.'

Dale said nothing.

'You haven't seen him?'

'Jay? No.'

'He's no good. I never trusted him.'

'No.'

'We need to worry about ourselves now.'

'Do we?'

'Yes. Yes, we do.'

The ambassador looked down at the water for a moment. Then he held his hand out to Dale.

'So. We in this together?' he said. 'What do you think, Dale?'

For a moment he thought the old man was going to pull him in. Then he saw that the droplets under the old guy's eyes weren't pool water, but tears.

*

So Dale Summers didn't confess to Ambassador Bill, after all. Given the old man's condition, it didn't seem appropriate, or wise.

Furthermore, Bill seemed to have gotten the story all wrong, and this was a worry. But Dale wasn't ready to contradict him — not yet. Despite appearances, the old guy was pretty sharp, and Dale wasn't sure that he trusted this hitherto unadvertised emotionalism.

Dale knew his boss, after all. The US Ambassador to Namibia had spent a third of his life in Africa. He had laboured on the logistics of progress and humanity, on the State Department's payroll if not always in its good books; he had lived within the sound of guns during the Great Power proxy wars of the 70s and 80s, with only a desk and a typewriter for protection; he had not been political enough to rise beyond Africa — he had been too interested in Africans; he was seen to be crusty on the outside and deemed to be even crustier on the inside. But now progress and humanity were forgotten and Freedom and Democracy were what you got, whether you liked it or not. And old Bill was going to pieces in front of him.

So, like a fire-tender trailing an obsolescent liner on its final approach into port, Dale tacked cautiously along behind his boss on the short voyage back to the house.

He had a developing intuition that Jennifer Lenehan, though assertive and smart and able, he suspected, to see right through him — and maybe also a little touchy, he would have to say — was an innocent in play. Two sides contested her. One side was hostile to her. The other... He didn't know. Which side was Bill on? Which side was Jay on, if not merely his own, as usual? Could he find out what the contest was? He already knew which side he was on.

'Washington says they still don't know who took them,' Bill said.

He was repeating himself. This had been his refrain as he'd limped and dripped and muttered to himself, from the pool to the pool-house, and all the way back to the main kitchen, with a pink towel over his shoulders and Dale in tow.

'That's bad enough. They say they don't know who took them.'

Dale didn't know either, Jay's insinuations notwithstanding, so he'd said nothing. Plus, after Karl, extra prudence was called for.

'They say they don't know why. That's bad. They say it's just terrorism, what else do you need to know? That's worse. But it's not the worst. Want to know what is?'

They were sitting at a large table normally used for food preparation. A box of fresh vegetables, the day's delivery, sat untouched at one end. Dale noticed that the kitchen had that almost imperceptible film of uncleanness that you get when you skipped a day in a place that was cleaned all the time. Like the Summers family home in Greenville, but not like the apartment; Sheryl cleaned too much — she was wearing the place away.

Bill was drinking Irish whiskey out of a tea-cup. Elaine had still not appeared. This was not their normal routine, Dale felt.

'They say — are you listening? They say that she was abducted twice. *Twice*. What do you make of that?'

'That's not right. Can't be.' Unless you counted last night.

'They say she and Mr Barclay were taken in Johannesburg, and it was just another one of these attacks. You know — there have been so many. But in *North Africa*, not there. And this attack is not typical. This is obvious even to me. It's too targeted, too quiet; there's no video. There isn't even a web site. Are you following me?'

'Think so.'

'Oh and publicly, it's the same as usual: we won't rest until the freedom-haters are brought to justice; we expect total cooperation from the South Africans. With most countries, that means we threaten to cut off their money or their guns and then we wait to see if that encourages them. This time, so I hear, the word is *back off and leave it to us*. What do you take from that?'

'Not sure as I know.'

'No. Nor me. But then after six weeks Ms Lenehan is delivered to our door by taxi and they don't even stop for the fare. What's going on? Well, she tells us. She tells *you*. *You* get the story. *You* are in a position to make a judgement. Responsibility falls on *you*.'

Dale felt his face begin to colour. Bill sipped his whiskey.

'But sometimes the foolish are fortunate. At the beginning, at least.'

Another sip.

'Lucky for you our military friends were in a hurry last night. Might have come looking for you. Out somewhere on your own, were you?'

'At the Quiver Tree. I just — it's kind of a good place to keep up with all the local —'

'She was abducted twice, Washington says. There's a second group. Takes her from the first group. Gives her back to us. We need to find these people, they say. To give them a reward, I say, a vote of thanks from Congress, a Presidential commendation? No, they say. These people are a threat. We need to find them. Is this making sense to you?'

'Well, no. Because —'

'They don't care about the first group. But they've got their hair on fire — those are their exact words — about the second. That's what they're all fussed about.'

'They are? But there's only one group... You know, she told me —'

'Have you picked up on the missing issue here, Dale?'

'Do they think that someone —'

'What about Mr Charles Barclay of New Jersey? Doesn't anyone care about him? Where is he? Is he still alive? How come he doesn't check in here in the company of Ms Lenehan? Was she able to explain that to you? Why does Douglas Moreland insist that Mr Barclay is dead?'

'I guess he might —'

'Why does Douglas Moreland tell his staff to tell the news media that *both of them* are dead — the day before one of them washes up here in, as far as I can tell, perfect working order?'

Time to show solidarity. First name terms.

'Ah. You know, Bill, I agree with you — this all sounds pretty screwy.'

True: the story had gotten all twisted up. He ought to say something. Not that Douglas Moreland was talking out of his ass, even though this was a perennial and popular view among the lower ranks at the embassy and throughout the tiny diplomatic community in Windhoek — even including the Brits, after a couple of beers at the Quiver Tree.

Nor should he say that Jennifer had told him, while the two of them were on their emergency clothes-shopping trip to Mr Price, and she was measuring herself up against a pair of slim-fit, boot-cut jeans and waiting (provocatively?) for his opinion, that he *wasn't exactly what she'd been led to expect*. He'd homed in on that give-away word, of course, being a sharper cookie than some people, including Bill, appeared to think. *Led*. She had been told to expect somebody. But not Dale. How about somebody slick and sly, somebody pickled in conspiracy? How about somebody like Jay?

Bill looked mournful.

'Dale,' he said — and then made one of those chewing noises that old people use to signify distaste. 'Do you know where in hell Jay has been of late?'

The old coot was reading his mind. But what could Dale tell him about Jay?

How about this.

Jay's been out in the desert, degrading embassy transportation again. And he's been up north, probably in the old bandit country in the Caprivi, probably close to the Angolan border. There's something going on up there and now he thinks that's where they took her. The place is so piled-high with advanced munitions that he figures he can steal one without the bad guys noticing. Assuming they are bad guys — all a matter of politics, these days, as everybody knows but daren't say. Lots more terrorists than freedom-fighters. All depending on which way the wind blows in Washington. And Jay gets so excited he doesn't make it back to Windhoek in time.

But who told him he needed to be back here? Good question, Bill, huh? And then he fakes me out by pretending he thinks she's some kind of arms smuggler. Which he knows she's not. Wants to make sure I'm not one of the people he suspects are reporting back on him. And he's happy about the Karl thing — oh, you still don't know about that, do you, Bill? And he and I know — because we saw the cars and she's not here any more — that Moreland's people have shipped her out (abducted a third time, must be getting sick of it!) to an undisclosed location, probably military, and she's not going to like it. So, to answer your question, Bill...

'Not really,' he said. 'Don't want to know, to tell the truth.'

'You *have* seen him. When?'

How come everybody could read his thoughts, including Sheryl?

'Last night. At the Quiver Tree. Think I saw him there. In passing.'

'In passing? Come on, Dale — he never goes there. He was looking for you. What did he say? Speak up.'

'Well, ah, he thinks she's in trouble.'

'You could have told him that. Is he already involved in this?'

'He's making out like he's interested in it.'

'Actively interested?'

'I guess. I mean he was acting like he was. But he's so full of — he's what everybody says he is.'

'And does he know more about this than we do?'

'He gave me that impression.'

'Is he the reason that she was dumped here? Or part of it?'

'Didn't say.'

'What do you think?'

'It's possible.'

'Well then we're finished. Thank you.'

And it seemed to Dale at that moment that Bill descended into a state of fist-clenching defeat, looking like he was going to crack up right there or start blubbing. Something big and nasty must have gone down the night before while Dale was joy-riding with Jay. Jay brought trouble. He went around in the night and broke things. In the morning other people got the blame. Whatever happened now, Dale felt inclined to blame Jay, no further evidence necessary.

All the same, he wanted to keep the story — her story — straight and uncontaminated.

'No, look, Bill — she wasn't rescued. She wasn't abducted twice. There wasn't any second group. The people that took her — they just wanted to dump her. It's not political. They could have killed her, but they didn't want a search-and-destroy coming down on them. Apaches at dawn or drones in the night, no thanks. They just wanted the guy, Barclay. He works for a bank. It's a financial thing. It's just crime. Money. She told me.'

Bill was looking at him with a disconcerting compassion.

'Moreland and his people were here,' he said, sniffing. 'They took her away. They're all convinced there was a rescue operation. You know — organised. Wanted to know who did it. Asked me if I did anything. Said there had to be a reason they brought her *here*.'

'Jay.'

'Jay's involved in financial crime?'

'Why not?'

Bill laughed.

'Even if he is, doesn't help us. Or her.'

'Why?'

'Because Moreland's the man we need to worry about. You and I. He has an appetite for retribution; and a talent for it. Didn't you know?'

Bill had finished his whiskey but was still playing with the cup, tapping it against the table.

Well, this was stupid. A whole lot of good it was going to do anybody — Bill sitting in his kitchen, drinking whiskey, dripping on the floor, wearing a bathrobe that was too short for him, worrying about Douglas Moreland.

'Somehow it was on the local radio,' Bill said. 'Moreland knew before I did. You can imagine how he played that. So anyway, they killed it before it got on South African Broadcasting. Or, God help us, the BBC.'

'They killed it?'

'Yes, the story.'

The story, not Karl.

Bill studied the bottom of his teacup, as if contemplating a further slug.

'So don't worry, Dale. I'm sure it wasn't you. I declare myself completely satisfied on that point.'

'Okay. I won't worry.'

Here comes the conspiratorial bit, he thought. We're in this together, Dale. Because Bill's got Jay running wild, and he's got Douglas Moreland on his case, and there's something pretty bad going on with Elaine—that was for sure.

'I don't think Moreland is going to do anything — anything he shouldn't do. Anything extreme. I don't—I really don't believe he would do that.'

Do what, exactly? Dale waited for the rest.

'Let me tell you what happened last night.'

Again there was a pause, as Bill put his teacup down and contemplated it from, as it were, a distance.

'Dale, get me some more whiskey—would you mind?'

'Sure. No problem.'

He took Bill's cup and began the hunt for the bottle.

'You know that Moreland and I worked together on Angola, back during the war. You were aware of that?'

Dale was aware; it was common knowledge — though nobody he knew had ever cared much about the details. More important was the obvious fact that Bill had wound up running a bottom-rung embassy with budget cuts, whereas Moreland had risen to a position of eminence on the National Security Council and a series of off-balance-sheet juntas, all of which were Special and trafficked in Strategy, Plans, Operations and so on, and whose budgets were either black or invisible, or both, but unlimited in any case.

'Angola? Uh-huh. Something happen last night?'

Where did Bill get the booze from? Where was the bottle?

'I don't know that we can be proud of everything we did. We were there because the Soviets were there. The Soviets were there because they were afraid to leave Africa to us. And the Cubans were there because we were there and because the Soviets were willing to pay them. So the Angolans trade their oil and diamonds for money and guns, kill each other, wreck their country — which is as beautiful as any in Africa, by the way — sow the place with landmines and wipe out their wildlife.'

'Bill, I can't find —'

'You arrive with the idea that there is an enemy, and that all necessary solutions to all problems flow from the defeat of that enemy. The enemy never changes and never has any desires other than the ones you deem him to have.'

So we air-freight cash to that thug Savimbi and we help the South Africans drive SWAPO out of the bush.'

'Do you keep your liquor in —'

'Next thing, the Soviet Union is gone like a bad dream. So are the old South Africans and their hired guns. The head of SWAPO is the President of Namibia. I come here. Douglas Moreland goes into private industry. Savimbi reneges on the peace deal when he loses the election and the war comes back. But there's no money in it, and no one cares any more.'

'Bill?'

'Someone gets Savimbi in the end. For a while there's hope. Then the Chinese come along and — Lord be praised! — they want to invest!'

Dale gave up on the whiskey. Bill sent his cup skittering across the table.

'But now Douglas Moreland is back and he's finding new enemies.'

'Here?'

'The whole of southern Africa. You think he would limit himself?'

Bill got up and slopped over to what Dale had taken to be a janitor's closet, but which apparently doubled as a wet-bar. He located a new bottle.

'Actually, this belongs to Elaine. So, anyway, we acted too much of the time according to this ideology of enmity, of evil. It's so simple — all you have to do is stamp it out, you see? And I thought it had gone. I thought Douglas Moreland had gone. We should have gotten over the ideology. We had a ten-year break to do it in. We could have reflected on the mistakes. Later on, it's easier to see the mistakes. You can say, well, we'll do that differently next time. But you have to remember. Takes effort. I remember. George remembers. But I don't think Douglas does.'

'George?'

'George Fischer. Worked for the South Africans.'

Bill refilled his cup.

Was this going somewhere? Why was he all so worked up about Angola? How about last night?

'Ah, Bill—did something happen last night?'

'Yes. Yes, this is really the point.'

Dale watched while Bill drank the whole cup.

'Mary Barclay called the embassy,' Bill said.

Dale waited.

'She's the wife. Of the other hostage. She wanted to know, was her husband here. Said she'd talked to Miss Lenehan directly. Said she knew Miss Lenehan was here.'

Dale stared at Bill but the ambassador had closed his eyes and was acting like he was addressing some imaginary third person.

'So the folks at the embassy told her, as they were supposed to, you know — we can't give you any information. They say it over and over. At this point Mrs Barclay gets upset. I guess I would. She says she was told, just that morning, that her husband and Miss Lenehan were both dead.'

Dead? Jay hadn't told him that. Had he known but kept it back? She's in trouble — oh, big-time, Dale! And she's in the bomb business, and all the time,

back home, she's dead already. Everybody's lying about her. She's lying about herself. And, guess what — now it's going to be your turn.

Bill was waiting for a reaction. Dale picked the stopper up off the floor and eased it back into the bottle. Then he returned the bottle to the closet. The old man was still waiting.

Give him something, he thought. You're shocked, you're taken aback. Just try it.

'Oh man! Man, that's bad. I mean, how...'

Bill wasn't buying it. He turned away, as if in contempt.

'Dale, I don't know exactly how it happened. It doesn't matter how it happened. Sometimes the cruel and the embarrassing... Coincide. Sometimes it's simple incompetence. You might instead care to ask yourself why.'

Bill paused for a moment, breathing deeply. The cold water, the exertion, the alcohol and perhaps also his sickly reminiscences were getting to him.

'In the end they had to hang up on her. Moreland was here in the residence while all this was going on. I think he arranged for some people to go around to her house. Jersey, I believe. All the time they've got Miss Lenahan in — in one of the bedrooms upstairs. They drugged her, Dale. Come here.'

They drugged her? And people? People going to Mary Barclay's house?

Dale came back to the table and stood next to Bill. The old man was trembling from his eyelids to his fingertips.

'So the new line is this,' Bill said. 'Miss Lenahan was never here. We never saw her. You didn't talk to her. She and Mr Barclay are now only *reported* dead. By someone or other. Not us. We are seeking confirmation. Urgently, we are allowed to say. Mrs Barclay is either mistaken — she's been under stress — or she is the victim of a hoax call over a poor-quality, transcontinental line. We do not know Miss Lenahan and we never will.'

Dale could have put his hands on the old man's shoulders and shaken him. He could have fetched the whiskey bottle and smashed it on the table. He could have torn the phone from its wall fixture, he could have slammed it down in front of his boss, he could have demanded that he make the call. But what call, Dale?

So instead, he just bent down so that his mouth was a spit away from the old man's left ear.

'But she was here. She's not dead. This is bullshit. You can't go along with that — you can't.'

'No choice.'

'Why not? The hell you have no choice. What do you mean?'

No answer.

'But how did Mary Barclay know Jennifer was here?'

He'd called her Jennifer in front of his boss. But so what?

'Ask *her*.'

Bill nodded towards the doorway. Elaine stood there, mostly upright, giving off a kind of drowsy defiance. She was smartly dressed in white pants and sleeveless shirt. But she hadn't done her hair or her face.

She walked up to Dale and pushed him gently away from her husband.

'Sit,' she said.

Dale sat. She stood behind him.

'I gave her my phone,' she said. 'Funny thing is, it rang while Douglas and his friends were here. It was out by the pool. They brought it in, but of course they wouldn't let me answer it. They just counted the number of times it rang, and wrote down poor Mrs Barclay's number every time. Bastards. Aren't they?' She gave Dale a little poke at the base of the neck with her knuckles.

Dale put his elbows on the table, his face in his hands, rubbed his eyes.

'So, Dale,' Bill said. 'Now you see how we're in this together, correct?'

'What's Moreland going to do?'

'You're concerned for her. Nothing wrong with that. Fact is, it's normal. It's admirable. Elaine and I feel the same. Personally, I believe she — she'll be just fine. You want some assurance from me. Well I can't give it. She's involved in something, that's clear. What is it? I don't know. You may have a better idea than me...'

I *do* have a better idea than you, Bill.

'...but it comes down to a question of trust in the system. Not in Douglas Moreland, Elaine. There's a system. In this case there's obviously an issue of timing. Do you want to just throw it all out there and see who gets hurt? How do you know who else is involved? Maybe they're trying to stop another bloody disaster like Nairobi. How do you know? By what —'

'Stop it, Bill,' Elaine said.

Dale stopped rubbing his eyes, opened them and looked up at Elaine.

'What's Moreland going to do with her?'

'We don't know,' Elaine said. 'We just know what he's done in the past. Right, Bill?'

'This is an American citizen we're talking about. There's only so much...'

'Elizabeth was an American citizen,' Elaine said. 'As I recall.'

Bill sat up straight. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but said nothing. His eyes — watery again — were full of a kind of childlike rage, but also panic. He got up and stumbled out into the garden.

'Tell him what he has to do,' he said.

Then he was gone.

'Elizabeth would have been her age,' Elaine said, too quietly for her husband to hear. She gave Dale's shoulders a rub and then flopped down in her husband's chair.

'He's going to swim some more. Then he'll be okay.'

Dale waited.

'Doesn't usually drink tea in the morning. Probably trying to calm his nerves. What a joke.'

Dale felt an urge to ask who Elizabeth was. But he didn't really want to hear the answer. He was pretty sure he knew. She was a girl in an old photograph with a white dog. Their dead daughter.

'What do I have to do?' he said.

She laughed.

'What you have to do is nothing,' she said. 'That's what he means. Because if you go out there and you bust up this — whatever this thing is, then we'll be destroyed. Really. You know, it's not like we've been in a very strong position. He's proud of his record in the service. He has a right to be. But, like a lot else,

it's been reinterpreted. You know? So, in his way, he's asking for your help. He wants you to spare us.'

'What about her?'

'She might be okay. It might depend how she handles herself. You know something, don't you?'

'No.'

She laughed again, but a little less easily.

'Look Dale, we're finished here, the two of us, pretty much. Doesn't matter. Career's already over. You're not in any better shape--in case you didn't know. Moreland knows you talked to her. To Jennifer.'

She paused for a moment, picked up her husband's cup and put it on the counter. Then she sat down again, reached across the table and put her hands on top of his. He couldn't help noticing how mottled and unhealthy her skin looked.

'If you want to do something,' she said, 'go see George.'

'George Fischer?'

'Uh huh. You know him?'

'No. Bill just said something.'

She gave him a long look, then seemed to make a decision.

'He lives on the coast. Swakopmund. He's got a hotel or guesthouse or something. It's named for him - George's whatever-it-is. You can have a nice weekend at the beach. Get away from the heat. With Sheryl.'

'I'll think about it.'

'Sure.'

He hesitated. A little more detail about George might be useful. But she didn't look like she wanted to talk any more. Maybe he could just ask...

'Well, I think you could go now,' she said.

So that was it. He got up, walked through into the hallway and looked back. She was watching him. He made a little bye-bye gesture with his left hand. She didn't respond.

He went out and got in his wife's car. The steering wheel was too hot to touch.

CHAPTER 6

When he got back to the apartment, which was located in what many people at the embassy — quite seriously — referred to as the 'US Compound' and which wasn't much more than a small, flat-roofed block with a chain-link fence and a padlock for security, Dale saw his Cherokee in the parking lot. It was covered with dust, and someone's finger had written 'Thank U!' on the back.

Hoping that Jay had simply left the keys with Sheryl and gone, he stalked across the barren yard to the stairwell, avoiding the cement path, which would be too hot to walk on in thin-soled shoes. As usual, dogs were barking in the neighbouring yard. Then he cursed when he saw Jay's truck parked under a tree, with a new scrape across the driver's door.

What was Jay up to now? He'd borrowed Dale's Cherokee the night before, had done something unspeakable with it — Dale didn't want to know and wouldn't ask — and had brought it back, dirtied-up as expected, while Dale had been at the Ellises'. Then he must have gone away, fetched his own vehicle, and returned. Why?

He climbed the steps. For no particular reason, he became exercised by the weeds that were growing through cracks in the cement and scuffed at them with the heel of his shoe. You didn't know the gaps were there until things started growing; they took hold and after that you could never get rid of them. And right here, too, was the smell; it never went away. However hot and dry it got, the stairwell always gave off an odour of mildew and drains. He liked to pretend it was kind of exotic — hey, it's Africa! — but he knew Sheryl didn't agree, and the truth was it was just bad plumbing. That really was the truth of it. No question.

Why the hesitation, Dale? Oh, surely now — you know you shouldn't think those things.

The apartment door wasn't locked, like it should have been. He turned the handle and gave it a gentle push. The door had barely cracked open and he'd hardly taken a breath of the cold, stale atmosphere before he knew everything was wrong. It was something about the taste of the air — some scent of distress — but he couldn't say exactly what. The door swung wide open on its own.

Here came the shock; why did it feel like he was expecting it?

The place had been wrecked.

He stood in the doorway, unable to move until his presentiments settled. For a moment he heard nothing — he only saw: books, papers on the floor; drawers pulled out; chair cushions scattered; closets open, clothes in heaps; broken glass. Then everything shut down — he didn't hear, he didn't see. A cold terror overwhelmed him, even as the sun burned the side of his face.

Robbers in southern Africa... This wasn't Carolina; the whole calculus was different here.

In his imagination he saw Sheryl — and he couldn't move. He wanted to call to her and hear her answer. He didn't want to find her; he didn't want to go room by room until... He wanted her to come to him. But he couldn't speak. His eyes began to moisten with the pity of it all. Then, angry and ashamed, he took one frightful step into the apartment.

A man came out of the bedroom.

'Dale, it's okay. Sheryl's okay. Come on in.'

Jay.

'Dale, you look terrible, man. Come on.'

The panic ebbed away. It left behind it the stain of a more familiar emotion: guilt. But he was grateful. Not to providence, and certainly not to Jay. To Africa. For not betraying him.

He stepped inside, stood in the middle of the living room and made out like he was surveying his shattered domain. But nothing registered: not the enlarged prints, now torn, from their honeymoon in Maui (where's the hurt in a old photograph?); not Sheryl's clothes, but none of his, spread all over the floor (you just wash them, they're fine); not the address book with pages torn out (just information; easily obtained).

Jay shut the door and locked it.

'Dale?' he said.

Dale looked up. Jay made a gun-shape with his hand and pointed meaningfully at the bedroom door.

She was lying on the bed, face down, dressed in jeans and a white top, with her eyes closed but not asleep. No shoes; dirty feet. He stood beside her, rubbed her shoulder and ran his hand through her hair — which she had cut short because of the heat and, she said, because there was no one to see it. He turned her chin, and brushed back her bangs to reveal her eyes. She rolled over on her back and looked up at him, saying nothing. That she looked at him — that was enough.

'Jay says you're okay?' he said.

She nodded, tried to smile, almost made it.

He ran his finger down the ridge of her nose: one of his old tricks and one that she understood. That cute little ski-jump you got there, oh my...

She smiled.

'You didn't get hurt?'

She shook her head. He knew she wouldn't want to talk with Jay there. She had one of those voices that, well, gave everything away. And her face wasn't so hard to read, either. She was okay, for now.

'I better talk to him,' he said.

She nodded again.

He kissed her on the top of her head, and went back out to the living room.

Jay had replaced the cushions in the leather swivel chair and was sitting there, swivelling hard, with his legs crossed, apparently studying the tip of his shoe.

'The first thing I think I should point out, because it'll save us some time is, this happened at my place, also,' he said.

'Was she here?' Dale said. 'Was she here when it happened?'

'Yeah. Yeah, she was.'

Dale stared at him. Jay shifted in his seat.

'They didn't hurt her. They just shut her in the bathroom. That's where I found her. But she was scared. Of course she was. But, as you probably know, I have some training.'

'When did you get here?'

'About a half-hour ago.'

'When did it happen?'

'Sounds like about twenty minutes after you left.'

Dale stepped around a pile of papers and magazines and picked up a photograph in a frame. Mom and Dad and his two sisters about to step up into a second-hand RV and head for the Outer Banks. Dad with his camera gear, that cost him so much and which he never really understood. The girls about twelve and fourteen and, as ever, at least two years his senior. Mom with an extravagant sun hat. Himself with a junior football, but also a map. A first trip into the wilderness, or close enough. There was the tiniest crack in the corner of the glass.

'It's pretty obvious,' Jay said. 'In fact, it's insultingly obvious. No class, in this new era of ours. Style is out of style.'

The guy was raving again. Dale put the picture back up on the bookshelf.

'What?' he said.

'Nothing stolen, nothing damaged — well, you know, unless it's all kind of deliberate. So it's a message. Goes like this. Please be frightened. Be afraid. We would like for you to feel a little shit-scared at this point.'

Oh, we're scared, Jay. We just don't know what scares us the most. Maybe it's you.

'So you know what we have to do,' Jay said.

'The hell are you talking about?'

'You've just been over at the Ellis place?'

'Yes.'

'Then you know.'

'I don't know anything. Who did this?'

'Aw, come on. Relax. You don't have to be too scared, my friend. It's not life and death. Not for you. Not yet, anyhow.'

Jay got up out of the chair and walked over to the apartment door. He rooted around in a plastic shopping bag and took out a flat, rectangular object, wrapped in sacking. He held it out to Dale.

'Here. Take it.'

What was it with the man?

'No. What the — what is this, Jay? I don't want your bombs, I don't want your spy crap. If you know who did this, then for God's sake tell me. Otherwise...'

'It's the plates from your Jeep,' Jay said. 'You're going to want to put them back on.'

Dale stared.

'Unwrap them,' he said.

Jay unwrapped the plates and held them up, one in each hand. Dale took them. Then Jay went back to his shopping bag — Mr Price, Dale noted — and brought out a DVD.

'Now, this is the important thing,' Jay said, removing the disc from its sleeve. 'Where's your DVD player? You still have one? Oh, there it is.'

Dale cleared a space on the floor and sat. He started to sort through a heap of papers and magazines. Jay fiddled with the machine, muttering as if talking himself through its intricacies.

'Okay, here it is. Dale, please look at this.'

It was a jumpy time-lapse recording, taken from a high angle, of the inside of a clothing store. Racks of clothes, a checkout counter at the top, windows and glass doors to the right. The checkout clerk was writing out something on a pad. A couple of girls were shopping for jeans.

'Keep watching,' Jay said.

The doors on the right opened. Two people entered. Jay hit the pause on the front of the machine.

'Do you know where the remote is?' he said.

Dale ignored him. He got up on to his knees and crawled closer to the screen.

'Oh, oh, oh!' Jay said. 'That's you. Look. And that's her.'

Dale peered at the screen. It was a pretty clear picture of the two of them together. You couldn't mistake it. He was holding the door open for her. She was going in first. He had his hand between her shoulder blades. She was wearing the clothes she'd arrived in. They'd borrowed some sneakers for her. She looked tired, maybe frightened. At the time, she hadn't let him see that.

'So I got the security video from the store,' Jay said. 'I told them I was you. I think it'll work out better that way.'

He restarted the video. Dale watched. He and Jennifer moved between the racks. She seemed to know what she wanted and she went straight for it. He saw himself tagging along behind, nervous, looking around whenever anyone came into the store. Sometimes they went out of view.

'Only got one camera that works,' Jay said. 'You see the date and time at the bottom there? Could fake that, not a hard thing to do.'

'This is all real. It's not a fake.'

'Absolutely. All the more reason you need to get it out now.'

'Me?'

'You're in it. That's credibility. I can't do it. You're the guy. I'm assuming you've got the nerve.'

'To do what?'

'Take it to SABC. Or the BBC. Not Karl, okay? Karl's a bust. Don't know why you thought you could rely on him.'

Jay took the disc out of the machine.

'That was just —'

Jay held the disc up in front of Dale's face.

'Take it, Dale. I want to see it on the nightly news. I want to see you and the dead lady. The dead lady who's shopping for clothes. I think she has good taste, by the way. I want to see you explaining how you took her to the store, and how happy she was, and how you saw her driven away from Bill's house, in a convoy, under cover of darkness, all the way out to the airport, against her will—that's a stretch, I know, but it doesn't matter—and how you have no idea where she is now.'

'No, listen, Jay —'

'Shut up. I want to hear your boss up in the State Department tell Wolf or Brent or Jane or Flint or Al the weatherman how come this woman's buying jeans in a mall when their best information is that she's floating in a river with a hole in her head up in the Caprivi. Or wherever the hell they took her. And now don't forget poor old Charlie Barclay. Remember him? Make sure you mention his name. Are you worried for him? I am. Here.'

Dale took the disc. Jay gave him a poke on the shoulder.

'You're a good guy, Dale. I knew I could trust you. Do the right thing. That's a neat saying, I always liked it.'

He's raving, he's wild, he's out there. Worse than ever. Jesus, get him out of here. But first...

'Jay, was she in the Caprivi? Who took her?'

'Yeah, I'm thinking so. Or maybe further west. Second question, still don't know. Wouldn't tell you if I did. You, my man, are in enough trouble already, don't you think?'

'Then who got her out? Is that what this is about?'

Jay gave one of his feline smirks, went to the door and picked up his bag.

'See you on TV. Lock the door.'

'Jay, wait...'

Jay turned and looked at him, turning his head slightly to one side as if in warning.

'Yes, Dale?'

'You know who they are, don't you? Those two guys.'

'What two guys, Dale?'

'The two guys who brought her to the embassy.'

Jay turned his back and was gone, shutting the door gently.

Dale threw the disc on the couch and listened to Jay's metal-studded heels banging slowly down the cement steps. And then, as he waited for the frantic roar of Jay's truck, his gaze fell into their tiny, cheap bathroom. Sheryl's Lion King robe, bought back when the excitement of their impending departure for Africa was still fresh, had fallen from the hook on the back of the door and lay in a heap on the floor. On the window ledge above the toilet, two flower jars from a street stall in Okahandja and an ornamental cat had been knocked over. One of the curtains was half torn-down from its track. How long had she been in there?

Then he felt Sheryl's arms around his waist. And then her forehead against the back of his neck, where Elaine had stuck her bony knuckle.

He was married to an innocent. A twenty-eight-year-old innocent who spent half the day cleaning the apartment and the other half on her computer and was afraid to go out. A girlish English tutor who had been so excited to dump her bratty and overfed underachievers and their stressed-out moms and absent dads, for the picturesque peoples, the vibrant cultures, and the enchanted animals of Africa.

So much more real than Charlotte or Washington! Even if the people are poor — perhaps even *because!* We'll be enlightened; we'll learn the languages. There'll be so much to do and discover. Money will be okay if we're careful. It will bind us, it surely will. We'll grow up together.

But she knew nothing — nothing at all — about politics.

And, he felt, she hadn't grown with him — unless there was something he was missing. She remained an innocent and she wanted to go home. He didn't love her any the less. No, he was confident about that.

'I don't understand what you-all are talking about,' she said.

But that voice... It always gave him the shivers when she used it.

'There's nothing to understand. It's Jay. We need to clean the place up.'

'He's making you do things.'

'No, he can't make me do anything.'

'He shouldn't make you do things, just because...'

'Because what?'

'Don't do what he says,' she said, barely audible.

'No,' he said, taking her hand. 'He's crazy. They're all crazy. I don't know what we're going to do. Come on, let's clean the house up.'

He picked up the disc and slipped it carefully back in its sleeve.

CHAPTER 7

Alan Vickery was feeling — let's be honest about it, shall we? — a little down. Not his usual self. No vim. His return to base camp in New York had gone to plan; no surprises.

Well, except for the change of hotel, thank you darling. Not the St Regis, not the Pierre, not the Waldorf, not even the bloody Ramada Inn Times Square — but some ghastly designer boutique hotel on Thirty-Second Street, where they gave you a little user guide with a translucent cover to help you understand the signage and the bathroom. And where the walls in the public areas were apt to change colour or take in a movie.

Never mind.

A stack of quality purchases — mainly shoes, if he was any judge (and he was) — awaited transportation home on Mariella's behalf. Heavy lifting, Alan's job. Plus the customary bills to pay and accounts to settle; nothing out of the ordinary. By now she'd have been received unto the gentle sands, idyllic grounds and exquisitely-designed interior of the front-line beach residence known as The Vickeries (local joke, pun on Valkyries, whatever they were), that the local real estate crowd took delight in describing as 'nestling amid lush tropical vegetation on the favoured and romantic west coast of Barbados, the British-flavoured jewel of the Caribbean.' She'd be ordering taxis and complaining about the scum in the pool. Especially if they happened to be Derek and Ronnie from the club.

All that was normal and, indeed, reassuring.

The problem was, you see, he still felt an outsider over here — an alien, to use the dread word. He'd hobnobbed with Zarnoff, laughed it up with Kellerman, been blessed by Phyllis and had even gotten to shake General Fricke's hand, eventually (wait on line please, one shake per customer). But then he'd allowed himself to get suckered into Ray and Marty's lunatic revenge take-over scheme, a sort of low-budget Barbarians at the Gate, with psychos instead of Barbarians. Imagine inviting that man Marty Bazon around to tea with Mariella. *Hello fucking Mariella, nice to fucking meet you.* And he was sure Kellerman still had something deliciously appalling lined up for him. Would it ever be worth it?

No vim, and not a hell of a lot of vigour. Well, do us all a favour and try to make the most of it.

He'd been invited to a party.

The evening's entertainment was to be provided at the pleasure of one Bradford Urquist. There was probably a middle initial, but Vickery had given up on those. His presence had been requested by — who else? — Kellerman. Bradford! Where did they get these names? Bradford City nil, Leeds United one. Call him Brad, for God's sake, and then you won't be thinking about football all night.

According to Kellerman, Urquist had inherited a fortune built, way back in the early twentieth century, from real estate speculation. Now, he presided over an empire that was entirely financial. Widely admired and often seen on the covers of business magazines, he patronised think tanks and built weirder-looking art galleries than any of his rivals.

Urquist's residence was an apartment on, no surprise, the Upper East Side. It was accessed — though doubtless only by the few — via private elevator from an upper lobby. Inside, preliminary analysis revealed the atmosphere to be composed of furniture polish, odour of orchid (or possibly lily — Mariella would have known), partisan jollity, cigar smoke (the whiff of liberty!) and, to Vickery's increasingly cynical nose, the nitrogen of complacency and the oxygen of ambition.

There might have been a hundred people. Black tie and pearls. Low lighting, and lots of it. High-toned buzz of conversation. Luscious hair. Fantastic teeth. Enough accessories to fill a wheelbarrow. Elegance on legs, as Marie-Thérèse, Mariella's best friend, had once said.

Vickery was in his second-best business suit; as usual, Kellerman hadn't warned him. Making up for this, however, was a hand-made silk tie, picked out by Mariella on a trip to Piccadilly, that carried a sharp and aristocratic motif. He hadn't a clue what it meant, and it felt vaguely fraudulent, but right now he'd take any boost he could get.

His first stop was the bathroom. Again. Prostate problem? Surely a bit young for that, wasn't he?

The apartment was not a flat. Not as he understood flats, anyway — and he'd lived in a few. This was more like a country mansion (Connecticut, probably) which had been dismantled on the instructions of the owner, trucked into the city, knocked into a single floor and then slotted into a brownny-green skyscraper, about six floors down from the top.

Urquist was a successful investor, according to Kellerman, and a Movement guy. Precisely which Movement, Vickery hadn't had time to establish. But it wasn't hard to guess. And, come to think of it, in all his trips to the States, he'd never met an *unsuccessful* investor. How did you explain that? He would have to ask someone.

On exiting a bathroom the size of a three-car garage, hands all clean and dainty, Vickery ran into his host, a young man about three inches shorter than Vickery's own barely adequate five feet and ten.

Urquist looked about twenty-six. He was fair-haired, rounded and plump — but in a toned sort of way. Unlike his guests, he was dressed with flair, humour and individuality, in baggy shorts with too many pockets, and in a T-shirt

endorsed by the editors of the Weekly Consensus. It looked like he was still on one shave a week.

They exchanged compliments, cursed Kellerman on a number of jovial pretexts and then, stuck for small-talk, Vickery asked Urquist how the investments were going.

'Oh boy. You know, I'd really have to ask my managers. I know we're placed with Goldhurst Capital and Black Heath Partners and Oak Creek Asset Management, but I couldn't really tell you what strategies they're following. I guess it's kind of a mix of regulatory arbitrage, pro-cyclical yield curve plays, private equity, a bunch of those synthetic index options they're all doing in the Far East, you know — just the obvious things. It's a tough market. And everyone's buying volatility — I mean, that's a no-brainer. What're you doing?'

'Oh, well like you were saying, just the obvious things. I always think the obvious ones are the best. Very dodgy market, in my opinion.'

Got to remember to have a word with Fat Phil the accountant. Find out where to get our hands on some volatility. No brains required, right up his alley.

'Bryce says you have your own little financial empire over there,' Urquist said.

'Yes, that's right. In a manner of speaking,' Vickery said.

But the empire had suffered of late from a spot of restlessness amongst the natives, according to Phil. Problem with one particular hundred grand loan, case in point. Had to refer the matter to the Pinton brothers of Walthamstow. And, by extension, their Ukrainian associates. Always an occasion of the greatest regret. A dreadful duty, in fact, that he earnestly wished to transcend, one day, and not something he would care to explain to the present company (or Mariella). Imagine.

'Of course, we operate extensively offshore. High-end. Caribbean, primarily,' he said, as much to himself as to Urquist.

'Uh-huh. That's good. That's cool,' Urquist said, managing to look both up and down his nose at the same time, and drifting off towards a clutch of young women who, though noticeably taller than their host, nevertheless became excited at his approach. 'I can appreciate that. Enjoy...'

He felt small, a little dirty.

But then he rebelled at the smell of his own self-pity. You play the games you have to play. You start with what you start with. Never mind the rest. Never mind the bollocks, as they say. The hard knocks, you've done that. Made you what you are. You are you, you idiot. And don't you forget it.

A bit of straight talk, nothing like it. More bracing than the kind of instruction he got from Mariella as a rule.

Self-reliance, Alan! Beats privilege every time.

He grabbed at a glass of champagne from a passing waiter, almost missing, and spilt a puddle on his shoe. Discreetly, he shook his foot, but the liquid merely dribbled down to his toe and fizzed with a pointless exuberance.

He slurped recklessly and wandered.

Somewhere out of sight in an adjacent room a piano started up. Gershwin? Or the theme from that film about the maid who became President?

A couple went out on to the balcony. The male pointed up and down the river with great animation while the female nodded and sipped.

Vickery eased his way through the mob, looking for a quiet spot or, preferably, somewhere to sit down. Snippets of conversation caught his ear.

'You used to be able to see the planes going into La Guardia from here...'

'It ought to go up. It *has* to go up. This is the greatest economy in the world, the greatest country in the world. Don't tell me that's not worth twenty percent a year!'

'I had no idea you could get insurance for that...'

'Well, I don't know anyone who believes the Chinese economy is *that* big. *Of course* they're going to lie about the figures.'

'The problem with the UN was just, like, this basic structural flaw — it was always going to be a hundred ninety to one. How fair is that?'

'Is that really Paul Zarnoff — he looks so old!'

'Have you read *Atlas Shrugged*? I've read it like nine times. I've heard they're coming out with the video game. It rocks, I'm telling you...'

'I can recommend you, but I can't promise anything. What kind of dog is it?'

'Alan! Alan! Over here.'

It was Kellerman, huge and glowing as usual, summoning him like a dog or waiter to a corner of the room near the window.

Smiling, but with gloom in his heart, he made his way across.

Alongside Kellerman was a sixty-something, overbuilt man with a ginger moustache, a large wristwatch and as much gold and jewellery as his knuckles could stand.

'Alan, this is Arnie Muller, a friend of ours from South Africa. Say how d'you do.'

'How do you do, Bryce. No, don't answer that, I know exactly how you're doing. Nice to meet you, Arnie.'

'You and Arnie are going to be working together. I talked to Phyllis's people, they're giving you the green light. Are you happy?'

'Have you ever been to South Africa, Alan? It's a great country,' Muller said, with a slight tone of challenge.

Mariella had wanted to go to Sun City once, long ago — until she found out that apartheid was still in effect, actually, and recalled that some of her dearest friends were sensitive on such matters. Subsequently, of course, Mandela had been one of her heroes. Elegance on legs.

'Of course I have my home in London, now,' Muller said, not waiting for Vickery's reply. 'St John's Wood. Are you familiar?'

'My wife has some friends there.'

'Okay Alan, here's what we're going to do — uh, did you meet Bradford yet?' Kellerman said.

'Brad? Yes, had quite a nice little chat. Volatility.'

'Don't call him that. He likes to be called Bradford. Volatility, what's that about?'

'Nothing. What is it we're going to do?'

'We're going to Queens.'

'Bryce, I've only just got here. This is my first drink.'

'Don't worry, we can come back after. Drink up. Where's Bradford?' Kellerman reared up on his toes and peered over the throng, like a bear in a corn patch.

Urquist's girls had been joined by a gang of strong-chinned boys who looked like catalogue models.

'See that bunch of kids?' Vickery said. 'He's in there somewhere.'

Kellerman squinted. The boys and girls swayed merrily in unison. There came a flash of shin, plump and fluffy, and Kellerman surged off. A scuff of tux, a brush of pearls, and he was upon his prey. The young people — neophyte investors all, no doubt — were reluctant to yield up their asset. They put up a fight, bless them. But Kellerman wasn't having any of it.

'So Arnie, what sort of business are you in?' Vickery asked, to pass the time while Kellerman performed the extraction.

'The logistics business.'

Clear. Succinct. Entertainingly vague.

'What, warehouses, distribution, lorries, track your own parcel on the web — that sort of thing?'

Muller broke into a lop-sided little grin. Fellow soul, perhaps?

'We don't, as a rule, track our consignments on the web, Alan. Our customers tend to be in remote locations. Internet access is not always available.'

'Very specialised service, is it? Customised?'

'Oh, very much so, Alan. Our clients are very demanding. Especially our American clients. One must strive very hard to meet their requirements...'

I bet one must.

'ISO 9000 and all that?'

'...but they are generally very good about payment. As long as they are completely satisfied.'

Kellerman burst back upon them, herding Urquist in front of him like a scout returning to the stockade with the captured son of the local Indian chief.

'Let's move it, gentlemen. The car service is waiting.'

Urquist didn't seem put out to be dragged away from his fan club. Quite right, son: always leave them wanting more. In fact, he had a happy sort of gleam in his eye.

As they descended in the elevator through the building's sedimentary layers of opportunity and enterprise, Vickery mused on Mr Muller's profession.

Exactly which flavour of smuggling or trafficking did Arnie go in for? Let's see. What comes out of sub-Saharan Africa? Diamonds, ivory. A possibility. Dollars, of course. Looks a bit too, well, *horny-handed* for that, our Arnie. Dictators, when the Yanks are finished with them. Failed coup-leaders. Rhino horn, for the insatiable Chinese market? Uranium? Definitely not that, one earnestly hopes. Bushmeat? Don't be ridiculous. What goes in? Drugs. Grow their own, mostly, don't they? Tiny market for the expensive stuff. Fake CDs? All those people in Angola and Zambia listening to Sting. People? Hardly. Terrorists. Don't think they want Arnie's help. Hmm. Only leaves one thing, really, doesn't it?

Waiting for them at the curb side was one of those big, black Town Car limos, all red on the inside, that always made him think of sex and death at the same time. He felt a horrible little shudder.

Urquist went in first. Kellerman sat next to him, in the rear-facing seat. Muller insisted Vickery go in before him.

The car took off and rocketed down Second Avenue. As it rebounded from each dip in the pavement, Kellerman rose in his seat and brushed his over-tended locks against the upholstered roof, leaving a smear.

The Queensboro Bridge at Fifty-ninth Street was snarled up on account of another terror-plot scare, so they continued downtown.

Muller seemed to be sizing Vickery up, from behind his moustache, in a vaguely approving way.

'So Alan, what do you think of the current political situation?' he said.

'Alan's a supporter of the New Democratic Consensus,' Kellerman said.

Muller snorted with laughter.

'Is he? Are you, Alan? Well, I must say I'm honoured to meet one at long last.'

'Thanks, Arnie. As a matter of fact, I don't have a clue what the bloody —'

'Alan was with us in Philly,' Kellerman said, with a sideways glance at Urquist. 'Met the General.'

'Now there's a man who knows how to take command of a situation,' Muller said. 'That is what we have to do in Africa. I was glad to see you sent Douglas Moreland out to Pretoria,' he said, talking to Kellerman. 'Those ANC guys, they're not all bad — but you've got to be firm with them.'

He looked at Vickery.

'Or, failing that, you've got to buy them.'

The car heaved through a yellow light. Much blaring of horns. Kellerman hit the roof.

'We got any Diet Coke in this car?' Urquist said.

Kellerman pretended to look for Diet Coke.

'The thing with Africa is this,' he said. 'Secure the resources and stabilise the threats. But it has to be done...'

He gave Urquist a sorry-no-Coke-pal shrug.

'...in a less obvious way than in certain other, uh, theatres. Middle East, Central Asia. East Asia. Central America. South America.'

'The military's over-stretched,' Muller said. 'There's only so much they can do. They're tied up in North Africa and East Africa. Meanwhile, the Chinese —'

'You need a vigorous and forceful foreign policy,' Kellerman said. 'You need a new, hard-ass school of diplomacy. And you got the military option — your drones, and so on. But then, in between, you got —'

'An opportunity for the private sector,' Muller said.

'This is not making me happy, if you really want to know,' Urquist said, slumping even lower.

'He means the Coke,' Kellerman confided to Muller.

The car took an abrupt left. Vickery was flung against Muller, who reached out his right hand to steady himself. The man had scars under his rings.

They bowled over the Brooklyn Bridge. Looking down to the right, Vickery could see the string of empty barges that, temporarily and for the foreseeable future, guarded the East River.

'I hope Alan isn't going to be squeamish about this,' Muller said.

The shudder returned for an encore.

CHAPTER 8

The car hurtled down into Brooklyn, past a fortified building that looked like a courthouse, and made a left on to a wide, straight thoroughfare called Atlantic Ave. They cruised in silence for some time, past self-storage warehouses, auto repair shops and flag-and-razor-wire used car lots.

At length, Kellerman turned to Vickery and whispered in his ear.

'Queens,' he said, authoritatively.

Soon afterwards, they took a left up a narrow street just past a car wash and a White Castle restaurant.

Urquist came back to life. He buzzed the window down and leaned out. The driver eased the car past a sagging, brown LeBaron and swung right on to the top of a downward-sloping ramp that was blocked at the bottom by a heavy roller shutter. His small frame half out of the window, Urquist tapped out eight digits on a keypad. Up whirred the shutter and they barrelled on in.

The car wallowed to a halt in a boxed zone of yellow lines claimed by the fire department. Muller and Kellerman were silent; Urquist seemed to be humming to himself. The driver unlocked the doors but stayed put. Urquist bounded out and led the way.

They were in a large, empty loading bay or parking area. It was underground; there were no windows. Two fluorescent strips lit the whole place. The walls, floors and ceiling were all of concrete and exuded a uniform dankness. Small pools of water, or perhaps oil, broke up the landscape. It was chilly. Didn't that boy feel the cold?

Urquist scooted across to a large pair of sliding steel doors. With Muller's help, he got them open. The second space continued the theme of the first but was larger.

They advanced.

Arranged in a single line before them were about twenty wooden trestle tables. On the tables were guns. Lots of them. Big, small and family-sized. Vickery stared. The thing was beautiful, in a horrible way — sort of like a wedding buffet. Delicate rifles with skeletal butts. Bashful machine guns on tripods, with multiple barrels. Self-absorbed two-man jobs with bulbous, high-tech sights. Brawny

belt-fed numbers with, it appeared, optional truck mountings. A selection box of rockets, artfully decked out like a hamper at Harrods. Some of those tube things — what were they called? Mortars? All laid out like a regular trade fair, minus the free bottled water and the long-haired models.

There was a smell of oil and sawdust.

Vickery congratulated himself on his prescience. Alan, you wise old bird. Spotted it straight off, didn't you?

Kellerman was giving him an uneasy grin.

'You okay there, Alan? Just wait here with me a moment.'

'I'm fine, thanks, Bryce. Who's that?'

Urquist and Muller had approached a thin, dark man in blue jeans and a bulky, grey bomber jacket who was attaching an enormous sight to what Vickery guessed was probably a rocket launcher. Urquist hung back as Muller edged forward. The thin man ignored them both until he had completed his task. Finally, in his own time, he stood and shook hands — first with Urquist, stiffly, and afterwards with Muller, in more comradely mode. Then he started into a conversation with Muller while Urquist sauntered off to inspect the weaponry.

'That gentleman is Mr Harlan Petty,' Kellerman said. 'He's one of our top boots-on-the-ground guys in southern Africa. So they tell me. He's got a new mission.'

Vickery thought he heard something in Kellerman's tone. A note of asperity there? Not quite the full vote of confidence?

'Are those Arnie's guns?'

'That's right. Samples. Harlan's going to pick out what he wants.'

It's a bloody Tupperware party.

'What's Brad's angle?'

'Bradford. He provides the money. And enthusiasm.'

'And what's mine?'

'You handle the financial arrangements.'

Well, well, well — I'm a bloody arms dealer now, Vickery thought. What a laugh. Arms to Africa. How to put this, with maximum delicacy, to Mariella? Let's see. Emphasise stylishness and fashionability of weaponry? Black is very in, this year. Really, Alan? Everyone's using RPGs these days. Oh, I know. This season the best people won't be seen dead without a — let's see if we can read the card from here — recoilless rifle made in Hungary to a German design under licence from a well-known British manufacturer. They weren't serious about all this, were they?

Vickery watched Urquist pick up the merchandise and play with it. Kid in a toy shop. Muller was keeping an eye on the boy, he noticed. A certain queasiness came over him.

'Bryce...' he said, nudging Kellerman. 'These guns. Not loaded are they?'

'Just demo stuff. Arnie's not dumb. Worried about Night Vision Boy?'

'Frankly, yes.'

'Don't be. He's just a harmless gun nut.'

Harmless?

'A harmless, supply-side gun nut. Get his name right, flatter his little idées, and he's not a problem.'

'What does Phyllis think of this?'

'Aw, come on, Alan. Phyllis? This is like the nuts and bolts she doesn't do. This is not the plane she operates on. She's up here,' Kellerman said, making an eye-level gesture with the flat of his hand. 'And we're...'

He pondered for a moment.

'We're in a fucking basement in Queens. She wants to export freedom and democracy. This is how we do it.'

Doesn't want to get her hands dirty, you might say.

Muller and Petty, having caught up on the gossip, concluded their chat with a little back-slapping, shoulder-punching finale. Ignoring Urquist, who was fiddling with something that looked like a Frisbee, they marched to the portion of the spread where the smaller items were arrayed. Petty picked up a heavy pistol, noted the price tag, and began to toss it from one hand to the other, in an appreciative sort of way. Muller got out a notebook and started to write.

He's taking the order.

'What's Harlan going to do — start a war?' Vickery said.

'Yeah.'

Well, you asked.

There was a sudden bang and clatter. Vickery flinched; they all flinched — he saw it distinctly. Urquist had thrown the Frisbee up in the air and failed to catch it. He'd made a leap, flopped, and was sitting on the oily cement floor, wiping his hands on his T-shirt and thus also across the condescending smile of the Consensus's star opinion-former.

'Sorry, I guess...' he said, smirking.

No comment from the grown-ups.

Vickery bit his lip. Someone ought to have a word with the boy's parents. No one could say he and Mariella — well, Vickery, at least — hadn't taken the time with Sara. Zara notwithstanding.

Kellerman fastened on to Vickery's elbow and led him over to the middle of the armaments display. Muller was in the throes of demonstrating to Petty how a light machine gun, manufactured in the Czech Republic to an original Soviet specification, had been modified to accept NATO-standard ammunition. Gun of the Month Club selection, quite possibly. Or a special deal from the Warmongers' Clearinghouse.

Kellerman kept a tight grip on Vickery's arm, as if he felt he might have to withdraw him at short notice from harm's way.

Petty slapped a huge magazine into the machine gun, with a casual and precise violence that made Vickery blink. Muller seemed to appreciate it — he puffed up his cheeks and nodded. Petty lowered the gun to waist level and turned to Kellerman.

'So this is the guy.'

More of an acceptance than a question. Not too friendly, either.

'Yeah, this is him.'

Kellerman's customary ebullience seemed to have deserted him. Petty gave Vickery the quick up-and-down.

'This is Alan Vickery,' Kellerman said. 'He's going to take over the, uh, financial administration. He's going to run it out of London. They don't want it run out of

here any more. Not until all the shit with Union's squared away. Maybe not even then. I don't know. Their decision, what can I tell you?'

Petty didn't seem convinced.

'I thought the money went through London anyway.'

'Yeah, yeah — it did,' Kellerman said, letting go of Vickery's elbow and swinging his arms in a kind of nervous frustration. 'But it was *controlled* from New York. All your commands, your messages, your emails, whatever — it all came out of here. That's how they tapped into it, Tom Lester and that guy at Union. You see what I'm saying, Harlan? It's computer stuff, it's complicated. That's why we need Alan.'

He paused, looking for a reaction from Petty.

'Alan's a good guy,' he said, not getting one.

Petty tossed the Czech machine gun back to Muller, who set it carefully back into position on the table. Urquist wandered over to take a look, but backed off when Petty leaned across the table at him.

'Harlan, if you don't mind me saying,' Vickery said, trying to jolly things up a little bit, 'you've got absolutely nothing to worry about. We know what we're doing over there. Not that you don't here, of course, ha-ha. What I mean is, it's all voluntary, isn't it? Voluntary. Self-regulation. We regulate ourselves. Best way, really. All based on tradition, I expect.'

This wasn't working; he was losing his audience. Get to the point.

'Never had a problem. Know the Caribbean like the back of my —'

'You're a computer expert?' Petty said.

'Me? Oh, no, no, no. Got someone to do all that. *He's* an expert. I can fix the printer, but...'

Petty sucked his cheeks in. Vickery had never seen anyone suck their cheeks in so menacingly.

'It's the money, isn't it?' Vickery said, his sense of desperation mounting. 'It's getting it from A to B. Isn't it? Without anybody *see-ing*, as it were, ha-ha.'

Petty opened his mouth to speak.

'He's very good at it, Harlan,' Kellerman said. 'Really.'

Petty folded his arms.

'You've done this before?' he said, with a nod to the travelling gun show.

Vickery took a long glance at the equipment. Back down at the gas-and-grenade end, Urquist was grinning, standing on one leg and talking on his mobile. Muller was pretending to care for his stock, while in fact listening with concern. The smell of oil and sawdust, augmented by leather and something else — rust? — had begun to condense in Vickery's nostrils. Kellerman, still agitated, was watching him.

'Oh yes,' he said. Might be a lie, might not be. Lots of times he made a point of not asking what the money was buying. Client confidentiality, serious matter.

There was a pause. Petty turned to Kellerman.

'Bryce, my people are professionals. If they don't get paid, they don't work. If we have another interruption, they will lose confidence. Confidence is very important.'

'Arnie — tell him, please,' Kellerman said, turning his back on Petty and Vickery.

'Harlan...' Muller said, indicating to Petty that a stroll to the far end of the table was in order.

Vickery brooded; he was definitely picking up on something here. There seemed to be a — what do you call it? — a trust or credibility gap between Kellerman and Petty. You had to be alert to these subtle dynamics when you ventured into the corridors — or basements — of power politics.

'Bryce,' he said, in a soft and encouraging way. 'Want to tell me about it?'

Kellerman, for a moment, was distracted by Urquist, who had removed his shirt — a pitiful sight — and replaced it with a kind of bandolier full of large bullets or shells with silver tips. He was leering in an expectant sort of way towards the entrance.

'Alan, my old friend,' Kellerman said, 'this is all I'm going to say to you, okay? You're listening? Okay, good. Be careful with that guy. Just be careful. Let Arnie handle him, if possible. Keep your yap shut. Stay out of the way. And none of your humour, okay? What was all that shit about your printer?'

'Well, he —'

'Never mind. Oh shit, what's this...'

It was the boys and girls of Urquist's fan club. They shimmied in through the sliding doors in droves, laughing and waving, dancing around the filmy puddles in their party clothes. The boys appeared to be fired-up with alcohol. The girls were clutching themselves against the cold. Urquist brandished a rifle above his head in a gesture of triumph, or *full-spectrum dominance*, to use the current slang. Obviously, he'd summoned them on his phone, with a view to impressing them with his arsenal. Fantastic American technology, Vickery thought — phones that worked in basements! Or Korean, possibly.

The kids swarmed around Urquist and, as before, he disappeared from view. Only the rifle remained visible. Muller and Petty appeared transfixed, but not in a good way. Muller's mouth was open.

Though they'd only been apart for an hour or two and, obviously, had not been out of radio communication, the bright young things appeared to have a great deal of news to pass on to the young plutocrat. The noise was fearsome.

Vickery could only guess at its import; it was another world. At Urquist's age, he would reliably impress a girl with a borrowed Ford. He looked on in bemusement, and everything seemed to go a little fuzzy.

We're going to start a war. Why? It's the fashion. Make the world a better place; don't know why nobody thought of it before. Bryce doesn't seem to want to, but he's been overruled. It's going to be in Africa; don't know where yet, exactly. Good place for wars, Africa: low real estate values, no one gets hurt. Well, no one who matters.

Harlan's in charge of the troops — ordinarily valiant fellows, no doubt — whose confidence is in question, alas. Brad's paying for it, and he can afford it — though what he's getting out of it isn't entirely clear. If he just wanted to play with guns, he could do that at home, couldn't he? Or out on Phyllis's ranch in Wyoming that they all keep talking about.

And Arnie's a respectable South African businessman who lives in London but loves his homeland to death. And Bryce, who is devoted to Phyllis and loves the General, has qualms about Petty — although not about much else.

And these boys and girls are going to parachute into the battle zone, plant their boots on the ground, degrade and diminish the terrorist forces, and then take back their capital city, block by block. And this is all for the sake of freedom and democracy — or *stability*, at least — and, when it's over (by Christmas, of course), Phyllis will invite me to afternoon tea. And Mariella, too.

Kellerman poked him in the ribs.

'I do not believe this.'

The boys had removed their jackets, rolled up their sleeves and started in on the guns, ignoring Muller, Petty, Kellerman and Vickery. Muller looked furious. The boys called out to the girls to join them and, like a small herd of particularly thin and curious antelope, they edged towards the table, noses out ahead as if to smell danger.

The lead girl, an almost weightless creature dressed in salmon-pink tissue paper, applying both hands, picked up the very same pistol that Petty had chucked about. She raised it up in front of her face and peered down the barrel, examining it in the same way that Vickery had once seen Mariella study a ruby bracelet of dubious but exciting origin.

Mariella, she looked right down the barrel! Yes! No, of course it wasn't loaded, but, well, would you? It's as if they have no sense of personal danger — they pay people to do all that for them. And no, I don't remember what she was wearing.

One of the boys came to take a peek.

This was too much for Muller. He strode over and snatched the gun away. The boy jumped with fright — he'd been completely oblivious to Muller's presence. Then the pink girl noticed the black smears on her hands and, arms outstretched, skittered back over to Urquist, who picked up his shirt and tossed it to her.

Another black mark against the Consensus.

Petty had wandered off into a dark corner and turned his back. Muller attempted to remonstrate with Urquist. But Urquist smiled a regal smile and revolved slowly as the boys and girls tried to snatch the rifle away from him. Probably a game they played all the time.

'Little fat fuck...' Kellerman said, with understandable emphasis on the little. Better stand back, Vickery thought — he's beginning to lose it.

'You have no fucking idea, Alan. Old man Urquist...'

A rubbery thundering sound — like Wellington boots tumbling down a concrete staircase — came from the entrance. The doorway darkened. Someone kicked the steel doors wide open. Thin, red laser lights cut across the space. One drew a circle on Vickery's breast pocket.

Kellerman moaned.

'Oh, Jesus. That fucking little...'

There came a barrage of yelling, almost incomprehensible.

'What?' Vickery shouted.

Kellerman screamed back at him, inaudibly, shaking with apparent rage and pointing at Urquist.

In the doorway were perhaps a dozen men, all kitted out in trendy black, looking like martial skateboarders in knee-pads, elbow-pads, helmets and super-sized, Hollywood-style assault rifles.

The yelling began to make sense, sort of.

All present were required to *freeze*, and also, in contradiction, to *get down*.

He chose to get down, lying flat on his stomach with his tie adrift on an oily pool. Kellerman flopped down alongside, cursing, flapping his pudgy hands and looking like an elephant seal taking a break on its way back to the ocean.

'You know what this is?' he hissed at Vickery. 'Stupid fuck sat on his panic button. Jesus!'

It made perfect sense: Urquist, while juggling a landmine, had landed on his arse and inadvertently set off some kind of personal alarm contraption. The cops — or these chaps, at least — had come running. Though you couldn't help noticing that the boys and girls had got here first.

They, too, were obliged to lie down in the muck, although, unlike Muller and Petty, they weren't extended the encouragement of a boot in the small of the back.

Urquist was scooped up by two men — though one would surely have sufficed — and whisked out of sight, legs pumping in empty space like those of a pesky cartoon character.

The yelling subsided. Vickery could hear the young ones sniggering. What was so funny?

'Uh, excuse me! Excuse me!' Kellerman was saying. He was having trouble getting air into his lungs, but had been able to extract yet another laminated ID card from his jacket pocket and was waving it, pathetically, at what appeared, from the extra detailing on his helmet, to be the officer in charge.

'Police?' Vickery asked.

'Shit, no. Not cops — not NYPD anyhow. TRU.'

'What's that?'

'Uh, I said, excuse me! Over here! Ow, fuck!'

The chief walked over, put his boot on Kellerman's shoulder and took the card. He studied the front, then the back, then the front again before summoning a subordinate.

'Check this out.'

Vickery relaxed a little. If Kellerman didn't have a string to pull, no one did. Then it was simply a matter of explaining the guns, and perhaps also the boys and girls. What was the TRU?

'Who are you?'

He was being addressed.

'He's with —' Kellerman said, before having his speech curtailed by boot pressure.

'I said, who are you?'

The rifle barrel swung in front of Vickery's nose. His tie was sinking.

'Um, Alan Vickery, actually. Atlantic Affairs Institute. I'm with —'

'Where're you from?'

'London?'

'Foreign?'

'I suppose...'

The chief walked away.

'Check this one for weapons and ID.'

Vickery felt himself massaged and prodded. His passport, conscientiously carried at all times, as required, was ripped — along with his reading specs and some embarrassing business cards — from his inside pocket.

'Hang on in there, Alan,' Kellerman whispered, giving Vickery a look as odd as it was sorrowful.

It looked like Muller was getting the same treatment. Petty, however, was on his feet and talking to two of the men in black. It was a conversation that involved a lot of slow hand gestures on Petty's part, which seemed in keeping with his personal style. His interlocutors did him the honour of raising their visors.

Perhaps Urquist had gotten word back. The girls were patted down thoroughly and unnecessarily and then shooed out. The boys were allowed to follow.

Muller was on his feet, helping the cops with their enquiries concerning the arsenal. Petty butted in from time to time with a languorous gesture. Muller offered paperwork for inspection. It was flipped through and returned with indifference. A small blue book, probably a passport, was swiped across a portable device, with results of no consequence. Muller was dismissed and went off to huddle with Petty.

Vickery's breastbone began to ache.

Now Kellerman was hauled, wheezing, to his feet and given his ID back. The chief approached, muttered something inaudible yet sinister to Kellerman and glanced down at Vickery.

'No, no, it's okay, fuck it,' he heard Kellerman say. 'I understand. You gotta do what... Shit, look at my suit!'

A pair of pointy, black boots with suspiciously tall heels splashed down in front of Vickery's face, pretty much giving the coup de grâce to his Jermyn Street tie. It was Petty.

'Bad luck, Mr Alan Vickery of London. We'll be seeing you around.'

Bad luck?

'Okay, Alan. Come on. You can get up now,' Kellerman said, offering his hand in a limp and useless fashion.

Vickery got up unassisted.

'So... Is everything sorted out?' he said.

'Oh yeah. Kind of. You just need to go with our friends here, and, uh... It's just a bureaucratic thing. You know how it is these days. Should have you out in a day or two.'

'Out? Out of what?'

'Don't get excited. They'll treat you nice. Harlan here told them what the deal is.'

'Out of what?'

'The processing centre.'

'The what?'

'Don't worry. We won't forget about you. It's nothing. It's a database thing.'

'What about Arnie?'

'US passport.'

'But he's —'

'Cool it, Alan.'

Vickery felt his arms yanked behind him and something thin and plastic tightened around his wrists.

He saw Kellerman and Muller look away.

And he saw Petty give him a little wave.

A drop of dirty water fell from his tie and ran down the front of his trousers.

CHAPTER 9

Stuff, Dale felt, was crowding in on him. The Ellises had vanished. In Windhoek, the embassy was running on automatic, with shields up. Jay wouldn't leave him alone. Sheryl was freaking out one moment then creepy-quiet the next. Karl had been kind of brutal with him. And Ms Lenehan, the cause of all this (though he still had little idea why) had become a — well, a cause.

Everything was up in the air. And now, so was he.

It was early in the morning and he was looking down on Johannesburg just as the sun rose above it. Sheryl slept in the window seat with Dale's coat over her. Couldn't leave her behind on her own. Not after what had happened. Plus he felt a little braver, paradoxically, with her at his side.

The plane banked to give him a view of the city. He'd been through here so many times, but had never bothered to look down. It struck him that the city was easy to read. The main highways stood out. There was the Central Business District, once faded and dangerous, now recovering. Over here were the industrial areas. In the north, the hotels, malls and apartment buildings of upscale Sandton. And with their twisty roads, tiled roofs, lawns, driveways and pools, the residential neighbourhoods were a cinch to spot. Major roads demarcated these distinct zones.

But what, then, were these large brown patches? He kind of knew the answer, but he couldn't make it fit. No roads in there, but a grid-like pattern all the same. Hundreds of little boxes. An occasional metallic flash as the plane turned and the sun caught. Containers, sheds, huts? Houses? But look at the size — compared to the suburbs...

Okay, Dale, he told himself. You're looking at the townships and you know it. Tell Sheryl.

He nudged his wife gently.

'Look,' he said. 'Down there.'

Sheryl rubbed her eyes and looked at him.

'No — down there. Look,' he said.

She looked.

'See?' he said. Then, lowering his voice: 'the townships. Still there.'

Sheryl slumped down in her seat and pulled Dale's coat up over her face.

Well, he thought, maybe not. Maybe not what everybody wants at this time in the morning. He, on the other hand, didn't mind going about with his eyes open. Most of the time.

In a briefcase in the overhead bin above him was a DVD. Two, in fact. He'd made a copy. To tell the truth, he'd made six copies. Sure, Jay probably had copies, too. But who wanted to rely on him? Today, he's on one side of this morass; tomorrow...

In addition to making copies, he'd transferred the whole thing on to Sheryl's PC. And then he'd tried emailing it to his Gmail account. That hadn't worked. So he'd made another DVD and mailed it to his grandmother in Winston-Salem. He felt a little guilty about that, but it was probably okay. Who was going to mess with her? She had a dog and a rifle.

The plane banked again and started to descend in earnest, rendering the townships invisible.

Despite what he knew, he still felt a shock at seeing the truth laid out so plainly below him. 'Graphic' was the word you always heard people use about development reports. *Graphic* picture of poverty. *Graphic* insight into whatever. But the reports were just words. What counted was seeing. And he had a video.

Karl had used his media contacts to come up with a name. Someone who would, most likely, be receptive. This had taken a while and caused a lot of frustration because Karl didn't really have any media contacts and was upset about being hassled by Jay (it sounded like Jay from Karl's description) and two other men (who remained mysterious and a concern). But the result was a name: some guy called Brian Callaghan who was Irish and worked for the BBC in Johannesburg.

Brian Callaghan, according to Karl, was well-known as one of those guys who went into war zones, spoke to the victims in their own language and got the news out first. Back in the day, that is, when such things were possible. Before war zones were The War Zones. Before any westerner was a dead hostage walking. Obviously not a young guy. But he went in on his own, or with a guide, and *not* with a backup convoy and the camera always on him. Karl said he'd talked to a friend whose brother-in-law had worked as an accountant at the BBC and who swore that this guy — Callaghan — was okay.

Dale had never heard of him. But he had his address.

Callaghan rented an apartment in a new building next to a mall that was even newer. Sheryl was thirsty so they parked in the mall and found a coffee shop.

As he sat watching the shoppers go about their languid business a sense of disorientation crept over him. The glass store-fronts were spotless and enticing. A friendly jangle of underwater music and gentle laughter filled his ears and soothed his soul. The air was cool and fragrant, the lighting soft, natural and indirect. He began to relax, to drift. Inside the coffee shop there was the clinking of cups and the hiss of steam; and the aroma. Outside, the tinkling of a fountain and the chiming of helpful announcements. What could be wrong with any of this?

'I'd better eat something,' Sheryl said. 'You want anything?'

'No. Thanks.'

She left the table. Her half-empty cup was removed.

So much marble, so much glass, so much to buy. What could there be in such a place to be afraid of? He, Dale, wasn't a threat to anyone. Nor was he about to turn the world upside down. He would do his little bit and that would be that. Forget about Jay's obsessions, which, as usual, were obscure. Give this guy Callaghan the video and say: 'Look — that's me, that's her, check the date. See?' Perhaps it doesn't even get on the air. It's just one person; with everything else that was going on...

So, anyhow, word gets around and they have to produce her. Habeas corpus, right? And it's 'Oh, say people, look — here's Ms Lenehan, not dead after all, sorry about the mistake, don't know how that happened, time to move on'. And then, whatever else they do to her, it has to happen in the open. With lawyers.

This last thought was a comfort. Get the lawyers involved, yes sir. Where would we be without them? Where she is, probably.

And he and Sheryl would have to leave Africa now. So it didn't matter whether Bill's successor fired him or sent him home. At least they wouldn't have to pay for relocation.

There it is, he told himself — you see? Sit in the mall here for twenty minutes and it doesn't seem so bad. You get a perspective.

Then he remembered the view from the air.

Sheryl returned with a muffin.

'So what are you going to say to this guy?'

'Oh, I don't know,' he said.

But, of course, he had been rehearsing a little speech. It went something like this: 'My name is Dale Summers and I work in the US Embassy in Windhoek, Namibia and this video proves that on October 27 I was shopping with the kidnapped banker Jennifer Ross Lenehan and she was alive, not dead, as you have been told, and I don't know what's happened to her but our government does, and if you show the video they'll have to let her go.'

It didn't sound very persuasive, and he knew the first question would be 'Who are *they*?' Who were they? His answer would be: 'Please. Just look at the video. I don't know what's happening to her. Show the video, so they know they can't go any further.'

He was afraid that Callaghan would want to interrogate him, record him, point a camera at him. If this happened, who knew what stuff he would blurt out? But then maybe Callaghan would just tell him to get lost. That would be worse. What then?

'Let's go do it,' he said.

They left their rental car under armed guard in the parking lot of the mini-mall and walked the short distance to Callaghan's building in ten minutes, alone in the sunshine. A security guard noted Dale's briefcase, but waved them through.

Callaghan's apartment was on the third floor. Dale knocked. The door opened immediately. A blowsy, florid man in tight, faded jeans and a voluminous, white, dress shirt filled up the doorway.

'Oh, all right. It's you,' he said. 'Bloody hell. Come on. Oh, you as well? Right. Come on in, the pair of you.'

They were shooed in like two sheep late for a party.

Dale expected to find the apartment full of newspapers, dirty clothes and whisky bottles. This turned out to be naïve. It was remarkably tidy — as was its occupant, except for his straggly, grey hair. The kitchen was well-organised, the counter-tops clean. In the bathroom, towels were neatly stacked. There was an ironing board, folded up but ready for action; and a sinister device he'd seen once in a hotel in London — a trouser press.

'You must be Sheryl. Have a seat. Want some tea? I'm Brian.'

So he was expecting them. Jay? Karl?

Sheryl got some tea, even though she hadn't asked for any.

'Dale, hullo, hullo,' Callaghan said, shaking Dale's hand with a grip that seemed too soft for such a large man. 'Got a video for me, then?'

They sat at a small, circular dining table. Sheryl watched from a couch.

'Well, I guess you probably know what's on it,' Dale said, happy to have an eager interlocutor and not a hostile one.

'Yes, yes, I do. Who's on it is the important thing.'

'Just me and her.'

'Exactly.'

'Want to see it?'

Callaghan thought for a moment, sparing a quick, encouraging glance for Sheryl as he did so.

'Why not, why not?'

He took the video from Dale's briefcase and set it running on a small TV on the kitchen counter. After thirty seconds or so of concentrated viewing he muted the sound and turned back to Dale.

'Brave man. All I can say. Now then.'

Callaghan leaned forward on the table like a doctor about to break the bad news.

'Have you considered your next step?'

His next step? Dale flashed back to the scene in his apartment — Sheryl in a state of shock; Jay hollering and bullying, ordering him about; his own sense of helplessness. This was supposed to be it. There wasn't supposed to be a next step. The only next step was on to a plane to Charlotte — or, to be realistic, Atlanta — just himself and Sheryl; followed by the rental of a modest two-bedroom in a nice area, with Africa left behind and no more spies and no more politics.

What next step?

'So are you planning on broadcasting it?' he asked, cautiously.

'Definitely.'

'Well, that's all I — I mean we...'

'Ah.' Callaghan said, tapping the table with his notably well-manicured fingers.

Dale was struck by the sudden suspicion that Jay — or someone — had given Callaghan more of a lead-on than was justified by the circumstances. And was Callaghan a TV journalist? He didn't look like one. Didn't sound Irish either. Was this really Callaghan, or...

'So you're not really Irish,' he said, trying not to sound accusatory.

'No,' Callaghan said, looking puzzled. 'No. Come from Southend.'

There was no way of verifying this, whatever it meant — but it had the dull ring of truth.

'Can we just go, Dale, please?' Sheryl said.

Callaghan was looking at his watch.

'Sheryl. Sheryl,' he said, as if repeating her name was enough to convince her of some unspoken proposition. 'Know you want to get going. But I really need, really need to have a little chat with your husband.'

Dale didn't want any little chats — this was shaping up like the afternoon-tea version of Jay.

'Brian, I'm sorry. We got to make tracks now. You got the video. That's all I came for. Shit, I could have mailed it.'

'No, you couldn't. Listen to me.'

'Sorry, Brian, we're going.'

He got up from the table and offered his hand to Sheryl.

'I know you want to help her,' Callaghan said. 'Very noble. Completely innocent, you know.'

Dale thought of Jay and the bomb. Innocence turned, by degrees, into foolishness, which mutated in time into guilt. Theory number one. Or you could believe theory number two, the current doctrine — all that black-and-white stuff — but, if you did, you found yourself demonstrating, one day or another, the validity of theory number one. What mattered was what he had felt the first time he saw her. She was innocent, no question.

Sheryl had the door open.

'We have an appointment, you see,' Callaghan said. 'Running a bit late, as it happens. I was expecting you earlier. Did you get lost on the way from the airport?'

They had indeed lost their way. Dale felt his resolution weakening.

'What appointment?'

'But the problem is, they've sent me a new assistant. Not that I need one, last one was useless. And I've got to pick her up from her pad. Doesn't know her way around. *I'm assisting her*. Daft, isn't it?'

'Is it? But what —'

'Lives in Bryanston, apparently. Know where that is, do you? Bryanston? North-west, isn't it? I'll drive. You can have the map.'

'What is this appointment?'

'What we'll do is, we'll drop the video off on the way, and my friendly editor will make sure it gets shoved out on the air right after the sport. And then the Southern Africa correspondent — nice chap — will come on and say this poses an awkward dilemma for the American administration. Sound okay to you?'

'This is Jay, isn't it?'

'Him? No, no. Then it'll be "Well, what do we know about this plump, young chap who doesn't mind standing around holding coat-hangers during office hours?" No offence. Following me?'

Sheryl closed the door again.

'Who are we going to see?' she asked, quietly.

'Ever heard of a chap called George Fischer?'

Dale hesitated.

'No,' Sheryl said.

'What about Walter Gabo?'

'No,' they said together.

Callaghan gave his chin a two-fingered tap, as if weighing the evidence.

'Heard of SWAPO, of course?'

'Sure,' Dale said.

'Well, it's Walter we're going to see. He's a lawyer. I think he can help you.'

A lawyer...

'But first,' Callaghan said, with a flutter of irritation, 'we have to collect Miss Zara Vickery.'

CHAPTER 10

Callaghan made a face — as if someone had given him the wrong story. ‘This doesn’t look right.’ He had drawn his weathered, green Land Rover up to the electric gates of a fake-French mini-château.

A gravel drive led past stripy lawns to a turning-circle graced by a fountain in the shape of two mermaids with their tails entangled. The shuttered and turreted house looked down on its visitors with bleached condescension. To the side of the mansion a well-kept tennis court could be seen through a screen of trees. Discreetly attached to the gates was a security company plaque. Dale wondered why people who wanted to live in France had built their house in Johannesburg.

‘Supposed to be a penniless graduate.’

Callaghan pulled out a scrap of paper from his back pocket and studied it. ‘Nope, this is it.’

He turned around to Dale and Sheryl, who sat uncomfortably in Callaghan’s recently-shampooed back seat.

‘How much do you think *this* costs?’ Callaghan asked, jerking his thumb.

Dale was thinking about the video. He’d seen Callaghan toss it on to the receptionist’s desk and trot back out with hardly a word spoken.

‘You got me,’ he said, drawling facetiously. ‘Ain’t nothing like this in Windhoek.’

‘Got to be at least forty thousand rand a month,’ Callaghan said. ‘What’s that in dollars?’

The answer was alarming. They sat contemplating it for a moment.

‘Better see if she’s at home,’ Callaghan said. ‘In residence.’ He jumped out of the car and strode up to a communication panel in the perimeter wall.

‘Check out that fountain,’ Sheryl said.

‘Yeah, really.’ It was hard to say which predominated — the eroticism or the fishiness.

Callaghan bounced back into the car.

‘She’ll only be ten minutes. Don’t know why I’m bothering with this. Don’t like keeping Walter waiting. Don’t like it at all.’

‘So who is this Walter guy, exactly?’ Sheryl asked.

Dale had been struggling to understand something odd about his wife's behaviour today. Gone was the fearfulness, the edginess, the terrifying quietude. She seemed grounded, confident, assertive even. Why the change?

Callaghan was talking on his cell phone and rubbing the back of his head. Dale wondered why his hair was the only untidy thing about him. Because it was the only thing he couldn't keep an eye on?

'Oh really?'

Callaghan had been repeating this phrase into his phone and snorting to himself, in mock-grim satisfaction.

'Walter?' he said, turning the phone off. 'One of our leading statesmen that nobody's heard of. Not in London or Washington, anyway. Started out as a harmless trouble-maker and trainee freedom-fighter. Worked his way up to international guerrilla chief. Had a bash at Truth and Reconciliation — quite successfully, by all accounts. Now he's a legal eagle, government advisor, article-writer and stalwart of Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment. Busy lad. Answer your question? Ah — look!'

The front doors to the château had parted and a tall young woman stood poised on the threshold.

'Must be her. Behold Miss Zara Vickery,' Callaghan said.

To Dale, she looked exotic. She was dressed all in pale-blue denim, but it was the kind of dress-down, designer outfit that had to have cost a ton of money. Her pale, blonde hair was done up in a ponytail that came half-way down her back and was artfully threaded through the hole in the back of her velvety, pink golf-cap. On the front of the cap were the letters 'TG', which meant nothing to him. She had a front-of-the-queue assurance about her — Dale had the sense that this was someone who never had to get in line for much — and an incuriosity about her surroundings: she was checking herself out with a self-concern that wasn't self-awareness, and ignoring the world about her, including Callaghan's car and all within it.

The girl fumbled in her bag and extracted a pair of gold-rimmed sunglasses. Dale noted with awe that she was wearing more jewellery than Sheryl possessed in her entire collection. And it looked real, too.

Callaghan seemed to have picked up on the jewels. He was muttering something under his breath. It might have been 'Where does she think she is?'

The girl tossed her hair back and strode towards them without quite seeming to acknowledge their presence. Her boots slipped about on the gravel but she ignored this. A pair of black hands closed the doors behind her.

'So TG — what's that?' Sheryl asked.

'Dunno. Tory Girl?' Callaghan said.

'What?'

'Well, I think I know who owns this house. Chap called Aylsham. Jeremy Aylsham. Don't suppose you've heard of him. Part-time British politician of the Conservative variety. Supposedly retired. Got caught in a spot of sanctions-busting. Used to be a Sir. Got stripped. A right piece of work.'

The girl was trying to figure out how to operate the electric gates. Suddenly they slid open on their own, startling her.

'So she's his daughter? Or his niece?'

'No. No, I don't think so...'

'What then?'

Callaghan seemed distracted.

'I don't think we want her around while we're talking to Walter,' he said slowly. 'What do you think?'

But Zara had arrived and was climbing into Callaghan's front passenger seat without waiting for the official invite.

By some strange instinct, she turned immediately to Dale and stuck her hand over the back of the seat.

'Hiya, I'm Zara. Really nice to meet you, Brian. Mrs Brian?'

Dale shook her hand. It felt ridiculously soft. 'Hi there. I'm Dale. This is Sheryl. That's Brian.'

Zara retreated gracefully.

'Oh! Okay... Brian!'

'Hullo, hullo. Lovely to see you at last, my dear. Do all the intro stuff later, okay? We're a bit behind.'

Callaghan started the car and took off, smartly.

'Nice place your uncle's got.'

'My uncle?'

'Sir Jeremy.'

'Oh, Jerry. No, he's just a friend of the family, you know. Well, actually, my dad, really. They're absolutely, well, you know.'

'Mm.'

The car swept on to the N1 and joined the traffic swarming south.

In the Central Business District, Callaghan negotiated his way past minibuses and street traders into a zone of early twentieth-century office blocks and skyscrapers. Dale couldn't quite gauge the neighbourhood: some buildings were shabby; others had been renovated. On Commissioner Street, Callaghan slowed and pointed out one particular building.

'See that? The Corner House. It's a famous building.'

The building was a solid, grand affair of nine stories or so, with classical ornamentation, bronzed bay windows and little bridges at the uppermost floor to link the building's two sections. It had a dome. Impressive — and surprising.

'Built in 1904. Tallest building in southern Africa. Whole country was pretty much run out of here. *Randlords*, they were called. Now there's a hotel and apartments. Walter lives here.'

They left the car in a parking garage and ventured into the marble lobby of Walter's abode. Callaghan pinched Dale's sleeve and held him back while Sheryl and Zara walked ahead.

'I'm just going to pop upstairs and have a chat with Walter,' he said. 'Keep Miss Vickery amused. Don't say anything in front of her about you-know-who. Have a whisper in your wife's ear. *Pas devant l'enfant* and so on. I'd send her on an errand, but it's probably a bit unwise. Back shortly.'

Dale watched Callaghan bound up the stairs, ignoring the elevators. Sheryl wasn't going to say anything in front of the girl; she was pretty damn sharp today.

In fact, chances were that she'd have a better take than he did on what the deal with Walter was; he didn't get it, that was for sure. He should go ask her, that's what he should do.

But Sheryl was listening to Zara talk about how she hadn't really been looking for a job, but a friend had mentioned her name to another friend and blah-blah-blah; and Jerry was just one of those people who would always help one out if he could; and she really just intended using the BBC as a stepping-stone to something better; and more blah. It looked like Sheryl was kind of tied up.

Why was Callaghan suspicious of the girl? She looked harmless. Okay, so she was upper-crust. So what? Maybe Callaghan was just a paranoid old lefty. But no, that wasn't it. Despite his manner — what would you call it in British-speak, chummy? — he was hard and cynical. There was a reason for his suspicion, but his act was the kind of stuff that he and Sheryl couldn't fake and couldn't entirely trust. They had better hope that he was truly on their team; they were in his hands — and maybe now Walter's, too.

Callaghan was back, whispering in Dale's ear.

'Walter is of the opinion that I am A, a paranoid old hack and B, not prepared to have a bit of fun now and again. I am neither, of course. Anyway, upshot is, everyone's invited. Up we go.'

Walter's apartment was large, dimly-lit and simply but elegantly furnished. In the centre of the living room, two sofas had been arranged in an L-shape. An oblong coffee table had been positioned in front of one of these, and in front of the table, pointing at the sofa, was a video camera on a tripod. On the wall behind the sofa were framed photographs of Thabo Mbeki and Nelson Mandela, the latter positioned two inches higher. No picture of Jacob Zuma — perhaps in another room?

Both Mandela and Mbeki were shaking hands with the same short, stocky man with wide shoulders, a large head, short, frizzy hair, John Lennon glasses and a grey-white beard. This man now emerged from a kitchen carrying glasses and bottles of water on a tray. He set the tray, a little unsteadily, on the table. Dale figured he was at least seventy-five years old.

'Brian...' Walter said, gesturing at the camera.

'Right,' Callaghan said. 'Zara, love — know how to work a camera, do you?'

Zara looked doubtful.

'Nothing to it. Come over here. Walter, this is Miss Zara Vickery and she's my um, assistant. Aren't you, Zara?'

Zara was inspecting the camera.

This is the bit of fun, Dale thought. Or the start of it.

'Now, Mr and Mrs Summers, I am very honoured to meet you. Would you please sit...' Walter indicated the hot seat. '...and I will join you.'

Callaghan sat on the other sofa, out of shot.

'Red button, Zara, love,' he said. 'But not 'til I say so.'

Dale looked at Sheryl. She seemed composed; in fact, she was adjusting her hair.

'I don't know about this...' he said.

'I think it's okay.'

'Don't worry, Mr Summers,' Walter said. 'We are not making a public broadcast. This is for insurance only.'

'In case someone puts the screws on the Beeb,' Callaghan said. 'Our fearless BBC. Has been known.'

Walter touched Dale on the arm.

'But let me ask you something first, please, Mr Summers. Where are my old friends Bill and Elaine Ellis? I am unable to contact them.'

'All I know is, they're gone from the residence and the place is locked down.'

'I heard they had gone to Djibouti. Why would they go there?'

Sheryl looked up and said something under her breath. Callaghan was listening intently, with a small notepad on his knee and a pencil behind his ear. Dale felt a sudden cramp in his stomach. Djibouti, he thought. The bases. Neat location for one of those new military intelligence fuck-ups. Was *she* there?

Something distracted him — a red light on the camera. He straightened instinctively.

'No, no, no, Zara,' Callaghan said. 'Not yet. Delete that bit, there's a good girl.'

Dale saw the flash of humiliation on the girl's face. If Callaghan did, he pretended not to.

'Well, we must hope for the best,' Walter said. 'Now let me say plainly that I am not a member of, nor an employee of the government of South Africa. But I try to make myself useful and they do listen to me from time to time.'

He paused to take a sip of water.

'They also ask me for favours.' He looked pointedly at Callaghan, who nodded in response.

'The government is very much opposed to mercenary activity involving the territory of South Africa or the citizens or foreign residents of the country. And they have made laws against this type of behaviour. I'm sure you can understand why. And I know that Bill and Elaine would understand only too well.'

'What if you don't call them mercenaries,' Callaghan said. 'What if you call them private military companies?'

Walter smiled, sourly.

'Flexible approach,' Callaghan said. 'Tried and tested in the UK and other leading nations.'

'We don't want any of it,' Walter said. 'It is one more disease we wish to eradicate from our continent.'

'Right ho.' Callaghan leaned back and folded his arms in response to Walter's frown.

'Mr. Summers. You met a lady called Miss Jennifer Ross Lenehan. And this happened in Windhoek just last week.'

'Yes.'

'And this is the same lady who was kidnapped here in Johannesburg — up in Sandton — eight weeks ago.'

'Yes.'

'Do you know why?'

'No.'

'We think that she and her companion, Mr Barclay, were following a trail of laundered money. We think that this money is to pay for mercenaries. We would like to know who they are and what they intend to do.'

Walter took another sip of water and waited. It had to be something like this, Dale thought. It explained Jay's bomb — though not quite the vehemence or personal character of his interest. And what of the Ellises? What was going down in Djibouti?

'Why did they say she was dead?' he asked Walter.

Callaghan took a huge sigh. Zara looked confused and jumpy; she was looking up at the ceiling, mouth open, as if trying to memorise something.

'They were going to get rid of her,' Sheryl said.

There was a moment of stillness.

'Who was?' Callaghan asked. But Walter held up his hand; no one spoke.

She said it out loud, Dale thought. We're on a new track. She's leading the way. Something's going to happen.

Walter was rubbing his hands together like a businessman about to make a difficult pitch.

'Mr Summers. How long have you been working under Bill Ellis in Namibia?'

'Couple of years.'

'And did you get to know him very well?'

Dale thought of the scene by the pool and its sequel in the kitchen.

'Not that well, I guess.'

'He and his wife have spent half of their lives in Africa.'

This was uncontroversial.

'Mr Callaghan here would probably tell you that they went native,' Walter said, giving Callaghan another severe look. 'But then he often speaks in outmoded language, and this is not, in fact, the case.' He turned back to Dale.

'Do you know their history?'

There was something about Angola, wasn't there? And the daughter?

'Not that much.'

'Namibia achieved independence from South Africa in 1990. But SWAPO — the South-West Africa People's Organisation — was formed in 1960 — by Mr Nujoma, and Mr Pohamba, among others. They were resistance fighters. There was a long struggle. Eventually, each became President of Namibia. In 2014, the Namibian people elected a third President. Also from SWAPO.'

'Sure.'

'Angola became independent from Portugal in 1975. But there was civil war until 2002—except for two short interludes, one for the conduct of elections and another for a brief visit from the UN. The MPLA, the Angolan liberation movement, fought against Jonas Savimbi and Unita. The Soviet Union and Cuba backed the MPLA. The United States and South Africa backed Savimbi. Savimbi was a monster, by the way.'

'Right.' These old guys loved their history lessons.

'In South Africa, we had majority rule in 1994. After nearly a century of resistance.'

'Yes.'

'And this was our life. So it became for Bill and Elaine. To the extent that they could, they adopted it. The struggle. They were working for your State Department. But whereas we knew which side we were on, they were obliged to make a constant... Recalibration, in response to the pressures on them.'

'Balancing act,' Callaghan said.

'Sometimes they miscalculated, but they survived,' Walter said. A cloud seemed to cross his face. 'Well, the two of them survived. And we had hoped that those days were over. But it appears they may not be.'

'This time they got screwed,' Callaghan said. 'No balance of power any more.'

What was Callaghan talking about? Why the history lesson from Walter? And Sheryl looked grim — what was she thinking?

'Have you ever heard the name George Fischer?' Walter said.

That name — it kept on coming back.

'People keep asking me if I've heard of him,' he said, glancing at Callaghan, who didn't react.

Zara, who had been standing on one leg, looking bored, said: 'Who?' They all looked at her.

'Someone needs to pay George a visit,' Callaghan said. 'Before he gets swept up into anything. Right, Walter?'

'Thank you, Brian — I was coming to that point.' Walter paused, as if gathering his thoughts. Zara looked angry, Dale thought. Didn't like being ignored?

Sheryl leaned across Dale to look Walter in the face.

'They had a daughter. The Ellises had a daughter.'

Walter looked pained.

'Yes, they did. She was killed. Up north in the Caprivi.'

Dale blinked. Sheryl was amazing him today. And she hadn't finished with Walter yet.

'I was there,' Walter said. 'So was George.'

'What was her name?'

'Elizabeth.'

Sheryl sat back. Walter coughed; he seemed to want to move on.

'George can help us all,' he said. 'By virtue of his particular contacts in Namibia and Angola — and his relationship with Bill and Elaine. But we must explain the situation to him. And we must do so before — before others do.'

'Ever been to Swakopmund?' Callaghan asked, looking at Dale.

A weird little seaside town on the Atlantic coast. People went there to get away from the heat of Windhoek.

'Couple of times.'

'Know what to expect, then.'

'You will have the support and backing of the South African government,' Walter said. 'But it will be indirect. Through me. The security services are very competent — especially in regard to mercenaries — but there are always leaks, and we suspect our adversaries have many resources. Is that not correct, Brian?'

Callaghan nodded.

'We will mention this in our interview for the camera,' Walter continued.

Another mission, Dale thought. But he'd already fulfilled his assignment for Jay. This was too much. He'd brought the video. The video would be shown on

TV — of course it would. Jennifer would be released. Everybody could go home. Not to Swakopmund. Was this really just part of Jay's scheme all along?

'Is this Jay's deal?' he asked, sounding a little too plaintive and looking from face to face, including Zara's, for an honest answer.

'That's what we'd like to know, Dale,' Callaghan said.

'So what do we say to George?' Sheryl said.

There she went again.

'We can't do this,' he said. 'We're out of our depth, we don't know what we're doing. I — we just wanted to help Jennifer. She didn't do anything, and...'

He wasn't sure what else he meant to say. 'Why can't you just go get your mercenaries?' he said. 'Arrest them. Throw them in jail.'

'We don't know who they are,' Walter said. 'We know only that large amounts of money have been coming into our country and passing through some very dirty hands. This is what Mr Barclay discovered. We cannot even be sure that he told Miss Lenehan. But we would like to know what they know.'

'Send somebody else.'

'It's important that it be you. You met Miss Lenehan. You know the Ellises. You have certain other qualities. There is no one else. It is perfectly reasonable that Mr and Mrs Summers should wish to take a short holiday by the coast.'

Callaghan had budged forward on to the edge of his seat; he was giving his chin the two-fingered tap again — a gesture that Dale now began to find annoying and unsettling. Callaghan realised Dale was staring at him.

'Zara,' he said, turning away, 'come and sit down. We're not ready yet. Give your legs a rest.'

Zara scowled and sat.

'We must help Bill and Elaine,' Walter said, his voice tightening. 'George is essential.'

Sheryl took Dale's hand.

'We'll go, won't we?'

He wanted to ask her what the heck had come over her since the break-in at the apartment, but all he could do was sit back and breathe out slowly.

'Time for the in-depth political background,' Callaghan said. 'From Your Own Correspondent. Zara — do me a favour, love, see if there's a beer in the fridge...'

The girl looked at Callaghan as if he'd asked her to take off her shirt.

'I believe there is,' Walter said.

Zara slouched her way into the kitchen, almost upsetting the camera.

Sheryl gave Callaghan a look that reminded Dale of those he often received on his return from the Quiver Tree — except it was more curious than censorious. He wanted to pursue the Swakopmund issue — this was evidently where the legendary George lived — but Callaghan seemed to be cranking up some kind of oration.

'Africa,' Callaghan said. 'Big place, lot of problems. No need to go through the list — you know what they are and I'm not some pompous, fat-headed, western politician talking to a bunch of bankers in Switzerland.'

Walter seemed to find that amusing.

'But what,' Callaghan continued, 'is the single biggest impediment to progress down here below the Sahara?'

'Dysfunctional governance,' Walter said.

'Thank you, Walter. Correct answer. And which country is therefore the most important country in Africa and quite possibly the world?'

'This one. South Africa.'

'Right again, Walter.' Callaghan frowned at Sheryl and Dale as if to make sure they were paying attention. 'Now, for your bonus point, Walter, explain why that might be so.'

'Because we have a good government, an economy that is strong and growing; and because we have advanced political institutions and a true multiracial society.'

'And...?'

'And we may be able to transfer these benefits to our neighbours without invading them.'

'Good answer, Walter, and — because I like you so much — I'll gloss over the arms procurement scandals, the peccadilloes of certain ANC top brass, white disengagement, the scandalous treatment of mineworkers, and sundry other little embarrassments. Your point stands.'

Zara shuffled back with a bottle of what appeared to be premium German beer. She thrust the bottle, unopened, at Callaghan, who produced a handkerchief from his front pocket and wrenched off the bottle-top with one twist.

'Thank you, Zara. Very nice. Walter, you're getting a little decadent in your old age.'

'George introduced me to it.'

'Ah. Where were we? Right. You've got your African Union, your New Partnership for Africa's Development, growth on the up in sub-Saharan Africa, Chinese investment and so on, and you're going to lead the continent out of poverty. Fabulous. But what is the last thing you need?'

'Recolonisation.'

'Is there a danger of that?'

'Yes.'

'Why would anyone want to recolonise you?'

'Natural resources and strategic security. Particularly in respect of China.'

'In other words...'

'Oil and military bases.'

'Where's the oil?'

'In the Gulf of Guinea.'

'And where are the military?'

'The Americans have set up a *Command* for Africa. They call it *Africom*. It's everywhere. Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Chad, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Djibouti, of course.'

'What about Angola?'

'What indeed.'

Callaghan focused on Dale.

'Namibia will be affected if anything happens to Angola. And Botswana, probably.'

He switched to Sheryl.

'Angola needs decades to recover. Walter and his people need to be allowed to get on with what they're doing. Walter?'

Walter shifted in his seat and rubbed his eyes.

'There was a series of meetings in Pretoria. Just recently. It appears that we have been insufficiently supportive of American policy in our region. We were warned not to intervene in events — in our region. There was a gentleman by the name of Douglas Moreland. George and I knew him thirty-odd years ago in Angola. So did Bill and Elaine. I have no idea what his official position is now.'

'What did he say, Walter?' Callaghan asked.

'He said we were not to stand in the way of freedom. If we did, we would face consequences.'

'What did he mean?'

'We don't know.'

'It's Angola, isn't it?'

'We think so.'

Callaghan put down his beer and got to his feet.

'How's it going to happen?'

'We must follow the money,' Walter said. 'That is to say, someone must. *We* have been warned.'

'George is the man. And you, Dale and Sheryl, lovely people that you undoubtedly are, are on a mission to Swakopmund. That's where he lives.'

Callaghan checked his watch.

'But now, it's time for the news. Where's your TV, Walter?'

'Over there.'

'Zara, love,' Callaghan said, 'channel four hundred, if you wouldn't mind.'

As if numbed by the preceding conversation, Zara obeyed. They sat listlessly through sport, weather and the latest War Zone statistics — and then there she was.

Sheryl sat up straight. Walter adjusted his glasses. Callaghan took a slow draw on his beer. Dale felt the Central Business District heave under his feet.

Weaving between the rails, picking at T-shirts, scrutinising labels, holding up a sweater to check the size, smiling at her nervous companion: a trim, assertive woman, wearing an intelligent but tired expression, moving with deliberation and assurance.

Zara made a face.

'So like who the hell is *she*?' she said.

CHAPTER 11

Alan Vickery had bought his house in Chelsea, using cash of the hard-earned persuasion, in the summer of 1994, on the basis of three iron convictions: first, that, however nauseating the architecture or the neighbours, snobby London property was a no-lose proposition; second, that there was a decent boozier just across the river in Battersea (now a tapas bar, alas); and third, that Mariella refused to live anywhere else.

In respect of this last consideration, he reflected as he slouched alone in his home theatre watching Argentinian football on Sky Sports and trying to decide if all ten speakers were actually working, it was highly ironical that she was never to be found in the bloody place. According to Danesha (Danuska? Danusia?), the maid from Poland (Slovenia? Slovakia?), *Mrs Vickery go to Zurich*. All gnomes and chocolate, wasn't it, Zurich? Must have discovered curtains suddenly. Or maybe a marble crisis had flared up and an appeal had gone out for expert assistance.

Speaker number eight was the one he didn't trust: the smack of the ball hitting the net in the last goal but one should have sounded a lot crisper. This was the trouble, and it was typical of his life these days: with money came responsibilities. *Onerous*, was the word.

Or it might be number nine.

What he needed was entertainment and relaxation. Football wasn't doing it for him and neither was Argentina — not that he had anything against the country; war all forgotten, best steaks in the world and so on. He needed to get out of the house. He had, after all, suffered extreme privation during his brief period of detention at the pleasure of the Terrorist Response Unit. Had to hand it to the Yanks, though; they certainly knew how to lock someone up.

And, if that someone was an important foreign businessman from a crucial ally nation, with links to all the top movers and shakers in the New Democratic what's-it, then they knew how to let him go bloody sharp as well. Had to be something to do with Market Forces, which were well-known to be the authors of all happy endings. All the same, there had been some unpleasant people in

the slammer with him and he had thus been, as Mariella would say, *totally stressed-out, darling*.

But there was a reason why he was reluctant to venture out, in his habitually carefree and airy way, for a brisk one down the King's Road.

Someone was watching him. A man on a motorcycle.

Who could it be?

Mariella? Checking up on him while she was ripping out cuckoo-clocks or recoiling at the fondue in — it was alleged — Zurich? Hoping to tail him to, say, a fragrant flat above a Lebanese grocer's near Marble Arch?

Her Maj's Revenue and Customs? Hoping to catch him renting out his spare bedroom? Aylsham claimed that if his lot ever seized power, they'd abolish all tax collectors and replace them with something voluntary. What a joke.

Arnie Muller? One of Arnie's special-forces chums, down on his luck, willing to do a bit of freelance nosing around to make sure that Arnie's new partner was on the level? Faintly insulting, of course — of all the hundreds of people that he, Alan, knew intimately, he couldn't think of anyone more trustworthy than himself.

That bloke Petty? Harlan Petty — the name had a ring to it, but not a nice one. This was scary. The man was seriously into guns — not just the honest and gratifying profits to be made from them, but the nasty bits of metal themselves. Trying to cut Vickery out of the deal? Looking for an angle? And why the hostility at the gun show? Petty had clearly enjoyed the spectacle of Vickery being dragged away by the cops. Well, some people were like that. And another thing — why were the cops more interested in Vickery than the guns? Oh well — put it all down to Market Forces.

Speaking of which, what about Ray and Marty? Now Ray, the fat one, seemed like an agreeable chap, if a stock or two short of a full portfolio. He was doubtless far too preoccupied with building his golf course to go around hiring leather-clad snoopers. Marty, the thin one, on the other hand, was a true psycho who would probably stop at nothing in pursuit of his nutty revenge buy-out scheme. But what if, as they had insinuated preposterously, they really did have a pack of trained moles digging away at the Pentagon in search of military gold? Wouldn't that mean laser-beams bouncing off his windows, satellites swooping overhead and drones patrolling Mariella's Italianate terrace? And not a lonely greaser on a moped?

And then there was Phyllis...

But this was silly.

It dawned on him that the number of individuals, organisations, pressure groups, government departments, muck-raking publications, lefty trouble-makers, disgruntled former employees, quasi-criminal syndicates, financial regulators and people who had lent money to Sara — Zara! — who might want to spy on him was actually quite large.

This depressing thought led him to flick through the news channels on the TV, hoping for a funny animal story or a Botox scare in Switzerland. But what was the point, he thought, of having eight news channels if they all showed the same story at the same time? Then he noticed what the story was. It was the tale of the murdered bankers, as rendered so movingly by General Freaky. Except they weren't murdered after all — or one of them wasn't, at least. Why, with all

the stuff that was going on in the world — the dollar, the endless terror-plot alerts, the security restrictions, the economic crisis, the War Zones and so on — why was this important?

But it was then that inspiration descended. The answer to the problem of the man on the motorcycle was Aylsham. Tedious, pompous git he might be, but he had one big advantage. The boys at MI5 — cognisant of Aylsham's predilection for interfering in other people's countries; for getting up the noses of UN inspectors; and for generally embarrassing Her Majesty — kept him under constant surveillance, and didn't make a secret of it. And, if you were in his company, then James Bond himself would be certain to see off any pretenders.

Ordinarily, the prospect of an evening with Jerry Aylsham would not have been thrilling. But tonight was different.

He picked up the phone.

*

'Alan, you're looking particularly mouldy this evening. What on Earth have you been doing to yourself?'

Aylsham was one of those lanky, upper-class types who seemed to be constructed entirely of weird angles and non-standard components (no doubt the result of centuries of inbreeding, port-guzzling and horse-riding), and yet his clothes always fitted him perfectly. It was a puzzle. His eyes were restless, his hands thin and menacing, his posture taut. You always felt he was contemplating acts of unspeakable violence — or Vickery did, at least. Aylsham's hair, although not a patch on Vickery's glossy luxuriance, was sleek, fair and schoolboy-floppy. Combined with that vicious little curl of the lip (did they train them to do that?), his tapering chin and his baby-smooth, millpond brow, the overall effect was of a very well brought-up gangster.

'Jet-lag, I expect,' Vickery said. 'Been across the pond doing deals and cementing alliances.'

'Looks to me more like the aftermath of a night in Marble Arch,' Aylsham said, brutally.

They sat in a plush and crepuscular restaurant somewhere in darkest Vauxhall. Aylsham's ageing and decrepit Rolls-Royce ('It's a classic, Alan') had collected Vickery from Chelsea and deposited him at this secretive and underground eatery. Now, the equally aged driver had taken the car off to have its grommets chamfered, or something. Vickery had looked for the tail, but these MI5 blokes were good — very good. The absence of motorcycles spoke to their prowess.

To judge by the menu, the restaurant was French with an American twist, a very curious confluence. Aylsham leaned over and whispered in Vickery's ear.

'Steps from the embassy, Alan. Merely steps.'

Well, yes — except for the *moat* that the Yanks had cunningly installed to protect their new diplomatic fortress. But was he supposed to infer something from that? Probably not. Aylsham was always hinting at intrigues and conspiracies. Trouble was, one time out of ten, he really *was* up to something, and it invariably blew up in his face. In fact, it was a mystery to Vickery where

Aylsham's apparently copious funds came from. His elder brother had blown the inheritance on a web site for domestic servants — tactfully named skivvies.com.

'And where is the beauteous Mariella?' Aylsham asked.

There was nothing to worry about — it was just the way he talked.

'Zurich.'

Aylsham's face fell and two deep, vertical lines appeared at the top of his nose.

'Those Swiss bastards. Did I tell you what they did to me?'

'Yes, Jerry, you did.'

Aylsham had learned the hard way that banking secrecy was not a service you could order up à la carte.

'Jerry,' Vickery said, anxious to change the subject, 'where is he? Your MI5 man? Is he under that table over there, or is he hanging out in the kitchen, hoping for a free bash at the sole meunière?'

'You do talk rubbish sometimes, Alan. It's called the Security Service, and you'd think they'd have better things to do than persecute honest citizens whose only crime is a selfless sense of patriotism. It's pure harassment. You don't know how vindictive these socialist types can be.'

Yes, he did. Exhibit A: Ms Christine Sharp, MP.

'We have to take complete control, before it's too late,' Aylsham said, sighing.

'You keep saying that,' Vickery said. 'But the other side keeps stopping you. I tried to make a donation to your lot but they wouldn't take it. It's lunacy.'

'People are too bloody comfortable,' Aylsham said. 'What we need is a war.'

'I thought we'd had several.'

'No, I mean a real war. Then people would realise.'

'Realise what?'

'Alan, you're being particularly obtuse tonight. Anyway, even when our side is hamstrung or out of office, it doesn't necessarily follow that we're out of power. Do you understand me?'

'Of course.' Well, sort of.

Aylsham lowered his voice.

'If I could tell you, I would, Alan. Let me just say that a group of us have hit upon a little scheme of our own, whose ramifications, were we to be successful, would change the face of politics in this country.'

This sounded familiar.

'What are you going to do?'

Aylsham waved his index finger in front of his mouth; the waiter was approaching.

'The Château Haut-Brion, I think, don't you, Alan?'

'That's a good one, yeah.'

Aylsham proceeded to order half the menu. Where did he put it all? Vickery ordered something he believed would turn out to be steak and chips.

'Ah!' Aylsham said, as the waiter retreated. 'I meant to tell you something. Got your girl Sara a job.'

'Really? She's been pestering me like — wait, this isn't your *scheme*, is it?'

'No, no, no. Nothing like that. No, she wanted a job at the Beeb. So I got her one.'

'What, just like that?'

'I happen to know someone on the new independent board.'

'Well, Jerry, I don't know what to say... Really grateful, actually.'

Never in a million years would he, Alan Vickery, be able to pull off a stunt like that, however rich he became. But Aylsham...

'What's she doing?'

'Well, she's just a dogsbody, of course. But...'

Aylsham leaned across the table.

'...it's rather interesting, actually. They've got this terrible lefty chap in South Africa. Callaghan, I think his name is. Been trying to get rid of him for ages. So they've sent your Sara over there as his assistant. I think the understanding is, she'll report back if there's, you know, anything to report back.'

Bloody Aylsham. There was always an angle.

'Well, it's what she wanted.' And South Africa was a long way away.

'By the way, Jerry, she calls herself Zara now. Zara with a zed.'

'Why?'

'I don't know.'

The wine arrived. They drank in silent contemplation for about a minute.

'So Alan,' Aylsham said, pausing to lick his lips suggestively, 'did they welcome you into the bosom of the Republic?'

'Yes, they did. Had a fantastic time.' If Aylsham had somehow heard about the incident with the cops he would just have to laugh it off.

'And did you get to meet Phyllis?'

'Got on like a church on fire.'

'Remarkable woman. If only we had something like the Liberty Club here. Think what a difference it would make.'

'Ah!'

'Ah what?'

'As it happens, I persuaded Phyllis to invest in the Atlantic Affairs Institute. We're —'

'Your bijou little think-tank in Paddington, you mean?'

'Yes. We're going to expand. We're going to be promoting the New Democratic thingy. For a UK audience, as it were.'

'Consensus.'

'What?'

'New Democratic Consensus.'

'Is that what it is?'

'Yes.'

Vickery paused while Aylsham's initial courses were delivered on a fleet of trolleys. Aylsham plunged directly into something that looked like a bird's nest in a puddle. Perhaps this was the moment he'd been waiting for?

'Jerry,' he said, narrowing his eyes for extra insouciance, 'if you don't mind my asking, what exactly is the New Democratic Consensus? I know it's free markets and liberty and all that stuff, but... What is it *really*?'

Aylsham sat back and dabbed his face with his napkin.

'Well, Alan,' he said, demonstrating that horse-boxes full of money on haughtiness lessons hadn't been spent in vain, 'it's a state of mind, a philosophy, a movement.'

'Yes, and...'

'It's the result of the great changes we have witnessed in the world since we defeated Communism.'

It was hard to picture Aylsham defeating Communism; when animal protesters invaded his farm he locked himself in the bathroom.

'And what changes are those, exactly?'

'I thought you knew your history, Alan. Your reports are full of NDC theory.'

'Don't write 'em myself, you know.'

'No. Well, those of us who keep up with the cutting edge of the intellectual debate consider it axiomatic that liberal Democracy is approaching its final and most perfect form, having triumphed in the Cold War, and —'

'What about the financial crash?'

'Creative destruction, Alan. The system has proved its resilience.'

'Has it?'

'Of course it has. Are *you* richer than you were before the crash?'

'Yes.'

'There you are, then. Thus we may say that a final settlement is possible and imminent.'

Final settlement sounded a little ominous. And there was a glaring flaw in Aylsham's analysis.

'But your bunch can't win elections.'

'I don't mean here! That's why we — you and I and others — have to pull our bloody socks up.'

Things were getting only slightly clearer.

'But what about the Consensus bit, Jerry? What does that mean?'

'It means that we're all agreed.'

'Are we?'

'Yes. Of course we are.'

'What about the people who don't agree?'

'There aren't any.'

Vickery thought back to Phyllis's speech in Philadelphia.

'I think there might be.'

Aylsham attacked his brie and buffalo soufflé with a steak knife.

'Only enemies of freedom, Alan. Only enemies of freedom.'

'Ah, right.'

Vickery's food arrived. It comprised some small medallions of grey fish, in green sauce, complemented by a pyramid of exotic berries and julienne vegetables.

'Oh, excellent choice, Alan!'

Bugger, he thought. Could he send it back? Not in a place like this. Where were Market Forces when you needed them?

'Fish! Mariella told me she was working on your diet.'

Well, there had to be a kebab shop somewhere between Vauxhall and Chelsea — probably in Victoria — but would he dare ask Aylsham's driver to stop?

The evening, so far, had been less fun than he'd hoped. But Aylsham had hinted at some entertainment to follow dinner. It wouldn't be Soho — Aylsham might invest in porn shows, but he'd never visit one — it would be some private club, known only to people who named their dogs after great military leaders

and discreet enough for two upstanding members of the New Democratic Consensus.

He took a bite of the fish. It tasted of... Well, nothing really. Was he missing something? Was it genetic? Or was it — as it so often turned out to be, in his experience — a load of total bollocks?

Aylsham was absorbed, almost literally, in his food. Vickery waited until the plates had been cleared, then he popped the question.

'So, um, where are we going?'

'The Glue Factory.'

The Glue Factory!



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