

# CHECKMATE BUDAPEST

RAYMOND HITCHCOCK



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*Also by Raymond Hitchcock*

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'One ticket!' he shouted, and held up one finger. 'Just one ticket.' He slapped twenty-five forints on to the wooden shelf then added in English, 'And for God's sake, hurry!'

'You've come early,' said the woman. 'You've come early to get the best place in the sun. With a fine day like this, by noon the baths will be packed. By lunchtime you won't be able to take one step without falling over someone.'

'And a bathing costume!'

'I'm not a fool,' said the woman, 'I know that twenty-five forints includes a bathing costume. Twenty-five forints has always included a bathing costume. It's laid down in the regulations.' The woman raised her head from the coins and tallies and frowned at the impetuous young foreigner. Why ever couldn't he realise that when you had sat in the ticket office of the Széchenyi Baths as long as she had sat there, compared with regulations, time was of no importance.

Oliver clenched his teeth, and glanced towards the door.

'From the way you were hurrying, anyone would think you were meeting your sweetheart.'

'Hurry, you old idiot!' cried Oliver in English, then suddenly smiled. A smile might make the old woman move. It worked. The woman stopped talking and handed him two tags, one to enter, the other for the costume.

The tags grasped firmly in his hand, Oliver hurried through the dark tunnel and into the changing booths. He thrust the two tags at an official, and received a pair of dark blue bathing trunks and a towel. He found an empty cubicle, ripped off his clothes and tied them into a bundle. He pushed up the skylight and slid the bundle out on to the roof. Then he put on his bathing trunks,

walked out of the cubicles and into the sunshine and the hottest of the three baths.

He was standing in water of 76 degrees Celsius. Reaching just above his navel the hot water had a wonderfully soothing effect. For an instant, Oliver forgot who and where he was. His breath was taken away not by shock but by a great glow. He was cradled in a womb. Alive and reassured. He moved across the bath to the only other occupants, three men standing by a large chessboard that appeared to float on the surface of the water, conjured into existence by the steam.

The game had yet to start. No move had been made, but two of the men were already leaning over the board deep in thought. A broad-faced, grey-haired man, his flabby, breastlike chest buoyed by the water, glanced up.

'Ten dollars,' said Oliver. 'Ten dollars to each of you whether I win or lose.'

'You mean you want to play?' asked the man.

Oliver nodded.

'American?'

Oliver shook his head.

'German?'

'English.'

'Ten dollars,' said the man thoughtfully. 'Ten dollars not to play. Ten dollars not to be beaten by Tibor Várkonyi. Ten dollars to stand in the sun and do nothing. Too good to miss.'

The man moved aside. Oliver looked at his opponent. He seemed to epitomise all those who played chess in the hot thermal springs of the Széchenyi Baths. He was broad, stocky and middle-aged. His most conspicuous features were the mass of black hair that covered his chest and his big, fleshy hands. 'Sure you can play chess?' he asked, suspiciously.

'I said ten dollars,' said Oliver, glancing around the baths. 'Ten dollars whether I win or lose.'

'Fifty,' said the man, with the trace of a smile. 'If the game's worth ten dollars to you, then it's worth fifty. For me it's fifty dollars or nothing and I don't want forints. Forints are no good to anyone.'

'OK, fifty.'

The man looked surprised but said nothing. He shuffled a white pawn and a black pawn in his cupped hands. Oliver drew black. The man moved a white pawn to Queen Four. The sun rose

a little higher, the water seemed a little hotter. Oliver took his time. He had all the time in the world. In the hot, thermal springs of the Széchenyi Baths he was safe.

'Come on,' said the man, 'I want that fifty dollars.' His eyes narrowed, his cheeks broadened, then he added, 'Or don't you know how to play?'

Oliver made the same move. Black pawn to Queen Four.

The car was an old Skoda with a slipping clutch. The traffic was light. Taking in every feature, every person within his vision, he drove through Heroes' Square and into the Városliget, the City Park. He didn't drive fast for he had no wish to draw attention to himself, nor did he drive slowly for that would have shown him to be a stranger, possibly a foreigner. Certainly not a native of Budapest. He passed the closed iron gates of Gundel's, and noted that at that time of the morning the only activity at the restaurant was an old man sweeping around the tables. He saw a party of Russian soldiers staring through the railing into the Zoo, but they caused him little concern, other than to remind him that this was not Hyde Park. Then he saw the white police car, stationary on the right-hand side of the road fifty metres from the entrance to the Széchenyi Baths.

Two uniformed policemen and two men in plain clothes stood by the car staring implacably at every vehicle that passed. Instinctively, he turned on to the pavement and parked in a tiny gap between two other cars. He sat to get his breath back and to think, a newspaper open on his lap. Just as he had had no plan for the last half-hour, so he had no plan for the next few minutes. He was as bewildered as he was scared.

Assuming Erzsébet had reported the loss of her car, the number would be known. A police chase through the streets of Budapest in the old Skoda was out of the question. Parked as he was on the pavement, something all good citizens of Budapest did, he was reasonably inconspicuous. That is, so long as the police stayed where they were. Later, when the crowds got here, he might be able to drive away.

Through the windows of the car parked next to him he could see the police. He watched them with the same concentration he might have lavished on a high-nesting buzzard feeding its young. The four men were smoking and talking, one was laughing, all

had their eyes on the road. Oliver tried to persuade himself that they weren't here looking for him, that the Rendörseg were in the park on purely routine business, waiting for the Sunday crowds to materialise. But he couldn't fool himself. He had learned a lot recently. He had graduated. He had flown his first fifty missions. In a few weeks he had become a wary, old campaigner. He had begun to sense danger as easily as he could scent spring on a March morning. Today, the scent of danger filled the air. Nowhere did it seem stronger than the park into which he had just driven.

He laid his hands palms down on his lap and above the newspaper. He breathed slowly and counted his own breath out. He counted it to four and then repeated the process. It was a simple form of meditation. He thought only of the breath and the numbers. As the fears entered, so he labelled them and sent them away. The police in the Városliget, Erzsébet – although he was still loath to accept that she was a fear – Lawrence Morley, the Foreign Office man with the small, dark moustache, and even his own father. There were others who slipped through his mind and were consigned to oblivion with a tag around their necks.

He began to feel the energy surging back into his body. He stretched his limbs as far as the confines of the car allowed. He tensed his back and pressed it against the seat. He believed he was free. Just for one single, magical instant, police and the shadowy agents of state were as nothing.

One of the uniformed policemen had got back into the car and was talking on the radio. Another stood at the open door listening. A third took a pistol from his holster and checked it. As Oliver watched the reality, his confidence waned. He felt naked sitting in the Skoda. He longed for the park to fill and echo to the noise of families. In the Sunday kaleidoscope he could find refuge, if only for a few hours. Then he turned his head in the other direction, away from the baths. His heart missed a beat, his whole body froze. Those moments of confidence had been nothing but a fool's paradise.

A car had stopped on the opposite side of the road. Oliver recognised the car and the two men who got out and were now standing looking across the park. One was tall, of good build and well dressed in a lightweight suit, fawn shirt and pink tie. His shoes were perfectly polished and he had a thin, dark moustache. He stood very upright and held his hands behind him in a regal

manner. The other man was shorter and broader, and had his hands in the pockets of his rumpled jacket. As Oliver watched, he put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it. Looking straight ahead, the taller man spoke. The smoker took the cigarette from his mouth, stamped it out on the ground then spat.

Oliver knew one man very well and the other sufficiently well to want to avoid him. When the two men started moving up the row of cars parked on their side, examining each in turn, Oliver slipped out of the Skoda, and walked into the shelter of the trees. He walked slowly and sedately and without looking behind him took a wide circle around the golden baroque building and back on to the road. Then he hurried up the broad steps and into the baths.

'You're not concentrating. You're looking everywhere but the board. If you don't keep your eyes on the board, you're not going to keep that fifty dollars long.'

'Pawn to Queen's Bishop Four,' said the grey-haired man with the flabby chest, speaking towards the board as if every piece, both black and white, could understand him. 'Tibor's made his move, now it's your turn.'

'Relax, boy, relax. You look as if you're expecting your mother-in-law or the secret police. I've never seen a man so worried as you, certainly not in these baths. This is where you come to relax, to forget everything, not tense all your muscles and frown. You remind me of a weight-lifter getting ready for the snatch.'

Oliver moved a pawn to King Three.

'That's better,' said Oliver's opponent and held out a hand. 'My name's Tibor Várkonyi.' He indicated his companion. 'He's Aurél. Aurél Demichev.'

Oliver suddenly found himself grasping two hands. Both men were grinning at him. 'Oliver,' he said, 'Oliver Freemantle.'

'You're on holiday here?' asked Demichev. 'You like Budapest? You think our city a lovely city?'

Oliver laughed. At first it was just a gentle laugh, a laugh that hardly rippled his belly or disturbed the hot water that encompassed it. Did he like Budapest? Then the laugh fed upon itself. Fear and relief poured from him in great guffaws. His chest and shoulders shook and the men around the chessboard stared in astonishment.

'Why did you take so long to tell me about your father?'

Oliver shrugged. 'I thought you'd guess. Anyway, at the time it didn't seem important.'

'Why should I guess? In England, Freemantle isn't a particularly uncommon name. There are columns of them in the telephone directory.'

'So you looked!' cried Oliver.

Erzsébet smiled, a slight smile, with the hint of disapproval. A mother to infant expression. 'Of course I looked. For one thing I lost your number and wanted to call you. For another thing, I'm the sort of woman who always looks. I always check everything. Surely you know that by now?'

'You mean you're well trained?'

She bit her lower lip. 'I thought you knew me well enough to tell me.'

'Sometimes I think you only got in touch with me because of my name, because of my father?'

She didn't flinch at the accusation. She didn't even bite her lip. She showed no emotion whatsoever. Her mouth still had that trace of a smile but that was the way her lips always settled. Her green eyes with their suggestion of Thai silk went on burning their way through him. Her face, with its broad, flat beauty, appeared unruffled.

Oliver leaned across the table. 'You might even have been *put* in touch with me?'

She said nothing but put her hand out for him to hold.

He'd accused her and hated himself for doing so. But that was the trouble, with Erzsébet he was never sure. It wasn't just that face with its touch of inscrutable Buddha yet reputed to be pure Magyar. He knew the face well and was obsessed with it. It was something else. Behind the mask, behind the smooth unmade-up skin, he often felt she was laughing at him. It was as if she knew all the answers and he knew none.

'You *might* have been put in touch with me?' he asked, challenging. 'I don't know. That's the trouble, I don't know a bloody thing!' He put his elbows hard on the table and clasped his head in his hands.

'I don't see why you're so worried. We're having a lovely dinner. The orchestra isn't bad.' She raised her shoulders in a little, impatient gesture. 'And as far as I'm concerned, I'm with a nice, thoughtful man. In every way the evening is most pleasant.'

He smiled. He always smiled when he heard her English with its trace of American. Then his mood changed. 'Pleasant is a very pissy word,' he said angrily. 'A disgustingly pissy word. An evening's either bloody nice or bloody awful.'

'And which is this evening? Bloody nice or bloody awful?'

He grasped her hand. 'Take no notice of me. I'm having a pity party.'

'A what?'

'What my mother calls a pity party.'

They were in the Café Royal of Budapest, the Hungária Restaurant on Lenin Körút. Oliver stared up at the great baroque ceiling and the chandeliers. Three filled his vision like glittering, visiting spaceships. Of the hundred pieces of glass in the nearest chandelier, he focused on one. It hung in his sight like a sparkling mantra.

'I put off telling you about my father because I *try* and keep him out of my mind. It's very inhibiting having a father who's well known. It's . . . it's pretty stunting really. It gets bloody boring when everyone looks at you and says, "Ah, you must be Sir Adrian Freemantle's son." Sometimes I forget that I've got a name of my own, and a birth certificate.'

'The cult of the individual,' said Erzsébet with a sigh.

'Don't give me that!' cried Oliver angrily. 'You've got it over here too, just as much as we have.'

'Not with the families of politicians.'

He had no wish to be aggressive but he couldn't let the assertion go unchallenged. 'You're behind the times, my dear little comrade,' he said nastily. 'Things are changing in the socialist world. What about Eugenia Daranov and Elena Ceausescu to name but two?'

'You're talking about Russia and Romania,' said Erzsébet loftily. 'We are in Hungary.'

'You mean the Peoples' *Popular* Republic,' he said scornfully.

She gave him a scathing look.

'OK. So I am a phenomenon of the decadent, corrupt, imperialist, capitalist world. The workers are ground into the dust so that I can drive about in a Roller.'

'I never saw your Rolls Royce,' said Erzsébet, laughing. 'You certainly never took me out in it. All we ever went out in was that old MG of yours.'

A shadow crossed Oliver's face. They were laughing, sparring with one another. Even now he had no idea how good a Communist she was, or a patriot too for that matter. She seemed to conform, yet at the same time she didn't.

'Mind you, had you brought your MG to Budapest, it would have looked like a Rolls, certainly amongst all our cars.' She sighed. 'That's the very first thing I notice when I get back home, the cars.'

'Vintage . . .' observed Oliver, in a superior tone. 'Not quite veteran but bloody near.'

He was thinking of her primrose Skoda with the rusting wings, worn tyres and battered bumpers. It looked so frail that when he'd first got in, he'd been frightened to shut the doors in case they fell off. With use and familiarity he'd come to realise what a rugged little machine it really was.

'Forget what I said,' he said suddenly, staring at her. 'I like your car. I like it very much. It's great, absolutely great. It suits me better than you think. When I'm in it, I disappear right into the landscape.'

'You want to disappear into the landscape?'

'You know I do. That's why I'm bloody well here.'

They drove back across the bridge that bore her name. The moon was in the second quarter, high and clear, its chilly light touching the edges of the feathery puffs of thinning cloud. Castle Hill, like a suspended fairyland Camelot, presided over the bridges, each draped with lights that etched its slender, asymptotic shape better than any sun could ever do. The Danube sparkled like a long, curving tray of winking diamonds, yet Oliver felt nothing. In spite of the food, the wine and the company, he was tense and distant. He looked up at the glowing spire of St Matthais Church and the towers of the Bastion and could think only of an icy Disneyland. Of something planted upon something else. Of

layers hiding other layers. Of dust, bones and a debris that exactly suited his mood.

Her apartment was in the old part of the city, in Buda, in a street immediately beneath the ramparts. The house was eighteenth-century restored, for everything on and around Castle Hill had been destroyed when the Germans had made their stand here in 1944. For two months the Russian guns in Pest had shelled the heights of Castle and Palace. When the Red Flag was eventually hoisted on the hilltop, there had been nothing but a crown of rubble.

'It must be odd to be Hungarian. Almost schizophrenic.'

'I don't see why. I don't see why it's any more schizophrenic to be Hungarian than to be English or Dutch.'

'You fought with the Germans in two world wars. Both times you were defeated. In the last war your own army was wiped out by the Russians fighting for Hitler in the Ukraine. After that your enemies, the Russians, "liberated" you. Now the Russians are here as an occupying power and the Germans come in their thousands as tourists. You don't really want the Soviets but you're part of their empire. You despise the Germans as capitalists but you want their Deutsche Marks. If that doesn't make anyone schizophrenic I'd like to know what does.'

'You have the Americans in England but you don't really like them. You have all your demonstrations against them, your women at Greenham Common. The Soviets were your allies in the last war, now they're your enemies. And as for schizophrenia, you're certainly one to talk. You who once belonged to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament with your father a Conservative Minister!'

Oliver groaned. 'Go on, rub it in properly. Spell it out! Spell it *right* out.'

Erzsébet smiled. 'I was trying to spare your blushes.'

'I know what you were going to say. In this little clapped-out Skoda sits Oliver Freemantle, son of Sir Adrian Freemantle . . .'

'Son of the British Foreign Minister . . .'

 She sung the words.

'For God's sake, Secretary! Foreign Secretary! We don't have Foreign Ministers. We leave that to Peoples' Popular Republics!'

'All right, then. In this little Skoda sits Oliver Freemantle, a one-time fervent member of CND, while his father, Sir Adrian Freemantle, the British Foreign Secretary, encourages the Americans to put more and more Cruise missiles into his country.'

'It's not as simple as that, as you bloody well know.'

Erzsébet snorted. 'And neither is it as simple as that in Hungary either.'

They drove in silence to the Clark Adam roundabout at the head of the Széchenyi Bridge. At the roundabout, Erzsébet turned off into a narrow street that climbed the side of the hill. In a small square, the houses dwarfed by the ramparts, she parked the car. They walked up steps into a house that smelt faintly of damp on the ground floor, but this, as they went up in the lift, soon gave way to the lingering remains of the evening's cooking.

It seemed to Oliver that not only had all of Hungary's cuisine been represented on those five floors, from the tang of sour cream to the scent of paprika, but so had Buda. They were back to layers. Layers of civilisation and culture. Layers of life and death. Layers of black pepper stew and dumplings.

'Did I tell you I once belonged to CND or was that something your little secret service mind ferreted out?'

'You must be in a bad way if you don't remember that.'

Oliver ran his hand across his forehead. He'd had too much to drink, but that wasn't all. He was tired. Bewilderment and fear had exhausted him. 'Of course I'm in a bad way, a bloody bad way, and you're enjoying it.'

Oliver sat on the couch and stared at the electric fire set into the great stone mantelpiece between two huge vases of flowers.

For a young, single woman in Budapest, Erzsébet had a most prestigious apartment. Indeed, it was more than an apartment, it was a penthouse. It was large, spacious and – in a country short of consumer goods – had everything from an Italian deep freeze to a Sony video. It was in the very best part of the city and the furnishings were elegant and expensive, if a little dated. There were a few genuine antiques, but the couch and chairs were reminiscent of a Harrods window in the late seventies.

The prize items were the carpets and rugs. Rich and red, they lay scattered across the hard block floor. Oliver had already identified a Hered Baluchi and a Meshed Baluchi, and one large golden wall-hanging in the sitting-room he knew to be a silk Qum. The only artefacts, lamps, tables and cushions he had seen in Budapest to compare with those around him had been in the hard currency shops on Castle Hill. For a simple airline employee the penthouse was far too good, and that worried him. It worried him very much.

'You told me, you know very well you told me.' She threw open the window to get the scent of the night air. 'Only you didn't tell me then who your father was, just that you enjoyed cocking a snook at the establishment. Oh, yes, my dear Oliver, you were very pleased with yourself. You were pleased to be upsetting the authorities. I can see now how delighted you must have been to be embarrassing the steady, worthy, right-wing Sir Adrian Freemantle. You enjoyed being photographed against the wire fence of Greenham, and you enjoyed it when the police grabbed you and the media were there to see it.'

Oliver grimaced. 'Did I really tell you all that?'

'More than once.'

'The police were really quite pleasant, considering,' said Oliver thoughtfully. 'Very gentlemanly. But there, living in a country like this, you wouldn't know.'

Erzsébet picked up a cushion, held it high above her head and hurled it. Oliver ducked. Erzsébet burst out laughing. 'If Hungary is such a rotten country, why are you here?'

'You know damn well why I'm here. I'm a fugitive, a bloody fugitive. A fugitive from the land of hope and glory. A fugitive from all that is good, decent and honest.' He paused, held up his arms and said, 'What about some strong black coffee and a glass of barack?'

She pointed towards the kitchen. 'You know where the coffee is and you know how to make it.' He got up, went out and started to boil the water.

'I wouldn't want you to think that I joined CND just to thwart my old man,' said Oliver, shouting through the door. 'It wasn't that negative a move, thank God. I believed in it at the time, still do in some ways. Of course, I know that Freud would say that I had to emasculate my dad to go to bed with my mum, but I still felt pretty damned anti-nuke.'

They sat and drank coffee and sipped barack. The coffee sobered him, the fiery apricot liqueur revived him. He was able to look back over the day with a surprising sense of detachment. It wasn't the tall twenty-seven-year-old with the pink shirt, soft white trousers and white shoes, and with his blue sweater tied around his neck, now lounging on a Hungarian woman's large white leather couch that had slipped out of Priors Hurst at six that morning. It was someone else, a man still left in England.

'Just for once I had all the luck that was going. I had that visa

and when the basketball team went through, I just went through behind them. Right from the check-in, I hung about with them. There were so many, no one bothered. And luckily I'm tall. God knows what I would have done if I'd been a midget.'

'They'd have seen you if they'd been looking,' said Erzsébet curtly. 'They're not fools at Heathrow. It's one of the most secure airports.'

'There speaks the voice of experience.'

'I work for Malév,' said Erzsébet coolly. 'As a representative of our state airline, I know about airports.'

'How to get people in and out of countries illegally? Surely Malév doesn't go in for that sort of thing? I'd have thought with an international airline everything would have been virginal and clean.'

Erzsébet put her hands behind her head, laid her head back upon her palms and smiled. 'You really are being difficult, aren't you? I am trying to understand you, Oliver, but I'm not doing very well. You've come to me for sanctuary, and yet . . .' She stopped and shrugged.

'You said they weren't fools at Heathrow. That they'd have seen me if they'd been looking. Are you saying that they saw me, knew who I was and *still let me go*? Is that what you're saying?'

'I'm not saying anything. I just don't know. You must make your own mind up.'

'They let me out of the country . . .' Oliver murmured to himself. 'Just let me out of the bloody country!'

'Perhaps they wanted you out of the country. Have you thought of that?'

He hadn't thought of it, but when he did, the thought chilled him.

### 3

Through the bedroom window he could see the ramparts. The moon bathed the stones in an eerie, unliving glow and where there were shadows turned them into pools of hollow darkness. He had the utter exhaustion of being sapped and yet he still

couldn't sleep. Erzsébet's dark hair lay across his chest, her head nestled in the crook of his arm. She was breathing gently and evenly, not even a dream disturbed her.

He turned his head slightly and, lifting her hair, whispered, 'Tell me one thing, just one thing.'

Erzsébet made a sound that might have meant anything.

'I know you work for Malév, I know you're a true, red-blooded Comrade, a daughter of the Revolution, a sister of the Anti-Kulak League and all the rest of it, but are you a member of Hungarian Intelligence? That's all I want to know. When you've told me that, I can go to sleep.'

'If I tell you that, you'll only ask me what my rank is. Am I a colonel or a mere captain? Do I work for the British Section or am I simply in the General Secretariat? How much secret information do I see and how much do I liaise with the KGB? I know you, Oliver, it's exactly the same with sex, you're never satisfied, never . . .' Her voice trailed off.

'You'll have noticed that it wasn't me that mentioned KGB, but you.'

She said nothing. Oliver put both his arms around her and held her spoonlike and very tight. 'Once upon a time this just couldn't have happened.'

'What couldn't have happened?'

'Before the age of the microchip and the jet engine, it would have been unheard of for a man of one nation to make love to a woman of another nation and not know whether she was a member of the secret service. It wouldn't have been considered decent.'

'It's always happened,' said Erzsébet lazily. 'It's happened all over Europe. The trouble is you're just a novice in these matters. Napoleon went to bed with an English governess before every battle until Waterloo. Before Waterloo, it was Wellington's turn. He slept with the Countess of Bayeaux, a most luscious lady. She told him Napoleon's plan for the next day so that the Duke knew exactly where to place his Guards.' She sat upright and turned her face towards him. 'But what about me? What's an innocent, young Hungarian girl to make of a ruthless English agent who arrives in Budapest, pretending to flee from his own country, but who is really here just to trap her?' She paused, and he saw that smile in the moonlight. 'If I'm a member of the AVH, why shouldn't you be a member of British Intelligence?'

Her small breasts were cupped in his hands. Gently he kissed them.

'I wouldn't be any good. Agents have to keep secrets. I always need a bosom to cry on.'

'Maybe it's the other way round. I'm working for British Intelligence, *you* for the AVH.'

'Why should I be doing that?'

'I'm Hungarian. Why shouldn't the AVH be watching me just like your secret police are watching you?'

'OK, so I'm a member of the AVH.'

'Recruited in England and now working for the Foreign Section. In London you were instructed to contact me, seduce me and report on my activities to the fifth floor of the building on the corner of Roosevelt Square and Joseph Attila Boulevard.'

'So that's where it is. Thanks.'

'As if you didn't know.'

There was a long silence. Oliver heard the girl's breathing and watched the moon shadows move. 'No, no,' he said at last, 'if we're anything then I'm from British Intelligence and *you're* from the AVH. I don't like it the other way round, it's too . . . too disorientating.'

'You are too conventional, Oliver, much too conventional.'

'We're getting away from the point.' Oliver raised his voice. 'The point is, you'd let a member of the British secret service make love to you?'

'Of course. Why shouldn't we agents from East and West be the very best of friends. Whoever heard of a bed with Iron Curtains?'

'That's what I bloody well mean!' shouted Oliver. 'It shouldn't be happening! It's just not decent!'

He pulled her down and kissed her hard on the mouth. He couldn't be sure, but he felt that she was laughing the whole time they were making love.

He awoke late in the morning. Erzsébet was standing at the foot of the bed watching him. She informed him that she had taken the day off to be with him. He had no more idea what to make of that than he had of her luxurious penthouse. He could only mumble his joy and ask for coffee. This time she made it and brought him a cup.

'What do you know of Project Blue Snow?' he asked suddenly, watching her face.

She frowned. 'Project Blue Snow?'

He nodded. 'Blue Snow, from an American folk tale?'

'Absolutely nothing.' There was no emotion in her face, no flicker of an eye. Nothing.

'Then why did you frown?'

'I didn't!'

'You did. The name must have meant something to you or you wouldn't have frowned.'

'I tell you, I've never heard of Project Blue Snow.'

'Sure?'

'Of course I'm sure. Why should I know anything about your blasted Project Blue Snow?'

Oliver shrugged. There was no reason whatsoever why she should know of Blue Snow, unless, of course . . .

Her expression had changed. The endemic smile had gone. She was staring at him now as if she'd never seen him before. 'You *are* from British Intelligence!' she cried. 'The game we played wasn't a game. All that about your father . . .'

Oliver shook his head. 'For God's sake don't start that again, I just can't stand it. It was spooky enough last night.' He looked around the room and shuddered.

'Then why did you ask me about Project Blue Snow?'

'I don't know. Anyway, forget it. Pretend I never said it.'

'How can I pretend you never said it?' She shook her head in bewilderment, her eyes full of fear. 'You come to my apartment . . . I don't really know very much about you, but I try and help you . . .'

'I said forget it!'

'It is important, this . . . this Project Blue Snow?'

Oliver closed his eyes. Her reaction seemed over the top, yet when he considered it, why shouldn't she be anxious, even scared? All she'd said was true, they didn't really know one another. They'd been lovers when they were still strangers. Although he'd turned to her now, they were still strangers.

'Look, I'm very sorry I said anything about it. It's just something that's been worrying me, that's all.'

'Is this . . . this Project Blue Snow anything to do with your father?'

He got out of bed, stood naked, stretched himself and asked if the bath water was hot.

'In this apartment everything is hot.'

From the cupboard she produced a man's bathrobe. Oliver glanced at the garment, wondered who was the usual wearer but said nothing. He wrapped himself in the robe and ran the bath water. When he got into the bath, Erzsébet sat on the chair and stared at him. Then she offered to do his back. Immersed in hot water, warm and soothed, Oliver forgot Blue Snow and handed her the loofah.

'Once when we were driving in Hampshire, we passed a lane and you pointed. You said you lived down there. You said the house was very beautiful, but you never took me there. You never showed me your home and you never told me about your family. Not just about your father, but your mother. You never ever mentioned either of them.'

'You never told me about yours.'

Erzsébet shrugged. 'One day I'll take you to the Kerepesi Cemetery.'

Oliver nodded, a gentle, slow nod. 'I'm sorry. I had no idea.' He looked at her lying on the rug, her head against a cushion propped up on the seat of a chair. His mood softened. In that light, in that childlike pose, she looked very young and astonishingly frail. He stared into her eyes as if to read there the whole of her life. He had never thought of her as an orphan. Somehow, even now, a girl like Erzsébet couldn't be an orphan. The world seemed too big, too cruel for her to be alone in it.

'We can go out there tomorrow . . .' She spoke slowly, staring up at the ceiling as if a trip to the cemetery was a major outing and needed to be carefully considered.

'Go to the Kerepesi Cemetery?' enquired Oliver in astonishment.

'Why not?'

Oliver shrugged. 'No reason at all, I suppose. Just that a cemetery isn't a normal place to go.'

'In England you took me to churchyards. You showed me lots of graves.'

Oliver considered explaining the difference between an English country churchyard and a metropolitan cemetery in a

Communist state but decided against it. Lameley he asked if both her parents were buried there.

She nodded.

'When? I mean, how long have they been dead?'

'My father died in 1956.'

Oliver could think of nothing to say. The date meant nothing, only that it was a long time ago. Thirty years ago. He had never asked Erzsébet her age, but in his mind he'd always been the older.

'I never knew my father. He was killed before I was born.' She paused, then said very seriously, 'However, that makes me quite an old lady. Nearly thirty.'

'I thought I was older than you . . .'

She laughed. 'You wouldn't have come to me if I had been a mere girl. You don't just need any bosom to cry on, you need a mature one.'

There was a long silence, then Oliver said, 'My mother runs an antique shop . . .'

Erzsébet sat upright. 'Ah, the stiff-upper-lipped Englishman is at last giving away some of his deep, dark secrets . . .'

'Don't be bloody facetious, it doesn't suit you.' He paused, then added, 'In fact, she runs two antique shops.'

'And when she isn't working in her antique shops?'

'She prunes her roses.' Oliver saw her face. 'You see, she is very English. A love of antiques, gardens and dogs is the hallmark of a well bred, well brought up English lady. When you were in England you didn't meet that sort of person, you never moved in those circles.'

'And what about their children?'

'They love them so much, they pack them off to boarding schools.'

Erzsébet frowned. 'They never pick up their children and hug them?'

Oliver shook his head. 'No, but they do pick up their dogs and hug them and sometimes they hug their horses. Of course, my mother can't hug her roses because of the thorns, but if she could hug them she would. My father, when he isn't hugging his despatch boxes, hugs his leather-bound copy of Oppenheim's *International Law*.'

'And when you were little, what did you hug?'

'My goldfish . . . and when she let me, my nanny.'

A slim figure in purple slacks, with a green threadbare anorak and a fisherman's waterproof hat that flopped over her face, knelt by the side of a large, rambling rose-bush and grubbed at the roots. Two yards away, in a patch of tufting grass, lay her dog: a spaniel named Septimius Severus – so called because he was black and had been given to Lady Eleanor by an Italian diplomat she had rather fancied. Now, from where Oliver sat watching the scene, with the dog's coat shining in the afternoon sun, Septimius Severus, or as Oliver called him, Septicaemia, looked like a great, overfed slug.

'You feed that dog too well. He's too fat. It's positively indecent that with three-quarters of the world starving, Septicaemia should be able to stick his snout into the fleshpots three times a day. No wonder he can't keep awake.'

'What about digging in a little bonemeal, eh?' cried Lady Eleanor. 'Use up some of that young energy of yours.' She got to her feet, shook the dirt from the front of her anorak, pushed her hat back so that the rim was on the crown of her head and then, twitching her nose, wiped the back of her gloved hand gently, sensuously across her nostrils. 'There, that's better,' she said, addressing Septimius, then gave a great sigh. 'But I shan't be able to go on much longer. I'm getting too old.' She leaned over the dog and gave it a half-hearted pat. 'That's the trouble, Septimius, I'm getting too old.'

'You're not too old. It's nothing to do with getting old,' said Oliver quietly. 'You're not well. You haven't been well for months. There's no colour in your face. You should see your doctor.'

Lady Eleanor appeared not to have heard her son for she took no notice of his words. But she had heard. In fact her hearing was acute. The reason she took no notice and instantly changed the subject was because that was how, over the last thirty-three years, she had learned to live. To Oliver she survived by using her mind as a sensitive, selective filter. Anything that impinged,

questioned her status quo or suggested difficulty was instantly filtered out. So now her mind was upon roses and not upon herself.

'In the autumn, I shall take up the "Rosa Complicata" and plant something more exciting,' Lady Eleanor thought for a moment, then added, 'Perhaps "Ballerina".' She thought a second time and evidently decided that the apple blossom pink, the white eye and the fragrant smell of that particular rose exactly suited her needs. 'Yes,' she said firmly, "'Ballerina".'

'Perhaps you won't be here next year. Perhaps none of us will be here next year. Perhaps the world will be one great charred cosmic ball in the grip of a nuclear winter.'

Lady Eleanor turned towards her son and a rare thing happened. Their eyes met. For a very brief moment Oliver thought that his mother was going to take up the challenge, but he was wrong. His mother was looking at him with much the same look that she lavished upon the dog's bowl. 'How long are you going to be with us? It's a matter of the groceries.'

'Two days . . . three . . .'

She nodded, turned away and went back to grubbing at the roots of the rose.

Once Lady Eleanor had been a most beautiful woman. Oliver could remember thinking of her as the most beautiful woman in the whole world. She was tall and even now, in spite of her bizarre dress and her dry, wrinkled skin, she was elegant. When she moved, she seemed to sail for there was nothing awkward about her limbs. Her face was still fine-boned and she held her head high. Only the glazed look that so often clouded her eyes was a clue to the trials and sadnesses of her life.

Oliver, who of all the family observed his mother the most closely, knew the causes of some of that pain, but not all. He saw his father as the main contributor. A husband who had used his wife as a stepladder to power, who spent much of his time in London, who wasn't interested in roses or antiques, who when he was at home at Priors Hurst shut himself up with his papers or listened to Chopin or Mozart. Just to observe them was to wonder why they had got married.

But all that pain in his mother's face couldn't have been caused by one man. If Robin his elder brother and Sophia his younger sister had been exemplary in their growing up, there was still himself. He had no doubt that he had caused his mother, and for

that matter his father, more distresses than the other two put together.

An old Renault was coming slowly up the drive. Lady Eleanor turned, pulled herself very upright, pushed her hands into her back and watched the car. Inside, a grey-haired man, wearing an overcoat in spite of the warmth of the spring day, could be seen hunched over the wheel. In his mouth was an empty pipe. The pipe was unlit, for almost exactly a year ago, Colonel Symington, upon approaching a traffic light, had dropped his burning pipe into the confines of the car and set fire to his trousers and the seat. Now the pipe wouldn't be lit until the Colonel was safely in Sir Adrian's study.

'The Colonel's come to see your father . . .' observed Lady Eleanor then added, as if Oliver didn't know, 'Colonel Symington is an old friend.'

Oliver went back into the house.

In his bedroom, Oliver stripped off his T-shirt. In the mirror that filled one panel of the wardrobe, he observed with considerable surprise that, having studied his mother in the garden, he was now looking at a male clone. Like her, he was tall and slim, far taller and slimmer than his father. He had the same long, thin face, the same very evident bone structure around the cheeks and his eyes were the deep blue of the eyes he remembered blazing from the beautiful woman twenty years ago.

He stood just as she stood, upright and relaxed, and assumed rather gloomily that in thirty years' time he would be even more like her.

He went into the second bathroom, the one they'd always used as children. He ran a bath but as usual the water was only lukewarm. In the bath he pedalled furiously and beat his chest with his hands to keep the circulation going. In the midst of this exercise, while being very conscious of his own body, he had a sudden, sickening vision. He was in the South Atlantic in full kit, struggling to keep a grasp on his camera, forgetting the newspaper who had sent him, and the father who had pulled the string. Around him an icy ocean was gripping his legs, dragging him down into its fathomless, alien womb. He kicked and struggled and fought his way out of the metal tomb. He watched the wrecked helicopter sink and heard the screams of those still

trapped inside. He trod water in the freezing sea until he passed out. Now he struggled a different struggle. To forget where he had been, subdue his panic and remember where he was.

He was in a Grade II listed Queen Anne house, more a glorified farmhouse than a true country mansion, surrounded by 450 acres of good Hampshire farmland all belonging to the estate. At the main gate a uniformed policeman stood guard. Another policeman was walking by the stream that formed their southern boundary encouraging his dog to sniff behind every bush. A plain-clothed detective was plodding the lawn, crushing the daisies, and a courier would soon arrive with despatch boxes from the Foreign Office. His mother was still digging bonemeal into her roses, Septicaemia was lying in his usual sluglike stance, dreaming of a bowl overflowing with chopped horsemeat, and his father was ensconced in his study with his old friend, Colonel Symington.

Oliver had no cause for alarm.

The Colonel stayed to supper eaten on the large kitchen table. Oliver, who loved Priors Hurst for the walks and was always uneasy when confined within the family house with both parents, found the meal inhibiting and oppressive.

His mother remained in her own world, saying little, barely listening but occasionally exchanging a distant smile with the Colonel.

Dressed in old slacks and a darned cardigan, his face reddened with claret, Sir Adrian seemed nervous and drank heavily. Oliver had often felt ashamed in his father's presence; tonight he felt ashamed for his father. In the end it was the Colonel that smoothed the evening. Under the direction of the old man's grey, nodding head and the piercing gaze beneath his great, shaggy eyebrows, Oliver helped by the wine, slowly relaxed.

'Oliver is doing well,' announced Sir Adrian blandly. 'He's got a good job with Parigi and Crawford.'

'Advertising!' cried the Colonel. 'Damned good money in advertising. Wish I'd been in it.'

Oliver's brief experience as a war photographer, now four years ago, had long since obliterated the memory of his service with CND, or at least relegated it to one of those childish acts that

young men must indulge in along with the sowing of their wild oats. Now he was one of them. Oliver had joined the club. His father had seen service in the last months of the Second World War, the Colonel had seen service everywhere.

That one exploit in struggling free from a stricken helicopter had made up for all the front page photos of the young Oliver standing Christlike by the wire fence of Greenham. Even son and heir Robin, leading his squadron of Challengers across the heaths of Germany, appeared to have been surpassed. But then Robin had only watched the sentries on the Berlin Wall, he'd never seen a shot fired in anger. That Argentinian air-to-ground missile had linked Oliver to the other men in the room as no other umbilical could ever have done.

In spite of Oliver's misgivings, the evening turned out to be a good one. Symington was a nice, harmless old man; so, on the whole, was his father.

Only Lady Eleanor was excluded, but then she expected to be. She soon withdrew to a large chair by the Aga and after rocking to and fro for a few minutes fell into a deep sleep.

Aurél Demichev started chuckling. So far as Oliver could see, the man had nothing to chuckle about, he wasn't even playing. He wasn't even staring down at the chessboard. Three or four others were doing that. Demichev was staring up at the sky and chuckling. 'I'm a taxi driver,' he said at last. 'Private.' He looked at Oliver. 'You know what that means, private?'

'You drive for yourself.'

'For dollars, Deutsche Marks and pounds . . .'

'Illegal,' said Tibor Várkonyi and winked at Oliver. 'Everything Aurél Demichev does is illegal. If he isn't driving his taxi and taking dollars, then he's standing in Heroes' Square doing his own private exchange. He'll tell you that he's going to give you sixty forints for your dollar, but when you get back to the hotel and count them . . .'

Oliver gave a dutiful smile. Demichev's broad face broke into a wicked grin and his flabby breasts shook as the chuckling increased. As suddenly as he had started chuckling he stopped and started humming gently to himself.

Várkonyi moved his Knight to Queen's Bishop Three, then dipped himself deeper in the water and stared at Oliver, waiting.

'If you're not here on holiday,' said Demichev, 'then you're here on business. And if you're here on business, maybe you and I can do business together.'

'He'll tell you that he runs an import-export business,' said Várkonyi, 'but the only things he imports are dirty magazines and the only things he exports are sausages. Sausages to Romania if he can get them over the border. So unless you publish dirty magazines or eat sausages, Demichev isn't going to be much good to you.'

'I trade . . .' said Demichev, with an expansive gesture of his shoulders and stomach.

'Your move,' said Várkonyi, looking at Oliver and indicating the board.

'He's not concentrating,' said Demichev. 'He's not even here. He's miles away thinking of the girl he left behind in London.' He nudged Oliver. 'You'll lose all those dollars, fifty to him and fifty to me, if you go on like this. You'll need all your wits to beat Várkonyi. Várkonyi is a demon with the chessboard.'

'Don't turn,' whispered Oliver, 'and whatever you do, don't appear to be interested, but there's a certain person that I'm trying to avoid, and he may have come into the baths. He's a tall man, with a thin moustache. He's wearing a lightweight suit with a fawn shirt and pink tie. If he has come in, you can't miss him. He'll be standing upright like a soldier, probably tapping one foot upon the ground. Above all he'll look very English.'

'People are coming in all the time,' observed Demichev. 'Pouring in. That's what the baths are for. And it's Sunday. A fine, sunny Sunday. Soon we shall be stacked like sardines.'

'Have you run off with this man's wife?' asked Várkonyi. 'is that what it is?'

'Ah, a jealous husband!' cried Demichev. 'Now I understand. You're hiding in here from a jealous husband. Why ever didn't you tell us before?'

In spite of Oliver's warning, Várkonyi turned and stared towards the entrance from the changing rooms. 'Relax, you're the only Englishman here,' he said at last. 'Enjoy the woman while you have her.'

Demichev laid a hand upon Oliver's shoulder. 'Try Bishop to King Two,' he said quietly. 'It's a good move to make on a Sunday.'

Oliver made the move.

'We're old friends, Sergey Allyevich, very old friends.'

'Moscow University, November 1953, the Students' Hall, and you, a second-year law student, had penned five freshmen in the corner and were telling them of the greatness, not of Vladimir Ilyich Ulianov nor of Joseph Vissarionovich Djugashvili, but of Czar Petrovich. Think of that, Comrade Secretary-General, you were talking of the greatness of Czar Peter!'

'And the first time, I saw you, Sergey Allyevich, you were talking most enthusiastically about the genius of an English mathematician, Isaac Newton!'

Sergey Allyevich Yerokhin nodded. 'That's because, like me, he never saw his father.'

'So we have never been hemmed in by boundaries, never.'

'The free-soaring mind, Comrade Secretary-General,' said Yerokhin with a chuckle. 'As free-soaring as the eagles over the Ripet Marshes.'

Yevgeni Ivanovich Daranov, Secretary-General of the CPSU, suddenly leaned forward, his hands gripping the armrests of his chair. 'And now the question, Comrade Yerokhin, the very straightforward question. Is it possible to destroy a hostile Intercontinental Ballistic Missile in the *early* part of the Boost Phase?'

'How early?'

'Very early.' Daranov paused then said, 'Right over the silos.'

'You're talking about the first minute?'

Daranov shrugged. 'The first fifteen seconds, the first thirty seconds, the first minute . . . I'm asking you this as a scientist. Is it scientifically possible for one side to destroy the ICBMs of the other side *in the Initial Boost Phase?*'

Sergey Allyevich Yerokhin, President of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, Director of the Kurchatov Institute, thought for a long time. At last he said, 'Is this some sort of trick question? I mean, have you some way of destroying the missile that I don't know of? Some magician's wand?'

The Secretary-General shook his head.

'Ah, I know what you're thinking,' said the Academician suddenly. 'You're thinking about interference to the guidance system on blast-off. But for that, we would need agents with the right equipment near the silos.' He shook his head. 'I can foresee a lot of problems.'

The Secretary-General smiled. It was a warm smile that raised his cheeks and made his grey-green eyes glow. 'Sergey Allyevich, from that first day at Moscow University have I ever asked you a trick question?'

'Never.'

'Why should I ask you one now?' The Secretary-General paused, then added, 'Of course, if you know of a magic wand, or can conjure one up, I shall be only too pleased to borrow it.' There was a long silence then the Secretary-General repeated his question. 'Is it possible to destroy an ICBM *right over the silo?*'

'Once I should have said to you, no, Comrade Secretary-General, it is not possible,' said the Academician cautiously. 'Nor will it ever be possible. To destroy an ICBM in the Initial Boost Phase, to destroy it within the first minute or minute and a half of flight, is to destroy it well *within* the earth's atmosphere.' He stopped.

'Once you would have said that, what do you say now?'

'I still say that it can't be done with our present technology. At the moment it's no more than science fiction. The energy required, even if the missile could be targeted, would be enormous. Astronomical.'

'But with enough energy . . . ?'

The Academician shrugged. 'The question is, could enough energy ever be assembled?' He looked into the Secretary-General's face. 'How are you thinking of doing that? Presumably you would fire your destroyers – your chemical lasers, X-ray lasers or particle beams – from space?'

Again Daranov's face broke into that cheerful smile. 'I'm asking *you*, Sergey Allyevich. You're the scientist, not me.'

'Is it possible for hostile missiles to be destroyed very soon after they rise from their silos?' mused the Academician.

Daranov nodded. 'Possibly while they are only a few miles into their flight. Perhaps, the very moment they rise from their silos!'

The Academician gave the Secretary-General a sharp glance.

'Why not?' asked Daranov aggressively. 'That would be the

ideal moment. They'd be easy targets then. Plenty of hot gases to alert the surveillance systems. Slow-moving. Compact. All the warheads, all the decoys in one container . . .'

The point not yet touched on by the Secretary-General, the vital point, was not lost upon the Academician. 'If they were to be destroyed right over their silos . . .'

Daranov nodded. 'They would be destroyed in *our* atmosphere. If they were armed, the detonations would be over *us*. The fall-out would be over *us*. Over *our* homes, *our* farms, *our* lakes, *our* cities. Even if they weren't armed, we'd still have the radioactive debris. It's Russia that would suffer. The weapons for our defence would be our own destruction.' He paused, then very quietly added, 'I need not tell you that the implications of such a capability on the part of the Americans would be immense.'

'We know their thinking, their lines of research in the Strategic Defence Initiative,' said the Academician, 'but this would go much further. In the SDI they wouldn't expect to destroy an ICBM within the first minute. They are certainly not considering operations deep within our atmosphere.'

'You know more about the SDI than anyone in our country,' said Daranov sombrely. 'For twenty-five years you were the co-ordinator of our own Stars Wars programme . . .'

The Academician said nothing. His fine, long face remained deep in thought. His brown eyes stared at the Secretary-General. He wasn't thinking just of the problem of Initial Boost Phase Interception. He'd thought of that before and long ago ruled it out upon scientific grounds. He was thinking of the man he was sitting opposite, the man who had summoned him. The man he had first met at the University thirty-three years ago and who even then had exhibited all the fire, zeal and intellect that set him far above his fellows. If anyone could bring the Soviet Union into the twenty-first century, it was Yevgeni Ivanovich. But no one, however powerful, however forward-looking, could defy the laws of nature.

'Supposing . . . ' prompted Daranov. . .

The Academician shook his head. 'I'm sorry, Comrade Secretary-General, but at the moment, it is in the realms of supposition. I can say no more than that.'

The Academician knew that Daranov wouldn't be put off and he wasn't. The Secretary-General clenched one fist and tapped it into the palm of his other hand. 'Very well then, let us look at the

matter in greater perspective. Let's see it as the American President sees it. The President loves his Strategic Defence Initiative as a mother loves her child. I watched him at our meeting in Reykjavik. His old eyes glowed every time he mentioned the letters SDI. But here is the rub, Sergey Allyevich, he claims that it is a shield. But he doesn't think like that. I know how he thinks. He believes he's a warrior, a man from the Wild West. A trooper in his 5th Cavalry. To him, a shield without a sword is as unnatural as a spring without water. So where is the sword?' His face flushed, his voice rose. 'Where is the sword that would make the shield unnecessary?'

'You are thinking far beyond the missiles . . .'

Secretary Daranov nodded. 'Far beyond. In Christian mythology, when Herod heard of the birth of Jesus, a rival king, he didn't wait for him to grow up. He killed *all* the children born at that time. That's what I am talking about, Sergey Allyevich, a weapon that is one step beyond Stars Wars and such a threat, we are *driven to make the pre-emptive strike!*

'It has still to be invented, Comrade Secretary-General. It has still to be practicable, to obey the laws of science.'

Daranov did not seem to hear. He was staring up at the ceiling, one hand under his chin, the other drumming gently upon the arm of the chair.

This was a very private meeting. Only one large black Zil limousine had swept through the Borovitskaya Gate in the Kremlin wall. To emphasise its extreme confidentiality, the meeting was being held in the Secretary-General's private apartment rather than his office. Academician Yerokhin had left his limousine at the inner block of the Arsenal and been escorted on foot by an officer of the Kremlin guard to the third-floor private apartment.

The apartment was modest and visitors saw only the sitting-room. On winter evenings, without every light on, the dark wood and marble fire surround gave the room a heavy, gloomy feel. Daranov, for all his youthfulness – at fifty-four he made a dramatic change from the old guard of Soviet leaders – had not altered the décor of his predecessors.

His bounding energy, his cry for modernisation, his interest in the arts did not alter the fact that he was the product of a peasant

family from the Gomel region of Belorussia. Darkness, the gloom of a Russian winter, were deep in his blood. The forests, the snows and the leaden, lowering sky were still as dear to him as the latest microchip. With all the power in his hands, he would never have dreamed of meddling with the room in which some of the great had worked and which was so redolent of Mother Russia.

Mother Russia, both ancient and modern, had also created the castle that encompassed Daranov. The great triangular castle of Moscow, the sparkling, sinister toy fortress of the Kremlin, with its ten-metre high walls, towers and gates, had been his Mecca since his first sight of it as a fervent young party member thirty-three years ago.

'Do you know the first thing I did, Sergey Allyevich, when I came to Moscow? The first thing I did when I got out of the train and found myself standing on a Moscow pavement?'

'Walked right down Gorky Street and stood staring at the Arsenal Tower?'

'I was in too much of a hurry to walk. I got the bus to Red Square and just stood and stared at those Kremlin walls. I stood there all afternoon until it snowed. I watched the lights come on. When all the lights were on the Kremlin was like a beacon. A beckoning beacon.' The Secretary-General sighed. 'The most beautiful palace in all the world. But do you know what I like most about being here, Sergey Allyevich?'

'I have a feeling, Comrade Secretary-General, that it's much the case of the young man from Belorussia singing the praises of Czar Peter again?'

'It's the continuity I love, Sergey Allyevich, the contrast yet closeness between the two halves.'

The Academician nodded. He knew exactly what the Secretary-General meant. While crocodies of tourists trooped around the old palaces and cathedrals of the tsars – the time-honoured totems of power upon which the Bolsheviks had been so careful to plant their own blood-red flag – just across the broad, heavily patrolled expanse of roadway that neatly bisected the triangle, crossed only by those with authority, was the shrouded strongroom of Soviet power. The headquarters of the Communist Party and Government.

Daranov revelled in this juxtaposition of old and new, of weak and strong, of openness and secrecy. It excited him that from the

apex – within yards of the cathedral of the Assumption of the Virgin – he could organise, control and direct 255 million Soviet citizens towards a new and greater future. Provided he could reduce the expenditure on armaments, one day they would match even the United States.

But the ironies of architecture did not stop there. In the apex, three buildings stood paramount. Two that might be expected to be the actual seat of power, the Senate and the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, were overshadowed both in size and importance by a third building, the Arsenal. It was within the long, rhombic-shaped Arsenal that the Politburo met. It was within the Arsenal that the Secretary-General of the CPSU had his office and apartment. It was to the massive wrought-iron gates that led into this most secret part of the Kremlin that Academician Yerokhin had driven upon receiving the summons.

‘And such a step could go even further . . .’

Yerokhin waited, saying nothing, just watching the round face, the high, domed forehead and the grey-green eyes of the Secretary-General. He could feel the man struggling to bend him to his will.

‘If our missiles could be destroyed just *over* their silos, then the next, most logical step is to destroy them *within* their silos.’

The Academician shook his head. ‘I will never say that is possible. Never.’

‘If there were enough energy?’

The Academician laughed. ‘You’re a most persuasive fellow, Yevgeni Ivanovich. You could persuade a cat to jump in the Moskva River. But this is fantasy. To destroy a missile *within* its silo from an energy source in space is beyond the realms of even science fiction.’

‘Let’s see where we agree,’ said the Secretary-General, ignoring the Academician’s outburst. ‘If the Americans had the capability of destroying our ICBMs immediately they emerged from their silos’ – he stared at the Academician – ‘or possibly *within* their silos, disaster would be upon us.’

‘It is a huge if, Comrade Secretary-General, an enormous, gigantic if. Besides the difficulties I’ve mentioned, the problems of energy supply within our atmosphere and the targeting, the time factor for such an operation is minute. The action would

have to take place in microseconds. With the curvature of the earth, none of our missile silos are visible to the United States or to their allies, either optically or by radar. Thus any Initial Boost Phase Interception would have to be initiated from space. We're dealing with immense distances, both from the satellite to the command within the United States and from the satellite to our missiles. Communications take time, and in all that time, our ICBMs are climbing away. The danger to our own territory is diminishing with every second.'

'A lot of technical problems, Sergey Allyevich, but technical problems have a way of being overcome . . .'

For a while there was silence, then very quietly the Academician said, 'Do you have information that the Americans are doing more than research into Initial Boost Phase Interception? Have they an actual development project?'

'The Americans aren't fools. They can see the advantages as well as anyone.' Secretary Daranov paused, leaned across the desk and said, 'You do realise, Sergey Allyevich, that with such a weapon no one, no country can maintain its own nuclear missiles. They become too much of a liability. They are too dangerous to keep.'

The Academician nodded. Very quietly he said, 'Every missile would have to be launched *before* the destroyer was operational.'

'Precisely. Even the threat of Initial Boost Phase Interception would precipitate war. There would have to be a massive, pre-emptive nuclear strike.'

Yevgeni Ivanovich Daranov had not arrived suddenly at his august position: he had climbed the ladder of preferment and spread his net wide. His c.v. was excellent and covered an impressive spate of experiences. Having graduated in law from Moscow University, and been a Communist Youth League official, he had joined the CPSU Central Committee. His first taste of power had been as Secretary for Aviation. After that came a considerable switch. Immediately before becoming a full member of the Politburo he had spent a short time as a Deputy Chairman of the KGB.

He knew the great, sprawling block, less than a mile away, that occupied all of one side of Dzerzhinsky Square and housed the headquarters of State Security almost as well as he knew his own

dacha. He also knew one of its better guarded secrets. Now he picked up the third telephone on his desk, the green one.

'Anatoly Michailovich . . .'

'Comrade Secretary-General . . .'

'When I had my office in your building and used to look down upon the statue of that good old Polish Bolshevik, Dzerzhinsky, I remember hearing of a person we call Kvali. Kvali, "the quiet, deep furrow". Is that person still available?'

In his office in the KGB building, Anatoly Michailovich Safronov drew in his breath. 'That person is available, Comrade Secretary-General.'

'Good. They've had a long sleep, it's time they start singing for their supper. I want them to start singing very loudly and very clearly. I want Kvali to sing a whole opera. We need music, Anatoly Michailovich, we need it badly.'

'And the piece of music, Comrade Secretary-General?'

'The American composition to do with space weapons, the one that goes by the name of Blue Snow, Project Blue Snow.'

## 6

'Where is the Kerepesi Cemetery?'

'In Pest.'

'Do you go there often?'

'When I remember.' She paused, then added, 'We must get some flowers. Just a very small bunch.'

He was amused by the use of the word 'we'.

Budapest doesn't abound with florists, but Erzsébet knew where to find one. They circled Engles Square and stopped at a small kiosk. Erzsébet did her bargaining from within the car. After a couple of minutes of hectic discussion, she bought six white roses and asked Oliver if he thought they would do. He said they would. With his own father in his thoughts, Oliver commented on how strange it must be to lay flowers on the grave of a man you had never actually seen.

'He was talked about. We always had photos in the house,' said Erzsébet thoughtfully. 'I always felt that I knew him. I know it sounds odd, but he was never really a stranger.'

As she drove, Oliver leaned back in his seat and analysed her profile. 'Are you like him?'

'I'm told I am, I have the same eyes.'

'So that deep, shining tropospheric green with the hint of Tartar cruelty is from father?'

She nodded.

'What about that Buddha look?'

She laughed. 'That came from my mother.'

They drove up the Rákóczi Avenue and turned right.

'And the goat's milk complexion with the Helen of Troy cheeks?'

'A bit of each.'

'They must have been a beautiful couple. Do we split the roses, three each?'

Erzsébet nodded.

Along one whole side of the road, beyond the rumbling trams and behind a high brick wall, lay a park. Another, slightly neater version of the Városliget. As they got out of the car Erzsébet handed the roses to Oliver. He held the flowers as if they were briars. Erzsébet laughed. 'You're holding them as if we were married.'

'God forbid!' said Oliver, and put both hands behind him, the flowers gently pressed against his jacket.

They walked through the gate into a parkland of straight, wide tarmacadamed paths, tall, stately trees and expanses of lawn. The grass might not have been cut to quite the standard of a cricket pitch but the whole aura of neatness and order was in striking contrast to any cemetery in England. Oliver was amazed at the size of the place. The Kerepesi Cemetery was every bit as big as the Városliget. It was like entering a flat Hyde Park with tombs.

'Does everyone get buried here?' asked Oliver in a hushed voice. 'The good, the bad, the rich and the poor?'

'It's the best place to get buried. Or so everyone thinks.' Erzsébet indicated the ornate statuary that lined the walls. 'You'll find plenty of good citizens there from the old Empire.' She pointed in another direction. 'And plenty of good Comrades.'

'And where do your parents lie?'

'My father is in Section 21.'

Oliver shuddered. 'God, how awful to end up in something called Section 21.'

'All the sections are numbered,' said Erzsébet blandly. 'They have to be for administrative purposes. You must have much the same. If you hadn't you couldn't find the graves.'

Oliver had to admit to himself that he had little experience of cemeteries. He had attended the cremation of an aunt and he knew many country churchyards, but the Kerepesi Cemetery bore as much relationship to the village churchyard as the Danube bore to the Isis.

'And what decides the section in which you're buried? Is this something that is left to the Chairman of the Central Committee?'

Erzsébet ignored the jibe and quickened her pace, walking swiftly along one of the long paths. Suddenly she slowed and said, 'Take my arm.' Oliver did as he was asked. They walked on, close together, Oliver still clutching the six white roses behind his back.

'You said your father was in Section 21 and your mother somewhere else. Why couldn't they have been buried together?'

'My father died a long time ago. I told you, in 1956.'

'I know, but when your mother died, why couldn't they have put her with him?'

'It wasn't possible . . .'

'You mean they were divorced or something? They didn't want to be together?'

'It wasn't as simple as that.'

'Nothing here is simple, is it?' cried Oliver angrily. 'Nothing is simple anywhere. The whole world's a bloody great puzzle! Even a trip to lay six roses on your parents' graves turns out to be a mystery tour.'

Erzsébet tightened her arm in his. 'We've been through all this before. You get angry, I ask why you've come here, and you tell me you've fled. If it's really true that you've fled, then you'd better make the most of Budapest.' She paused, then said, 'Anyway, you'll soon see. You'll soon understand . . .'

He was left with that vague reply. She held his arm tightly, but as they continued their walk along the long, straight path, her attentions were elsewhere. Her eyes scanned the cemetery. She appeared conscious of everyone that passed, even of those on other, distant parallel or diagonal paths.

'Forgive my impatience,' said Oliver at last. 'I know I'm supposed to wait until all is revealed, but is there something particularly special about Section 21? Is it haunted or something? Unless

I'm very wrong, you're approaching this place as if we were on our way to see the Minotaur.'

Erzsébet said nothing. They reached a wide, paved forecourt with a large flanking memorial to the fallen of the Second World War. They crossed the slabs of stone, passed the wall and immediately the landscape changed. Gone was the neatness and order of the rest of the necropolis. The grass was no longer trim and smooth as if nibbled by countless generations of sheep. The ground was broken and uneven, the brambles were shoulder-high and a wilderness of ivy, nettles and bindweed clawed across the land, engulfing the scattered graves and memorials that lay in their midst. The whole area looked like a set for Dracula.

Erzsébet seemed unmoved by the transformation. She appeared almost not to notice it. She moved between the graves on the scantiest of paths, brushing aside the obliterating foliage, but still never forgetting to check for anyone who might be watching.

Oliver was so fascinated by the sudden change to chaos that for a moment he forgot the reason for their journey. He began looking at the individual graves just as he looked at graves in the churchyard at home. The difference here was that the headstones were all relatively new, and none was covered with lichen. As in England, many of the stones were cracked or chipped, but unlike in England, every stone had one thing in common. The date of death was always the same, 1956. In some cases the month had been added. It was always October or November.

'1956 . . .' he said aloud.

Erzsébet was beckoning to him. She was kneeling by a black marble cross with white marble edges. Beside the cross was a headstone, from in front of which a sycamore sapling grew. Oliver realised with a sense of horror that the roots of the sapling must be in the grave itself. From Erzsébet's father's bones a tree now grew.

'The flowers . . .'

He handed her three of the roses and stood back and read the headstone. *József Sándor 1932–1956*. 'He was twenty-four when he died.'

She said nothing but placed the three roses against the base of the cross then, glancing round, rose to her feet, took Oliver's hand and began to hurry away from the graveside.

The penny suddenly dropped. Oliver hadn't been born in 1956,

but he had heard of the Hungarian uprising. His father still alluded to it, linking it with the other uprisings in Czechoslovakia and Poland.

'My God, I've only just got it! Your father was killed in the uprising!'

Erzsébet stopped, turned and gave the grave a parting glance.

'I'm sorry. I've been stupid. When you said 1956, the date just didn't mean a thing. Even now it's all pretty hazy. I've seen films of course. People shaking their fists and throwing Molotov cocktails at tanks.'

They walked back the way they had come. Erzsébet went in front. The path was too narrow, the undergrowth too thick for them to walk together. As they wove their way past the unkempt graves, she explained. 'It's not talked about much now. It all started on October 23rd when the Budapest students presented a petition to Erno Gero, the Party Leader. He threw the petition out and the police fired on the students. What had started as a peaceful protest ended in a revolution.' She glanced at Oliver and smiled. 'Or as we now call it officially, an anti-revolution. An uprising of criminals.'

'And your father was one of them.'

'He'd just left the University. He was a journalist. He was with those who helped drive the original Russian troops out of Budapest on the last day of October. The next day, Imre Nagy announced Hungary's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact and appealed to the United Nations to recognise our independence. Then, on November 4th, the Russian tanks came back. It was then, before he could escape over the border into Austria, that my father was killed.'

'And now the heroes have become the pariahs of the State. And as they were anti-revolutionaries and criminals, no one looks after their graves. And that's why you were so wary the whole way across the cemetery. It's just not good to be seen coming here. That's it, isn't it?'

They had reached a little clearing and were able to walk together. With a sweep of her hand, Erzsébet indicated. 'There are 250 graves here,' she said solemnly, 'and we have a perfect Catch 22 situation. One of the cemetery's regulations is that relatives must look after the graves of their loved ones, but as you say, it's not good to be seen here. It's certainly not good to be seen tending a grave.'

'So the whole plot falls into rack and ruin and the authorities . . .'

She nodded. 'It's officially classed as being in decay and is to be bulldozed.'

'By cleaning up, the buggers obliterate the memory of the uprising! The rotten, crafty sods!'

'There is one concession, we can take the bodies away if we want to . . .'

'Oh, big deal! And I suppose the AVH act as undertakers?'

They were still in the wilderness of Section 21 when Erzsébet suddenly stiffened, tightened her grasp on Oliver's hand and pulled him into the shelter of a thicket.

They stood motionless, the rough leaves scratching their faces. They heard a noise ahead but could see nothing through the foliage. The noise was of feet shuffling rather than walking and the ground beneath the feet crackled with the sound of dead leaves. Oliver held his breath. Erzsébet's grip on his hand tightened.

'If that's the secret police . . .'

Oliver, when Erzsébet hissed at him to shut up.

They heard a cough and the shuffling grew nearer. Oliver dug his head deeper into the bush, felt a leaf in his mouth and tasted its bitter tang. Through a parting in the leaves he saw an old woman, a shawl over her head and wearing an overcoat in spite of the summer heat, following the path they had followed. Oliver pulled Erzsébet towards him and pointed. Erzsébet watched the old woman for a moment then, tugging at Oliver, wriggled out from the thicket and into the sunshine.

They had gone another dozen yards when Erzsébet stopped in the shelter of a massive headstone. She drew Oliver close and they stood together while Erzsébet surveyed the ground around the War Memorial and the trees and paths beyond. They were like two Indian scouts watching the passage of a wagon train. Except that there wasn't a wagon train. Oliver could see nothing suspicious. Indeed he could see no one at all.

'There's no one out there . . .'

Erzsébet pointed. In the far distance, in the tended part of the cemetery, an elderly couple appeared for a moment through the trees then disappeared.

'You can't tell me that's the AVH,' said Oliver in disgust. 'They're bloody geriatrics.'

'Not there, beyond them. Two men.'

Oliver had a fleeting glimpse of two men before a gardener with a hand cart got in the way. 'Whoever they are, they're miles away. They're no more interested in you than a cow in the moon.'

Erzsébet went on staring. Oliver turned and looked back the way they had come. The view was not good for the ground was broken and the vegetation thick, but what he saw made him draw in his breath. The old woman with the shawl and overcoat, who had shuffled past them, was now standing in front of the black marble cross with the white edges and the large headstone, staring down into József Sándor's grave.

Oliver pointed. 'Hey, take a look at that! Is she a relative of yours? She certainly seems to know your dad's grave.'

'Let's get out of here,' said Erzsébet, and began walking quickly towards the War Memorial.

Oliver stopped and very deliberately sat on the grass in the shade of a large plane tree. He had himself to convince and reassure. 'I'm not going another step. Not one step more until you start talking. First of all, I don't think you saw anyone suspicious. All that cops and robbers stuff was a charade. I've no idea why, but you can tell me now. After that I want to know about the woman. Why was she standing by your father's grave?'

'I tell you, there were two men . . .'

Erzsébet was standing above him looking down, an expression of honest innocence in her eyes. He'd tried to persuade himself that his own subliminal memory was a trick and that Erzsébet would confirm it, but he couldn't get away from reality.

'All right, so you saw two men.' He looked around the cemetery. 'Taking the whole area, considering every acre, there must be quite a lot of people here. At least a couple of hundred.'

'The first time I saw them they were quite close, looking in our direction.'

For a long time Oliver was silent. Erzsébet knelt down on the grass beside him. She seemed more relaxed now than at any time since they had entered the cemetery.

'There were two men,' he conceded quietly, 'and they may well have been keeping an eye on Section 21, but what about the old woman? She didn't seem to care much. She made enough noise for a whole battalion and she steered a pretty straight course

for your father's grave. I didn't see her taking any evasive action.'

'She's my aunt . . .'

'Your what?'

Erzsébet nodded. 'My aunt. My father's sister.'

'If she's your aunt, why in hell did we go on cowering in that bush? Why didn't you say something to her?'

'You were with me, weren't you? She wouldn't have known what to make of it.'

'You could have told her. You could have introduced me.'

She shook her head. 'You don't understand, Oliver. We were in Section 21. You don't spring surprises upon people in Section 21.'

The aunt was a new one. A new piece in the jigsaw. He wasn't sure whether to believe Erzsébet or not. He was no more sure of her now than when they had been making love last night. The only time in the last thirty-six hours that he'd felt at all sure of her was when they were in Section 21 and he had realised that her father had been killed in the uprising. Now all that trust had been swept aside by her behaviour over the aunt. If the old woman really was her aunt.

'So she's a Sándor . . .'

 he said, almost to himself.

'She was a Sándor. She's a Sándor by birth, but she married a man called Beszédes. She is my Aunt Sylvia. Sylvia Beszédes.'

Oliver put his head in his hands. Whichever way he looked at it, it didn't make much sense. 'How often does she go to the cemetery? How often do *you* go? Why should she be there just when you choose to go?'

'She goes more than I go,' said Erzsébet simply, and got up and put her hand out to help Oliver to his feet. 'Don't let's stay here.' She gave a little shiver. 'It's not really the place to sit and talk.'

Oliver got up and brushed the grass from his trousers.

'The two men you thought you saw, did you notice anything about them?'

'It was only a glimpse . . .'

They were back in the Mezö Imre Avenue, about to get into her car. Oliver looked along the street. Everything seemed normal. A few cars sped past: a solitary tram stopped, disgorged half a

dozen passengers and began gathering speed again with that characteristic low frequency screech. The passengers from the tram went into the cemetery and two old women walked slowly along by the high brick wall.

There were people in the distance by the big, drab Biedermeier-style buildings on the other side of the road, but nothing seemed out of place. He got into the car, and as the day was fine and sunny, Erzsébet said she'd drive to Margit Island.

'Can you remember anything about the men?'

'Not really.'

'Their clothes?'

She shook her head.

'Did one of them look very English, and have a thin, dark moustache?'

'I told you it was only a glimpse and they were miles away. I couldn't have seen a beard let alone a moustache at that distance. All I can remember is these two men appearing between the trees, then they were gone.'

Oliver twisted round and stared through the rear window. As far as he could see, they weren't being followed. It was then he looked in his lap and noticed the remaining three white roses.

'We forgot your mother's grave.' He sounded calm, and he smiled as he threaded the roses into the top buttonhole of her dress, but inside, the sick, sinking feeling had taken hold and a nightmare of fear and despair was bringing the bile to his throat. He knew the symptoms well. The distraction of the visit to the Kerepesi Cemetery had worn off. He was back to England and all the weird, unbelievable ramifications of Project Blue Snow were here to haunt him.

'I like you,' said Aurél Demichev, taking a studied look at Oliver's face. 'I'd say you're an honest man. A man I could trust at any time, and one with whom I could do good business.' He slapped his wet breasts with the palms of his wet hands and reminded Oliver of a woman he'd once known who, when her nipples itched, would gently slap them with the tips of her fingers.

Várkonyi was concentrating on the chessboard. Without raising his eyes, he muttered, 'If Demichev says you're honest, then it is time to start worrying. A compliment from Aurél Demichev is like a butt from a wild boar.'

One of the onlookers grinned. Oliver smiled and tried to concentrate on the game and forget what was going on in his head. But he was touched by Demichev's remark and, staring at the rising steam all around him, asked himself about honesty.

He'd been called honest by a total stranger. Perhaps anyone can call a stranger honest. All strangers must start honest. After all, you have to know someone before you can call them dishonest.

Supposing he were to tell them who he was – but that presupposed that they'd heard of the British Foreign Secretary. More to the point, supposing he were to tell them why he was here. That presupposed that they were gullible enough to believe an exceedingly unlikely story.

'This woman you've run away with,' said Demichev, a quizzical look on his face. 'What's she like? Tall . . . thin . . . beautiful? Blonde . . . brunette . . . or has she a head of good black hair?' He rubbed the hairs on his own chest and gave that belly-shaking chuckle. 'None of us here are young. Not any more. It would do us good to hear about a beautiful young woman.'

Demichev waited. He saw that Oliver was biting his lip and staring down at the chess pieces. 'Don't worry about the game,' he said gently, putting a hand on Oliver's shoulders. 'I know exactly how Tibor Várkonyi plays and I'll tell you the moves to make. You just tell us about the beautiful girl.'

'She has green eyes,' said Oliver. 'I call them tropospheric green because when you look into them, you're opening the curtains that cover the universe . . .'

'A poet!' cried Demichev. 'The man is a poet! Go on!'

'Her face is round and the skin very smooth. She has a sharp intellect, speaks many languages . . .'

'Can she cook?'

Oliver had to think. It seemed that most of the time they had been together he'd taken Erzsébet out. But she could cook, or at least make excellent salads. 'She doesn't cook in the Hungarian way . . .'

'You mean, she's English?'

Oliver shook his head. 'No, she's Hungarian.'

'And her husband?' asked Demichev. 'The man you took her away from, the man who is now chasing you, he's English?'

'Very English. He's the man you see on the travel brochures

enticing you to come to England. You can't miss him, with his rolled umbrella and bowler hat, he stands next to the guardsman outside Buckingham Palace.'

'And he's tall with a thin moustache?' asked Demichev, staring over Oliver's shoulder.

Oliver nodded.

'In which case, my friend, he has arrived. Your outraged husband has just walked into the baths. From the look on his face, I'd suggest you take a very deep breath. You may have to hide under the water for a long time.'

## 7

Sir Adrian poured himself a large Scotch. 'You'll change for dinner? After all, it's not just an ordinary supper. Stefan Sliwinski is a very great pianist. Probably the greatest interpreter of Chopin in the world.'

'If it's a proper dinner, I'll do my best . . .' said Oliver vaguely.

'Good fellow,' said Sir Adrian and gave his son's arm a firm squeeze. Sir Adrian went on into his study. Oliver went up the stairs and into his bedroom.

It was April with its showers, rainbows and deep, yellow-headed cowslips. Oliver had spent the afternoon walking around the estate. The last time he'd been down, there'd been a false spring. Wild violets and wood-sorrel had taken a look and waited, but now the horse chestnut and the alder were in flower, and in the valley by the stream, where a police handler and his dog had their favourite walk, the aspen and the balsam poplar were draped with catkins.

A blackthorn blazed white in the hedge of Strawberry Field, making a chequerboard with its jet black bark, and a bullfinch was nesting where one always nested outside the barn. He'd followed a goldcrest to its lair, and tried to do the same with a wren but lost it. All that now seemed an age away from evening dress and a formal dinner party.

He heard his mother's car on the gravel and went down to welcome her. He made the gesture because he knew that his father wouldn't. His mother seemed surprised to see him,

although he had rung and warned her that he would be down.

He helped unload three terracotta vases that she referred to as having a 'biblical' form, and an eighteenth-century Polish porcelain centaur. The unloading finished, Lady Eleanor lay back on the sofa and closed her eyes. Her face was grey, her skin like parchment.

Oliver sat beside her and held her hand. It was cold, like ice. After a while she began talking vaguely of the first flush of American tourists who were already changing their travellers' cheques, but for once her heart wasn't in it. Her voice tailed off and she seemed to forget the subject.

'You've got a dinner party tomorrow. I didn't know or I wouldn't have come down.'

'Your father . . .' murmured Lady Eleanor. 'Sliwinski is doing three concerts in London. He's an acquaintance of the Colonel's.'

Oliver raised his eyebrows. 'I didn't know the Colonel went in for culture. I thought he kept to drums and flintlocks.'

Lady Eleanor smiled. 'Knowing your father's love of Chopin, the Colonel did the groundwork.' She paused, then said, 'We're bringing in the gardener as butler, he's done the job before and he's reasonably capable. I can't do much so Cook is having help from the village.'

'How many will there be?'

'At the last count, twenty-two.'

Oliver considered what made a good politician. Two webs with the politician the sole spider. An overt web and a Mafia, an underground network that few people knew about.

'Is this his official Mafia or his unofficial one?'

'We know most of those coming,' she said wearily. 'Of course, there's Stefan Sliwinski and the woman who goes everywhere with him. The Colonel, Dolby, who runs British Coal, a man who makes polyurethane . . . one of your father's cronies from the FO . . .' Still relaying the guest list, Lady Eleanor crawled slowly up the stairs and into her bathroom.

'Good God, Oliver, what brings you to the phone?'

'When did you last see Mother?'

Major Robin Freemantle stiffened; his voice changed to one of concern. 'What's wrong with Mother?'

'When did you last see her?'

Robin Freemantle stared through the window at the square.

Two Land Rovers, a three-ton truck and two troopers going off duty were all that he could see. It was mess night, the officers of the 3rd/12th The Queen's Royal Hussars were about to dine. The last person Robin had expected to hear when he was called to the phone was his brother. He couldn't remember the last time Oliver had rung him in Germany. Of his own family, only his father, who phoned him nearly every week, rang him when he was abroad.

'When did you last see her?'

'Christmas. To be precise, Boxing Day on my last leave.'

'She's ill. She hasn't looked well for weeks. All that energy's gone, Robin. You know what she used to be like, a human whirlwind. It's gone, completely gone, this afternoon she could hardly get up the stairs.'

'Have you spoken to Dad?' There was a long silence. For a moment Robin thought his brother had left the phone. 'Dad rang me last Monday and he didn't say anything.'

'Dad's no good,' Oliver blurted out. 'You know what it's like trying to talk to him about anything. He never listens, he just doesn't want to know. Nowadays he seems to live just for himself.'

Robin let out a low whistle, then picked up his gin and sipped it. 'Harsh words, Oliver. Dad isn't as bad as that. Have a go at him, have a chat. He'd like to have a chat with you, I know.'

Oliver had had to steel himself to make the phone call, now he gritted his teeth. He hated Robin putting on the big brother act. 'I've told her to see her doctor but you know how stubborn she can be. She won't listen to me and she won't do anything for herself.'

'Ah, there speaks the sibling. Mother's a lot more selfish than you know.'

'Oh, come off it, Robin, she's slaved away for everyone else in the family for the whole of her life. She's helped push Dad up his ladder and it's only now, with her shops, that she's doing what she really wants to do.'

Robin glanced at his watch, then lifted his gaze to the two camouflaged Land Rovers outside the window. 'Something you don't know, Oliver. Something I found out by chance. Mother did see her doctor.'

'When?'

'Last winter, December I think it was.'

'She told you?' There was a hint of jealousy in Oliver's voice.

'She told me she'd been, but she didn't tell me what the MO said. I don't know any more than that. I'm only guessing and you know that being a simple, thick-headed soldier I'm not good on the psychological side, but I got the impression that she had . . . well, put the matter out of her head.'

'She would. That's how she operates.'

Robin too put things out of his head. Indeed, that's how he operated, but when Oliver thought the matter over, he realised that not only did his brother and his mother put things out of their heads, but so did his father. It seemed to him then, crouched by the phone in the library at Priors Hurst, hoping that the phone wasn't tapped, that he was the only member of the family that kept things *in* his head.

'If she saw her doctor in December, that's *four months ago!* She's much worse now.'

Robin was like Sir Adrian, both physically and in temperament. He was a soldier, but in spite of his rank and the fame of his regiment, he never really looked very soldierly. He had the same round, ruddy cheeks as his father, the same short legs and the same tubby body. He also had the same equanimity and imperturbability, no doubt excellent qualities for a Field Officer in the British Army when exhorting his subalterns to die with their boots clean as the Russians broke through.

'If you can't get her to go to her doctor, talk to Dad the next time you see him.'

Oliver said nothing. There was a long silence. The regimental band struck up the overture to *The Gondoliers*. Faintly the music came through the phone. Robin had to raise his voice. 'I'll ring him tomorrow morning and tell him what you said. In the meantime have another go at Mother. If she won't listen to you, try Sophia. She listens to Sophia.'

'I'll have a go . . .'

'Good man.'

Oliver wanted to slam the phone down, but he didn't. He had got nowhere, resolved nothing and still had everything to think about. He put the phone back on the hook as if returning a viper to its basket.

The twenty-three who eventually sat down to dinner were very much the unofficial Mafia: Sir Adrian's links to all parts of the Establishment, but not government. These were the representatives of his power base, the people he could call upon in need. Some he dined with regularly others occasionally, to know what was happening in the City or the universities, or simply to canvass their views and give them his.

There was Lord Easton whose arm had been twisted to take Oliver on his staff to join the select few newspapermen and photographers bound for the Falklands Adventure. There was Charles Beaminster, the QC who ran Sir Adrian's chambers and kept a seat warm for the day the voters turned their backs. There was a university chancellor, two industrialists, a banker, an artist and, of course, Colonel Symington and the guest of the evening, Stefan Sliwinski, together with the formidable American woman who was his minder. There was also Lawrence Morley, described by Lady Eleanor as one of her husband's cronies from the FO, but in fact a man twenty years younger than Sir Adrian and more a protégé than a crony.

Watching, sipping his wine, contributing his share of small talk, Oliver couldn't help marvelling at his father's achievements. His father didn't abound with charisma, nor was he a natural leader. The event at Priors Hurst that evening was the culmination of years of careful, meticulous burrowing allied to an excellent brain and endless badgering. That he was able to manipulate so many eminent people, without overtly appearing to do so, was a considerable feat. And this was the least important of the Foreign Secretary's establishments, his home. His rooms in the Inner Temple and his official residence at Chevening were far better known as the centres of his web.

To Oliver it was all the more amazing that the man he called Father, the man in the crumpled suit, with the heavy-rimmed spectacles that constantly needed pushing up his nose, whose blue stubble gave the impression of always needing a razor, who could be morose and depressed and who drank too much, should be able to host such a glittering array of acolytes. Then he remembered his mother.

Sir Adrian couldn't have climbed even the first rung of his ladder without his wife. In her day she had been the booster rocket. Now she was empty and expendable.

After dinner, upon the grand piano in the drawing-room,

Stefan Sliwinski opened his private concert with Chopin's Opus 59, Number 3 in F sharp minor. His second piece, Opus 41, was altogether slower. The tempo sent Lady Eleanor to sleep and before the end she began to snore in deep, rasping spasms. Sir Adrian pretended not to notice, twisting his chair and turning his back upon her, whereupon Oliver gently awoke his mother and escorted her from the room.

'Since you have kindly helped put me to bed, you can help me make up my diary.' Lady Eleanor indicated the top drawer of her dressing table. Oliver took out the small brown leather book, and with biro poised waited for his mother's dictation.

'Saturday, April 19th, Priors Hurst. We had a dinner party for Stefan Sliwinski. Adrian enjoyed it hugely . . .'

'What about you?'

'Me?'

'Yes, you?'

'Oh . . . I enjoyed it, of course, I did.'

'It was very thoughtless of Dad.'

His mother ignored the remark. 'Have you written down what I told you?'

Oliver nodded. 'I said, it was very thoughtless of Father.'

'He has to entertain. A politician who doesn't entertain gets nowhere.' She sighed. 'Once I managed it quite well . . . when I was younger. Your father needed a lot of help then. When he was first starting out we had some great parties.'

'Tonight was too much for you.'

She shook her head with surprising vigour. 'Nonsense. It's just that I was feeling tired, that's all.'

'Have you thought about giving up your shops?'

She smiled. 'You forget, Oliver, I have responsibilities. The people I employ, the craftsmen and restorers who do jobs for me.' She thought for a moment then added, 'There's enough unemployed as it is.'

They sat in silence. Lady Eleanor shut her eyes and laid her head right back on the pillow. Several times she frowned, as if trying to remember or even as if she was in pain. Oliver held her hand; it was as cold as ever.

The single bedside lamp, together with the strange dated furnishings, threw the bedroom into a bizarre mixture of gaudy

highlight and heavy shadow. Mauve was the predominant colour, for the counterpane was mauve and so were the heavy, velvet curtains.

Oliver knew every inch of a room that had hardly changed from the days when he had crawled upon the rug by the fireplace. Then he had thought the chamber a furry paradise, an Aladdin's cave, full of wonderful knick-knacks: a golden clock with a seraph riding the pendulum, a blue and white jug and washbasin never removed when the plumbing went in, and a deep green chair with two massive armrests that towered over him like monuments to some upholstered god.

They were all still here and only the dog in its basket had changed. The great nuptial bed with its brass rails and vertical supports that would have made a structure for reinforced concrete still dominated the room and made its spaciousness seem cramped. It too was kept as it had been in the days when the family were being conceived and bred. Upon Lady Eleanor's dressing table, and beside the three photos of her children, Sir Adrian as a forty-year-old sat smiling and contented in an ornate silver frame. The lone occupant of the room still kept her museum as if love was made here every night.

Oliver shuddered. His mother opened her eyes and asked if he was cold. He shook his head. He wasn't cold; a feeling of deep gloom had settled over him. The feeling he so often had of layers of life and layers of death.

'You must go back downstairs. Your father will be missing you. He'll want you to talk to Stefan Sliwinski. You can't do any more for me.'

'You went to see Dr Harris last December.'

She opened one eye and squinted at him. 'Who have you been talking to?'

'I phoned Robin this evening. He told me.'

'Go down and see your father. It was quite wicked of us to run away from that concert like that. It might have made that poor pianist go all the way back to Poland.'

'What did the doctor say?'

'Very little.' She spoke slowly. 'It was so long ago, I've forgotten. Now go down and see your father, we can talk about all that another time.'

'Are you sure the doctor said very little?'

'Quite sure.'

Oliver hesitated.

'Please Oliver, I'm tired. It's been a long day.'

As Oliver went to the door, his mother indicated a bottle of tablets upon the washstand. He took them to her. Claspings the bottle in her hands, she kissed him on the cheek then waved him out of the room.

The concert was over, the evening finished; the guests were departing or, in the case of those few staying the night, going to their rooms. As he came down the stairs into the hall to observe the tail-end of events, Oliver found himself face to face with Sliwinski and the young man from the FO, Lawrence Morley. They were in animated conversation but stopped the moment they saw Oliver.

Sliwinski put a hand on Oliver's arm and asked solicitously after Lady Eleanor.

'She's all right,' said Oliver and drowned the anger in his soul. 'She's just a bit tired, that's all. And she hasn't been too well lately.'

Sliwinski expressed his warmest hopes for Lady Eleanor's future health. Oliver mumbled his appreciation of the concert and Sliwinski gave a little bow. Oliver was suddenly conscious of being fixed by dark eyes that burned from beneath a brooding forehead. The look was so intense that Oliver had to blink. Then he saw that Sliwinski was smiling, and automatically returned the smile.

A tall woman in a blue gown, her hair wrapped high over her head, moved towards them in a stately, inexorable fashion. She put out a gloved hand, straightened Sliwinski's tie, smoothed back his dark, thinning hair, then with a smile that was as artificial as the tints in her hair took the little, swarthy man's hand and without a word to anyone led him across the hall towards the front door.

Sliwinski, the greatest living exponent of Chopin, went like a lamb.

'His minder,' observed Morley. 'Grace Kuberski, an American citizen of Russo-Polish descent. I'm told, a most formidable lady.'

Oliver had been so engrossed with Sliwinski and the woman in the blue gown he'd forgotten Morley. Now he gave the FO man a weak smile.

'A wonderful evening,' said Morley. 'It was a great privilege for me to be asked down.'

Oliver did his best to look enthusiastic, but failed.

'I get the impression that you don't share your father's tastes in music?'

'Not really, but then do you?'

Morley was taken aback. 'Do I share my father's tastes?' His first-class honours mind thought the question over. At last he said, 'The two situations aren't comparable. Your father, Sir Adrian, is a most cultured man. Everyone knows of his love and patronage of the theatre, the arts and, of course, music. In my case . . .' He stopped and shrugged. 'It wasn't the same at all. Not at all.'

Oliver waited. It was evidently difficult for Morley to talk about his background. Finally he said, 'My father was an artisan. His tastes were quite different. His delights were watching football, going to White Hart Lane . . . and in the summer to Margate.'

Morley smiled, none too sure of his ground. Oliver examined the man's features. He couldn't have been more different from the Pole. It was a classic lesson in racial characteristics. From the smooth, almost feminine skin to the dimpled point of his chin, Morley's face was redolent of the English upper middle class. With his height and his upright carriage, his mould bordered upon the aristocratic. His voice and the ease with which he spoke carried an authority. Only when he had been asked about his background had Oliver noticed any wavering.

Considering the visible man, Oliver was surprised at Morley's background. He had expected it to be like his own, although where he had been to an expensive but by no means academically exclusive public school, he would have wagered that Morley was a product of Winchester or Eton.

Only two things marred this perfect English image. The thin, dark moustache that, when Morley smiled, gave him a supercilious look, and the eyes. The eyes were too grey.

'You're in the FO?' asked Oliver, more out of politeness than interest.

Morley nodded. 'For my sins . . .' Then he smiled and added, 'Don't hold it against me.'

It was that hint of superciliousness in Morley's smile together with the strains of the evening that finally triggered Oliver's aggression. 'Tell me something that's always puzzled me. Why

can no one anywhere ever have honest government? Why is it that to govern is to suppress and deceive?’

‘Honest government?’ asked Morley, surprised, and his eyebrows rose and his mouth set into a button shape while he examined the problem. ‘What exactly do you mean by honest government? I would have thought that that’s exactly what we have in this country.’

‘You’re a civil servant, my father’s a politician. Put the two together and we get a form of rapid setting cement of deceit and vested interests.’

‘Oh, surely not!’ cried Morley, warming to the defence of his career. ‘Don’t forget, the electorate are always there ready to put their cross in another place. That’s where we’re so fortunate in this country.’

‘Not many people want nuclear power, but we go on building the stations.’

‘Ah, that’s not an FO affair,’ Morley said with great relief, then saw the look upon Oliver’s face. ‘It’s the Government’s duty to provide energy for the next century. The whole brief has been worked out logically and scientifically . . .’

Sir Adrian came shambling across the hall with Colonel Symington. His face was blotched, the stubble on his chin, shaved before dinner, was dark again, and his bow tie was askew. When he saw his son in conversation with Morley, he stopped and laid a hand on both their shoulders. ‘I’m glad to see you two getting on so well,’ he said in a slurred voice, and enquired if Morley was driving back that evening or wanted a bed. Morley said he was driving back.

Oliver took his leave. As he did so, Sir Adrian said very pointedly, ‘Lawrence is a very great help to me.’

The Colonel nodded.

Alone in his bedroom, Oliver considered his father’s words. There had been something almost pleading about them, as if he was being asked to understand something. But understand what? For a moment he had the sickening feeling that Morley was his father’s lover. Then he shook the thought from him. He had seen his father with women. And the Colonel had nodded.

Oliver was in bed when he heard a noise on the landing. His father, half undressed, his braces down by his feet, his glasses askew, was kneeling in front of the lavatory, his head over the bowl, retching. When he saw Oliver he wiped his face with a

towel, muttered, 'Bloody fish mousse!' and staggered back to his bedroom.

They were lying in the afternoon sun on Margit Island, looking into the grey, turgid Danube.

'My father isn't a strong man. Not as strong as yours.'

Erzsébet opened her mouth in astonishment. 'However can you say that? You never knew my father. And anyway, look at the difference between them. My father was only a journalist, your father is a statesman!'

'My father wouldn't have got in the way of a Russian tank,' said Oliver, sombrely. 'He'd have made damn sure that someone else did that.'

Erzsébet smiled. 'I have an idea all this has to do with the Falklands . . . ?'

Oliver shook his head. 'Not all of it. Oh, sure the thought came to me when I was on that ship and saw all those paras and commandos on their way down there. When it was rough and grey, and the South Atlantic looked bloody endless, I got angry. The politicians sending us all to die while they went on whoofing down the oysters and champagne, but it didn't really stick. My father wasn't the first Foreign Secretary to help launch an expeditionary force. It's happened in every war in every age. There must always be those who send others to fight. That is, as long as we go on fighting.' He shook his head again. 'No, it's all to do with that Russian tank. Not only would my father have made absolutely sure that someone *else* threw that Molotov cocktail, he'd have checked that it all squared with the law. He'd have had endless briefs written about it, meetings galore and droves of men in dark suits parading in front of him all carrying files.'

'That doesn't mean he's not strong. It merely means that he's wise and sensible. You could call my father rash. It wasn't wise or sensible to get in the way of the Russian tanks.' She paused, then added bitterly, 'It certainly never got him anywhere.'

Oliver was haunted by the memory of the unkempt grave, set amidst the briars in the Kerepesi Cemetery, from which a sapling now grew. 'At least your father was true to himself,' he said bitterly.

'Maybe your father is true to himself in his way.'

Oliver now knew far more about his father than he had the

night the great pianist Stefan Sliwinski had played at Priors Hurst. The first night he had ever spoken with Lawrence Morley. Yet for all that made sense now, there was still much that was difficult to understand, much to be explained.

'I don't know. That's just the trouble, I honestly don't know. How can we really judge?'

'How dare we judge!' cried Erzsébet. 'Heroes, traitors, they're only labels.'

Oliver was surprised by Erzsébet's outburst. 'When I said my father wasn't strong,' he said cautiously, 'I meant he hasn't the inner strength of my mother. He could never have got anywhere without her. You wouldn't think so now if you saw them together. You'd wonder why they ever married, yet in her younger days she must have carried a fantastic load.'

'At last you're appreciating your mother!' said Erzsébet. 'The aloof, English lady with the roses and the dog. At last you see her virtues.'

'She was my father's step-ladder . . .'

'And how you do think she'd feel if she could hear you saying that?'

Oliver shrugged. 'She'd deny it. Or more likely just not listen.'

'She might not even realise what she's been. Many women don't.'

'She knows all right,' said Oliver quietly. 'She knows exactly what she's done. In fact she knows everything. Absolutely everything. That's the most extraordinary part.'

## 8

They were on their way to RAF Lyneham. Oliver was driving, Robin had his head back, his eyes shut. Oliver pulled out and passed two Army Land Rovers. The yawning of the vehicle jerked Robin awake. 'It's damned good of you to drive me back,' he said sleepily. 'It did mean that I was able to see Mother.'

'You're an expert on Chopin, Robin.'

Robin looked surprised. 'Hardly. Not like Dad.'

'But you like Chopin, you listen to him. You've inherited Dad's tastes.'

Robin shrugged; his round face broke into a smile. 'If you put it that way. I suppose I have. But I'm still nothing like the expert he is. If Dad hadn't been a lawyer and a politician, he could have been one of those music buffs on television.'

Near the crest of Upavon Down, where four tumuli line the roadside, and within sight of the old airfield, Oliver stopped in a lay-by. He took a tape from the side pocket and put it into the car cassette.

Robin glanced at the clock. 'I've got a plane to catch, remember. I'm due back in Germany tonight.'

Oliver switched the tape on and settled back in his seat. The sound of a piano in full flood instantly filled the car.

'Chopin . . .' said Robin after a while. 'Opus 63, Number 3 in C sharp minor.'

'I've run the tape on. It's just one bit I want you to listen to. We won't be here long.'

The Mazurka ended. There was a pause. Robin gave his brother a questioning glance. Oliver nodded. The silence continued. Robin folded his arms with a hint of exasperation. Suddenly the sound of the piano filled the car again.

'Opus 50, Number 3 in C sharp minor,' announced Robin, and frowned. 'But there's a bit missing at the beginning.'

Oliver started the car and pulled out on to the road.

'What exactly is the mystery?' asked Robin sarcastically.

'Did you recognise the pianist?'

Robin shook his head. 'I warned you, I'm not that good.'

'The pianist was Sliwinski . . .'

'Ah, the concert! The great, fabulous concert that I missed. I heard all about it, of course. Dad told me on the phone and then we had a visit from some chap who was there. Chum of Dad's from the FO.'

'Morley? Lawrence Morley?'

'That's him. Tall fellow, well-dressed, with a thin moustache.'

'What was a man from the Foreign Office doing visiting The Queen's Royal Hussars?'

'He wasn't. He was seeing a Signals' Interception unit. We happened to meet up, and he told me that he worked for Dad. Or maybe he said he worked with Dad, I can't remember. He certainly seems to have enjoyed the evening. Couldn't stop talking about it. And he'd actually shaken the great Sliwinski's hand.'

They turned left over the bridge that spans the Wiltshire Avon. Robin suddenly said, 'Forgive me if I'm a bit thick, but I still don't get the mystery. I still don't see why we had to stop just because a few bars are missing on a tape.'

Oliver passed the tape container to his brother. Written in thin, spidery letters below the photograph of a fifty-five-year-old man with a swarthy face, piercing eyes and thinning black hair were the words: *To Sir Adrian and Lady Eleanor Freemantle, with kind regards. Stefan Sliwinski.*

'I found it in the house. Sliwinski must have given it to father that night.'

Robin grunted.

Oliver began to explain. 'The total gap is forty-seven seconds. The normal gap between each Mazurka is five seconds. That suggests that forty-two seconds of the last Mazurka, the Opus 50, are missing, but they're not. Only twelve seconds are missing. I've measured it against another recording. So the gap between Opus 63 and Opus 50 was already abnormal at thirty-five seconds. On top of that we have a further twelve seconds of recording missing. Don't you think it's a bit odd, first to make a tape like that, and then, with a total gap of forty-seven seconds, give it away as a presentation?'

'A fault in the recording,' suggested Robin.

Oliver shrugged. 'You'd think if Sliwinski was going to take the trouble of giving a tape away, he'd make sure it was OK.'

'I imagine he's a pretty busy man. I don't suppose he listens to every tape he gives away.'

'And wouldn't you think that these days he'd give away something a bit more special than a crummy old tape? Surely a man in that calibre of music would have presentation compact discs?'

'Maybe being Polish he isn't all that modern.'

Oliver gave his brother a glance. 'You think it's all a load of rubbish, don't you? You think I'm making a mountain out of a molehill?'

'I agree it's a bit odd,' said Robin cautiously, 'but I don't think it's anything to get worked up about.'

'First the normal gap between Mazurkas has been extended, then the first bars of the Opus 50 are missing. There are *two* sequential faults, Robin. *Two faults, not one!*'

Robin grimaced but said nothing.

For a long time they drove in silence. As they approached RAF Lyneham, a Hercules, on circuits and bumps, droned slowly overhead. Robin leaned forward and peered upwards through the windscreen. 'Keep in touch about Mother,' he said quietly, as if the sight of the aeroplane lumbering through the sky reminded him of the heaven he presumed his mother might one day go to. 'I got her to promise that she'd go back to her doctor, and that was a bit of a victory.'

Robin showed his identity card, the barrier was lifted and they drove through the gates into the airfield. Robin got out of the car, stood beside the driver's door and put a hand on Oliver's shoulder. 'Where exactly did you find that tape?'

'In Dad's study.'

Robin puckered his lips and let out a long, low whistle. 'In his study . . .'

Oliver nodded. 'In one of the drawers in his desk . . .'

Robin's grip on his brother's shoulder tightened. Oliver understood the signal. 'I know he's damned proprietorial about that study of his and hates people going in when he's not there, but the room gets cleaned.'

'I was going to say, if you're really worried about the tape and it's keeping you awake at night, talk to Dad about it,' said Robin, smiling. 'But if you've nicked it out of his drawer, you can hardly do that.' He gave a little chuckle and added, 'On the other hand, if the mystery is that compulsive, you can always ask Mother. After all, it was given to both of them.'

With a final squeeze of the shoulder, he was marching away towards the departure building.

Oliver had intended driving to London; now he switched and drove back to Hampshire. Evidently he had failed to interest Robin in the tape. Thinking about it, in the clear light of evening as he wound his way back across the edge of Salisbury Plain, he wasn't surprised. Robin was a down-to-earth, unimaginative character. The Army suited him fine. He took after their father. Neither father nor son would ever have seen fairies at the bottom of their garden even if they'd lived in the Land of Oz.

There must be thousands of audio tapes with bits of recording missing. The loss of those forty-seven seconds could have

happened in a hundred different ways. Nevertheless, it worried Oliver, and it worried him in a very irrational manner. But then the whole episode of the discovery of the faulty tape had been irrational.

Oliver had opened the door of his father's study without intent. He had stood in the middle of the room, staring at the desk as if it contained Sir Henry Morgan's treasure, or at least the chart to help locate it. He had been in the room many times before, and not always with his father. He had opened the drawer of the desk before, although not recently. As a place that his father retreated to, the study had always held a strange fascination. Whereas his mother's bedroom contained one set of memories, a sort of faded femininity, his father's study, with its faint smell of leather, old paper and dried tobacco, encapsulated a completely different set of echoes.

None of that had really accounted for his actions yesterday morning. Heavy rain had cut short his walk yet, considering the matter with thirty-six hours of hindsight, he wondered why he had been at Priors Hurst at all. It wasn't a weekend and it wasn't a holiday.

He'd gone down to Southampton to see a client. Nigel Crawford, who ran the agency, gave him great latitude in his comings and goings. Everyone was aware that it did the firm no harm to have the Foreign Secretary's son amongst its employees, so Oliver led a relatively charmed, privileged life. Priors Hurst wasn't exactly on the direct route back to London, but Oliver made it so. If he needed an excuse, it was to see how his mother was.

His action in opening the drawer, apparently such an idle one, was filled with that same old sense of layers. In that drawer lay the strata of his father's life, and hence his life. Things long forgotten yet, when revealed, full of memories. The key of the house they had built high up upon a rugged slope in Corsica: faded brown photos, curled relics of childhood: uniform buttons, a compass and pens whose gold nibs once dipped into liquid ink. And then, at the very back, amidst the dust and pencil shavings, was that most incongruous article, the tape.

He read the dedication and, surprised at the location of the tape, at the very back of the drawer as if it had been deliberately hidden, inserted it into his father's own hi-fi. The gap so puzzled him, he played that part of the tape three times. Then he searched

for a record of the same music and played that. Finally he did his bit of algebra.

He was still obsessed with the gap and the apparent erasure when, at half-past two that afternoon, after a meeting at the MOD, Robin had arrived unexpectedly on a flying visit.

Lady Eleanor sat very upright in a Robert Adam chair, her hands grasping the tips of the rococo-style arms, looking like an aged She, staring through the window towards the old stone wall that led to the Cathedral Close. Sitting on a high stool checking invoices was Molly, Lady Eleanor's assistant.

When Oliver entered the shop Lady Eleanor asked if he had taken his brother back to his aeroplane.

Oliver said that he had.

'It was very good of him to come and see me, but all quite unnecessary.' Lady Eleanor gave Oliver an inspector-general's glance and added, 'I thought *you* were meant to be back in London?'

It was late-night shopping. Few customers came to Lady Eleanor's shop after four in the afternoon, but she believed it craven to leave everything to the multiples. So on that one night each week she kept the shop in Hempminster open until nine.

Oliver looked around the shop. 'There doesn't seem to be much happening, can't I drive you home?'

'I have my own car,' said Lady Eleanor, surprised.

Oliver put his hand into his jacket pocket and felt the tape. He searched for a chair to sit in near his mother, but none of the furniture seemed to fit. Molly offered him her own Regency stool but he refused. In the end he stood behind his mother, his hands on her shoulder. It was a very uncomfortable and unnatural pose and did nothing to ease his passage.

'You remember the evening Stefan Sliwinski was here . . . ?'

'I do so love him playing . . . ' said Molly and, slipping into an instant, ecstatic trance at the mere thought of the little Pole, closed her eyes and laid her hands palms down upon the writing table that acted as a desk.

'Mother,' said Oliver softly, leaning forward so that he could look down into his mother's face, 'did you know that Sliwinski left you a present?'

Lady Eleanor appeared not to hear.

'He left a tape, a recording of himself playing Chopin's Mazurkas. He left it as a present to Dad *and to you.*'

Lady Eleanor let out a great sigh and shook her head. 'Please, Oliver, not now. It really has been a most tiring day.' She put up her hand and gently squeezed her son's fingers. 'I'm sure you understand . . .'

Oliver returned the squeeze.

'Bend down so that I can kiss you.'

Oliver bent down. Lady Eleanor kissed her son on the cheek. It was the kiss of dismissal. The same kiss that had despatched him to school. He laid his mother's hand back on the armrest of the chair and strode towards the door.

The policeman at the gate knew his car but nevertheless waved him to a stop. Oliver ran down the window and stuck out his head. The policeman smiled and waved him through. Oliver parked right outside the front door, a place normally reserved for his father, and ran up the steps into the house. But for the housekeeper, Priors Hurst should be empty.

Oliver went to his own room and packed a clean shirt. The housekeeper came up to check who had entered the house. Satisfied that it was Oliver, after a few words she went back to the kitchen. Oliver came down the stairs, and tried the door to his father's study. It was unlocked. He went in, opened the centre drawer of the desk and slipped the tape back exactly where he had found it. Right at the back.

He set off for London, determined to put the whole matter of the faulty tape out of his mind for evermore.

## 9

The forest stretched unbroken on both sides of the long, straight road, two dark cones converging on infinity. The pines stood in their myriad ranks, stately, silent and still. The black of the road and the sombre greens of the forest were broken only by the splashes of white that marked the last of the lingering snow. Melting piles, once shoulder-high where they had been swept to

the roadside, were now no larger than punctured plastic bags, already half obscured by the early grasses of spring.

The driver slowed the big black limousine. A road branched to the left, into what seemed an even darker area of forest. A 'No Entry' and a red and white striped barrier blocked the way. Two policeman stood beside the barrier, their uniforms as dark as the trees that encompassed them, their AK47s slung loosely around their necks, their hands on the cold, hard metal. Behind the men, just visible in the fringe of the forest, was their guard hut.

The car never quite stopped. The police, recognising both car and driver and the two hazy forms in the vast back, quickly raised the barrier and waved it through. As it passed, both policemen saluted.

As the car gathered speed again, Anatoly Michailovich Safronov stared ahead through the windscreen into the gloom of the shaded roadway and spoke softly into the microphone. 'We shall be with Secretary Daranov for about an hour, Oleg Sergeyevich. No doubt you will make yourself at home?'

The driver turned his head and grinned. Safronov settled back in his seat and observed more to the upholstery of the Zil's roof than to the bundle of Arctic fox furs that sat next to him that Oleg Sergeyevich Romanov was a genius. 'That man would find water in a desert,' he said, then added not with the disapproval that might be expected, but with a hint of pride, 'Even now, Oleg Sergeyevich still manages to lay his hand on the vodka.'

'Everyone manages to lay their hand on the vodka. That is everyone but you. And if you're so keen to be seen as honest and irreproachable, part of the new *glasnost* that is supposed to be sweeping everything so clean, why let your driver drink?'

Safronov ignored the remark as he ignored much his wife said.

Safronov had always been Daranov's man. They had met at the Ordzhonikidze Aviation Institute in Moscow. When the Secretary-General had come into his own, Safronov had been rewarded. They saw eye to eye on many matters, but not on all. There were elements in the Chairman of the KGB that were not common to the Secretary-General of the CPSU. Safronov was more of a pragmatist, his idealism tempered by events and people, and although, like Daranov, he lived under the shadow of the greatness of Mother Russia, was awed by the memory of the spilt blood of generations of her citizens, avidly searched

for greater efficiency and appreciated the arts Russian-style, there was enough of the hedonist in him to sadly miss his vodka.

'I suppose you know that Eugenia Matveyevna is having a dress show. Some of her dress shows really are quite extraordinary. If you want my opinion, she's far too old for most of the things she wears.'

'Eugenia Matveyevna is a very beautiful woman,' said Safronov, simply, and from the way he said it, he meant the conversation to end there, just as he had meant the conversation on Oleg Sergeyeovich's taste for vodka to end. But his wife never allowed a remark about another woman to pass unanswered. 'For all her so-called "flair", she has bad breath and varicose veins!'

Safronov turned his head. He was fifty-four, tall and lean, with a thin face and inset shrunken cheeks. His glasses gave him a studious look, which the sag of his shoulders emphasised. He was handsome in a strange, aesthetic way, and in his carriage, gait and features was a hangdoggedness that stimulated the maternal feelings in many women.

Nellya had once been stimulated by just those feelings, but that was a long time ago. As her husband had grown thinner, more aesthetic-looking and more important, so she had grown plumper, lazier and, when she found herself unloved, bitter. But she still had a fine complexion and her bright grey eyes and small, arched mouth, when not down at the corners, hinted at the prettiness of her youth.

'Eugenia Matveyevna is not just a beautiful woman, but a wise and sensible one,' said Safronov, pointedly. 'You don't have to leap for joy at the sight of her dress show, but you might at least try and be polite about it.'

'You mean it will help you, if I do,' said Nellya challengingly, arching her eyebrows and staring at the long, gaunt face beside her.

Safronov shrugged. 'A few claps and a smile, if you can manage it, wouldn't come amiss.' He paused, then added in a voice so apparently soothing, the menace was almost imperceptible, 'You live very well, Nellya Dmitrievna, very well indeed. You have a house in Moscow, the best dacha to be found within ten kilometres of Barviha, a fine home on the Black Sea, you get priority seats for any theatre, any spectacle: you have access to

the best shops, and anything you want done is done at once. You have the use of a large car and as many servants as you can find work for. Not many live like that. You wouldn't want to lose any of it, would you?

'You forgot to mention one thing, Anatoly Michailovich,' said Nellya quietly. 'For all that, there is one penalty. I have to live with you.'

They turned off the main road at a second 'No Entry' sign. Here the police, alerted by telephone, raised the barrier the moment the Zil appeared. The car roared up a perfect surface without one crack or pothole from the winter's frosts, and in through imposing iron gates, thrown open as they approached.

They drove sedately up the long drive. In a wide swath where the forest had been cleared and gentler deciduous trees and bushes planted, stood an imposing mansion, Palladian in style yet, with its ochre red and sienna paint and its carved wood balustrade, redolent of France or colonial America.

Standing on the balcony, one hand on the rail of the balustrade, was Eugenia Matveyevna. Next to her, smiling indulgently, was her husband, Yevgeni Ivanovich Daranov. In front of them, on the gravel, dwarfed by the six Ionic columns of the portico, was a bizarre sight. A dozen women and a single man, the man dressed in black, the women in close-cut dresses of pale lemon and orange, pranced and posed with exaggerated gestures to music that blared from two loudspeakers.

They stood and swooped and swung and swivelled in perfect drill order more like gymnasts than mannequins, but then this wasn't an ordinary dress show, nor were the participants ordinary models. The lead was an actor, the women, all young and vivacious, were actresses, and this was just one of the little 'shows' that Eugenia Matveyevna so loved to put on.

The Zil turned right to avoid the parade and stopped. The two occupants got out and stood staring at the spectacle. Safronov put on his shy, intellectual smile and raised his hand in salute to Secretary Daranov and Eugenia Matveyevna on the balcony. Then he glanced at his own wife. Nellya Dmitrievna rocked back on her heels, twisted her chubby face into a smiling grimace, and slowly and very deliberately, as if every movement hurt, clapped her gloved hands together.

They walked around the models, up the six stone steps, past the base of the columns and in through the open French windows. Lighting and audio equipment stood stacked to the side of the door, cables snaked across the floor. Men and women, mostly young, wearing jeans and with leather jackets or thick pullovers over their sweat shirts, milled around in apparently aimless confusion. Cries of 'darling' mingled with the smell of tobacco, and although Nellya Dmitrievna treated the scene with an indulgent glance, that wasn't her true feeling. 'Krasnaya people,' she muttered contemptuously, for Krasnaya was the favourite area for the acting profession to have their dachas.

They crossed the hall, climbed the stairs and entered the long drawing-room that spanned the whole width of the portico and looked so resplendent with its deep windows, China blue walls, polished wood floor and fine, richly coloured, Shrivan carpets from the Caucasus.

Here the people were more varied. There were still Krasnaya people, but the groups that stood and talked and sipped their Bryansk water or apricot juice included scientists, people Nellya Dmitrievna might have called Abramtsevo people, a couple of writers and, to keep the balance, a sprinkling of military and Kremlin men whose sombre mufti looked so stark and old-fashioned beside the rest of the gathering.

Eugenia Matveyevna came in from the balcony to welcome the newcomers. She put her arms around the bundle of furs and gave the cold, rosy face a perfunctory kiss.

Daranov grasped Safronov's arm and led him across the room away from the others.

'Thanks for coming. I know dress shows aren't your forte.' He dropped his voice. 'I need a brief on Project Blue Snow for the May meeting. Simple, concise and to the point. All that we know, Anatoly Michailovich, about this worrying business, in a nutshell.'

Safronov gave a rueful smile. 'All that we know, Comrade Secretary-General, would go in a nutshell. In the shell of a very small hazelnut.'

Daranov ignored the KGB Chairman's deprecating remark and the gloomy face. This was Safronov professionally covering himself. Daranov was perfectly aware of all the information. It was scant but sufficient for a report. Certainly sufficient for a report to startle the Politburo.

'I want you to stay behind afterwards. I've arranged a private meeting with Marshal Bukovsky and Academician Yerokhin.'

'Do you want everything in this brief?' asked Safronov, his pale blue eyes seeking those of the Secretary-General. '*Everything, including the Kvali alert?*'

Daranov looked thoughtful. At last he said, 'No one there will know anything about it. For all but you and me, it will be the first time they hear the words, "Blue Snow".' He returned the look, staring into Safronov's eyes. 'It's a most complicated subject, Anatoly Michailovich. The implications are as various and complex as they are vast. Once it percolates down, I can see the Navy saying, "Now it is all up to us and our SS-N6 missiles." I can see Marshal Kvitsinsky crying out that in the circumstances his strategic rocket forces must . . .' He paused, then added, 'All I can say is make it simple. As simple as possible.'

Safronov hadn't questioned how simple he should make the report, but what he should put in and, more to the point, what he should leave out. The fine judgement was obviously to be in his hands. He would keep the Kvali alert out.

Together, like dancing partners, they moved slowly towards the far corner of the room. There, half obscured by a massive bookcase, three easy chairs and a small table were kept clear and unoccupied. Should any guest go there uninvited, he or she was instantly moved away by one of the security men who were always present. There were moments when the most powerful man in Russia needed to remain with his guests yet have the peace and relative quiet to discuss important matters without resorting to his study.

This was such a moment. Daranov's desire to talk about the brief for the May meeting was matched by his wish to know about Kvali.

The two men sat and for a while said nothing, both watching the people in the room.

'And Kvali?' asked Daranov, not turning his head but staring into the glowing log fire.

'As you requested, Comrade Secretary-General, Kvali has been alerted.'

'Good.' After a while Daranov murmured, 'So the quiet, deep furrow is wide awake and ready to start singing.'

Safronov nodded. 'And the song is Blue Snow.'

Daranov got up, collected a jug of apricot juice and refilled both

their glasses. 'Let's drink to it,' he said and held up his glass. Safronov looked at the syrupy, ochre-coloured liquid and thought enviously of Oleg Sergeyeovich. He hoped his driver, in the bowels of the dacha, was enjoying a stronger, more rewarding beverage.

The music had changed. When the Zil had arrived, the models had been performing to something truly Russian: Tchaikovsky's 'Marche Slave' and Mussorgsky's 'The Great Gate of Kiev'. Now the mood was different. For leather, it was all Western stardust and decadence. Cole Porter and Gershwin: 'Night and Day' and 'Summertime'.

There was an exodus towards the balcony, which soon became crowded. However democratic and informal the gathering, when the Secretary-General and the KGB Chairman rose from their corner and made towards the French windows, the throng parted like the waters of the Red Sea. Without having to exert themselves, the two Politburo men were suddenly at the front, their hands on the balustrade, looking down upon the dress parade below.

Eugenia Matveyevna tapped her feet, clapped excitedly, then grasped her husband's hand. Safronov, whether by accident or design, found himself some way from Nellya, and made no effort to join her. Instead he looked down with what seemed academic, almost bored interest at the proceedings beneath him.

Safronov had expressed no particular wish to come today. So far as anyone knew, his visit had been a business one. Secretary Daranov wished to see him as a matter of urgency. Now he was watching a dress show with all the lack of interest his long face could muster. To all appearances he was being polite, passing away the time until he could reasonably get back into his Zil and go on to his own house in the country, the dacha near Barviha.

He was watching the models or, as he knew them to be, the actresses. The Krasnaya people. He knew several, some quite well, but there was one in particular whom his eyes sought out and who he hoped would be here today. He was not disappointed. She was at the very back and, being taller than those around her, stood out.

She was at ease, yet not at ease. Allowing for the adrenalin

pumping through all their veins when appearing in front of the leader of the Soviet Union and his wife, she appeared as relaxed as anyone, but to those who knew her, she was tense and watching. She had a calmness and an expression that compelled men to look at her. Her lips always settled into a smile, her green eyes, with their suggestion of Oriental silk, burned, her nose was broad and her face had a flat beauty that always reminded Safronov of the Eastern Republics, even of Mongolia. Yet she had assured him on several occasions that she was pure Magyar.

Now her eyes were brighter than usual, her smile less.

'Zoya . . .' murmured Safronov, and it seemed as if the woman heard the voice above the Gershwin, for she raised her head towards the balcony and for an instant the endemic smile brightened and dimples pitted her cheeks.

Safronov gave a fleeting nod. He was warmed that that special signal, transmitted in the blinking of eye, had been directed towards him and that only he had been equipped to receive it.

He knew her as Zoya. Zoyenka. But he knew too that that wasn't her name. Indeed, he knew just about everything about her, for Zoya, like Oleg Sergeyevech, worked for him personally, and for anyone who did that there was a special dossier in the cabinet in his office in the Lubyanka.

Zoya's dossier was filed under Sándor, Erzsébet.

His murmur of 'Zoya' had been soft, discreet and barely perceptible, but his lips had moved. Nellya Dmitrievna had been hiding her boredom and anger ten feet away. She had sensed that her husband, when joining the others on the balcony, had deliberately kept clear of her, and in spite of the people standing between them, had kept a watch on him. She had seen his lips move and although unable to decipher the exact word, had got the sense and rhythm. She had followed the gaze and spotted the woman. Her actions were instinctive and over in a second.

Back in the Zil, the moment they were out of the gates, Nellya let her feelings burst out.

'Is it Kapa?'

'Kapa?'

'Yes, it is Kapa? You know, is it Kapa short for Kapitolina?'

Safronov looked puzzled. His long, drawn face screwed into a frown. 'I'm afraid I don't understand you.'

'What about Vera?'

'Is this some sort of game?'

'Maria?'

'But for the fact that you were with me, Nellya Dmitrievna, I would have thought that you had been drinking with Oleg Sergeyevich.'

'When you were on the balcony pretending to watch that absurd dress show, all you were really doing was watching *that woman*.'

Safronov said nothing. It was all too petty and tedious to bother his head about. He should have got divorced long ago. Now it wasn't so easy. Secretary Daranov disliked top people getting divorced as much as he disliked them drinking vodka.

'You looked at that woman and spoke her name.'

Safronov gave a sardonic laugh. 'There you make a great mistake, Nellya Dmitrievna. You've let your narrow, shallow little mind run away with you. When I was with the Secretary-General, we discussed some old Party matters. Many years ago in Georgia there was a liberal newspaper, we were trying to remember the name. It came to me while I was watching the dress show.'

'What a strange place to remember the name of a newspaper,' said Nellya sarcastically, and her small, *retroussé* nose rose as if she was smelling something particularly unsavoury.

'Memory plays strange tricks . . .'

'Yours evidently does.' She paused, then said, 'What was the name of the newspaper that reminded you of the girl?'

'Kvali,' said Safronov simply.

Nellya knew that her husband was lying, but admired his ingenuity. 'Kvali' nowhere near fitted the movement of his lips as she still remembered them.

## 10

Lady Eleanor looked better. Her cheeks had a hint of colour, her face more flesh, there was a touch of spring in her step, and she appeared to be eating well. She kept up her businesses and potted in the garden and Oliver, who whenever he was at

Priors Hurst watched his mother most studiously, decided that whatever had upset her had gone, or was in the process of going. But then, as Lady Eleanor herself proclaimed when Oliver broached the matter of her improved health, how could one possibly feel ill with such a glorious early summer?

All the house windows were open. The weekend weather forecast was good, high pressure was building over the British Isles, and the roads were filling with traffic. Priors Hurst was an oasis between two of the major arteries that both fed London and allowed the weekend exodus.

Oliver had come down late on Friday night; his father had made a surprise appearance the same evening and announced that, for the next few days, the nation's foreign affairs could run themselves. Saturday teatime, Sophia had arrived. Lady Eleanor's response to these unexpected invasions was to leave her Hempminster shop in Molly's hands and stay at home.

Oliver had a deckchair on the lawn. Ostensibly he was reading a brief about a potential client, in fact he was listening to the cuckoo, and observing any number of other natural phenomena from the high-flying swifts, dark, fast-moving specks in the bright sky, to the young rooks testing their wings in the only elm to have escaped the ravages of the Dutch beetle.

'You're a lazy hog. You always tell me that whenever you're down here, you do a dawn patrol. I've watched you from the window, you haven't moved in the last hour.'

Oliver turned his head. His sister was standing, staring down at him. He glanced at his watch. 'If I said that Lone Wood was awash with bluebells at eight this morning and that where the sun slants into the trees I saw holly-blues dancing, would you be able to fault me?'

Sophia tilted her head and smiled.

'While you, my dear sister, were still abed, I was keeping the IRA and Colonel Gadaffi's lot away.'

She was tall and thin, like Oliver and her mother. Physically, there seemed little of their father in her. Except perhaps his brain. She had a good brain and if she hadn't chosen to become a doctor, she'd have made a good lawyer. Like Sir Adrian, she had few flights of fancy. For Sophia, things were very much matters of fact.

The sounds of a Chopin Mazurka suddenly swelled out into the

garden. Oliver sat upright, the cuckoo unheard, the swifts unnoticed, the rooks forgotten. He jumped to his feet. 'Chopin!' he said, holding his breath, then looked at Sophia. 'But which Mazurka?'

'It's only Daddy. What's all the fuss . . . ?' began Sophia, when Oliver put a finger to his lips.

'I reckon . . .' said Oliver slowly, 'that that's Opus 41, Number 1. In which case we've got some way to go.'

Sophia stared at her brother. 'Do you mind telling me exactly what all this is about?'

'Do you recognise the pianist?'

'No. Should I?'

'That's Stefan Sliwinski, and unless I'm very much mistaken, this is the tape he gave them when he came down here for that concert.'

Sophia gave a fake yawn.

'There's one . . . two . . . three . . . four more Mazurkas to go, then we have the faulty one.'

Oliver took his sister's hand and led her nearer the open window. He sat on the grass and indicated to Sophia to sit beside him. 'We've got a little while to wait, so we may as well be comfortable.'

Again Sophia was looking straight into his face. 'Oliver, are you sure you're all right? You've been saying some very funny things, you know, ever since I got here. All that on the phone about Mummy being terminal, and then when I see her, she's galloping about like a young lamb. And now some strange burlblings about a faulty tape.'

'Mother has been ill, very ill. You ask Robin.'

'I do know something about illness . . .'

'Sure, I'm not saying you don't, but if Mother had come to your surgery just a month ago, you'd have thought as I thought. Robin got her to go to her doctor. It's since then that she's looked a bit better.' Oliver paused, then said, 'What do you really think of her?'

There was a pause in the music. Oliver listened intently. A new Mazurka flooded across the daisies. Oliver nodded to himself; so far the tape was on course. 'One more to go,' he whispered, then remembered his unanswered question. 'What do you really think of Mother?'

'I don't know . . .' said Sophia doubtfully. 'It might be just a

deficiency.' Suddenly the tone of her voice changed. 'Anyway, if she's seen her own doctor . . .'

The Mazurka finished, another started. They heard their father coughing. Sir Adrian came and stood at the window and saw them sitting on the lawn.

'Not too loud, I hope?'

Oliver asked if the pianist was Stefan Sliwinski.

Sir Adrian nodded to the gentleness of the music.

'Opus 63, Number 3 in C sharp minor,' announced Oliver, loud enough for his father to hear.

Sir Adrian sat on the window-seat, the empty pipe he sucked when devoid of cares gripped firmly between his teeth.

Oliver watched his father. The atmosphere was too dreamlike, too bizarre to be other than a dream, yet it wasn't. The hot, early summer sunshine, the bees droning over the clover, the hawthorns heavy with bud and the blossom about to burst forth, and above all that, Stefan Sliwinski, that swarthy little genius with the dark eyes that glowed from beneath an overhanging brow, a sort of Polish Napoleon, now probably filling the Carnegie Hall while his recorded music lifted the English country air, were all real.

Through it all, Oliver sat on the grass and waited for a blank in the tape which he had tried to forget about but failed, and which, as his father sat sanguine and contented in the window, he was now beginning to believe must have been nothing but a mental aberration.

Perhaps Sophia was right. Perhaps he was going off his head. That icy South Atlantic ducking had done more to him than he had imagined. The shock had been delayed, the suffering was yet to reach its peak. He would be committed by men in white coats and penned in a padded, soundproof cell, and for the sake of a statesman's career, his father would hush it all up . . .

Opus 63, Number 3 in C sharp minor, called Mazurka Number 41 and written in 1846, came to an end.

'Now!' said Oliver and held his breath.

He was expecting forty-seven seconds of silence, three-quarters of a minute, and then the Opus 50 already in full flood. He waited, watching his father intently to see how he would react.

The music was so soft, the notes of the piano so muted, Oliver was taken unawares. He was hearing it, yet he was not hearing it. He was back in that dreamland where the butterflies flitted

around the japonica and the Polish Napoleon was wondering why he was such an idiot.

There *was* Chopin and it emanated from the window of his father's study. His father was sitting in the sun with his eyes closed listening. Sophia was staring at her brother with a look of complete bewilderment. It was then that Oliver admitted to himself that he could hear a piano.

He was sitting on real grass on the edge of a real lawn and that last Mazurka on the tape, Opus 50, Number 3 in C sharp minor, known as the Number 32, *existed in its entirety*. There was no gap, no obliteration, and the recording had started on time.

Oliver put his hands to the side of his head and pressed his ears as if he would crush his own skull. He shook his head and held back the tears. He felt sick at heart and infinitely foolish, until he thought. Then he decided that his feelings weren't so much those of foolishness as of helplessness.

'I played it to Robin,' he murmured. 'He heard it.'

'Perhaps you should see *your* doctor?' said Sophia gently.

'There was a gap. I measured it, Robin heard it!'

'Perhaps it wasn't the same tape?' Sophia put a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. 'Yes, that's it. It wasn't the same tape.'

Sophia got up and walked back into the house. Opus 50 played on, rising to its minor crescendos and falling again.

Oliver heard the noise of feet on the gravel. He turned his head. His mother was walking towards him smiling.

'It's such a lovely day,' observed Lady Eleanor brightly. 'It makes one appreciate just how wonderful it is to be alive.'

Lady Eleanor stopped, tilted her head as if listening, then continued her walk across the lawn. She stopped by one of her rose-bushes, cupped a bud in the palm of her hand, and examined it with all the love, concern and interest that she might have displayed upon suddenly discovering the origins of life.

The tape ended. Sir Adrian got up and came out of the house. It was only eleven but he had a glass in his hand. He held the glass up to the sun. 'It's going to be a real scorcher,' he announced. 'An absolute scorcher.'

'Was that the tape given you by Stefan Sliwinski?' asked Oliver.

'Ah, so you know he gave us one?'

Oliver observed his father most carefully, but could discern no trace of discomfort.

'He told me, when I had that chat with him, just before he left.'

As I'd missed the best part of his recital taking Mother upstairs, I was to be sure and listen to the tape he'd given you both.'

Sir Adrian showed mild surprise, raising his eyebrows, then said he must get himself a deckchair.

## 11

Normally Oliver would have driven right to the studio. As it was, he was so conscious of the tape, he parked the car half-way along the Albert Embankment and dived into the warren of streets that made up the west edge of Lambeth and the beginnings of Vauxhall. He zigzagged his way towards the arches that flanked the station, occasionally stopping to glance back over his shoulder.

He'd stopped half a dozen times before the irrationality of his actions dawned upon him. He was carrying an apparently innocent tape, yet he was acting as if he had in his possession some earth-shaking secret and was being chased by half the KGB. It was, he told himself, all a matter of guilt. He was the small boy with something that belonged not to him but to his father.

Yet the tape of Chopin's Mazurkas, played by Stefan Sliwinski and given to his parents, had been there for anyone to take. That is anyone who had ventured into Sir Adrian's study. It had stood neatly in the rack with all the other tapes. In the drawer there was nothing, not even at the very back amidst the pencil shavings and tobacco dust. The tape, the only tape, was no longer tucked away in secret but a proud part of the house collection. Oliver told himself that he was only borrowing it for a day at the most.

Tony Playfair's recording studio was one of the more salubrious of the studios in the arches beneath the tracks of British Rail. When Oliver entered, Tony was at the CDU, editing. Oliver put the tape in front of him. 'Nothing to do with Parigi and Crawford,' he said. 'This is personal. There's something odd about this tape. Someone may have tampered with it. Erased a bit and then re-recorded.'

Tony picked up the tape, read the dedication and saw the photo of Sliwinski. 'Chopin. I'm no expert on Chopin, but we can have a look.'

Tony played the tape. It was ready wound to play the last half of Opus 63, Number 3 in C sharp minor. Tony responded to the music, smiling, moving his hands gently in front of him, his sensitive face, with that fleshiness so common among gays, alive and alert.

Opus 63 ended. Oliver held his breath. But it was exactly as it had been in the garden. After the regulation five seconds, Opus 50 came up dead on time, started at the beginning and played perfectly.

'Sounds perfect to me,' said Tony.

'Could someone have re-recorded?'

Tony grimaced. 'It would show. Without the right equipment it would be a devil of a job to make a perfect patch. If there wasn't a bloody great click, at least there'd be a difference in levels.' He paused, then said, 'But just to satisfy you, let's analyse the thing properly.'

Tony rewound the tape, and passed the signal into the CDU. He talked the music through, turning up the levels as he went. They passed from Opus 63 to Opus 50 and the screen showed nothing out of the ordinary. Just the music, the notes of the piano.

Tony rewound the tape and did a timed run. There was no break in the shape of the music. Tony froze several frames; the result was always the same.

'No mush, no horrible background,' said Tony. 'No break, no sudden change of levels. That's a brand new tape, never used before.' He ran the tape back and indicated the five seconds of blank between the Mazurkas, freezing the frame as he did so. On the CDU the glowing green line was still. 'As clear as a bell. In decibels we're a long way down, it would be hard to get a tape much more virginal than that.'

'So no one's tampered with it?'

Tony shook his head. 'That's a perfect recording. Couldn't be better.'

Oliver let out his breath in a long, rumbling, expellant sigh and slowly shook his head. 'There was a gap. It wasn't just a dream or my imagination. I measured it!'

They stood looking at one another for a moment, then very gently Tony said, 'Sorry to disappoint you, but there's only one possible solution. It must have been another tape you listened to.'

Sophia had said the same thing.

\*

He was going to write but he couldn't take his eyes off the phone. He tried to forget the instrument by doing odd jobs about the flat, but he wasn't fooled, he knew it was there. He switched on the television, tried the four channels and switched it off again. He put on a record and tried to read the papers but, just to remind him of its existence, the phone rang. It was a friend. At the end of the call he sat looking at the instrument for half an hour, then he picked it up and dialled. Robin was neither in his mess nor in his quarters, so Oliver left a message.

Robin rang back late; it was midnight in Germany and his temper was short; 'If it's about Mother, make it snappy. Sophia tells me she's better. If it's about that blasted tape, I advise you to forget it. You're wasting your time, it's just not worth the effort.'

'Just one thing, Robin, one thing. You listened to that tape with me in the car on the way to Lyneham. You heard the gap.' Oliver waited. He sensed the fuming that was going on at the other end of the phone. 'You heard that gap of forty-seven seconds.'

'I don't know how long the blasted gap was . . .' Robin's voice was drawn out with tiredness. 'I didn't measure it, you did.'

*'But you heard it?'*

'Of course I bloody well heard it. I couldn't have done anything but hear it. If you remember we had to pull in and listen to it, then after that we talked endlessly about it, or rather you did.' Robin took a deep breath. 'Now, are you satisfied?'

*'Perfectly.'*

Robin was taken unaware. 'You are?'

*'Of course I'm satisfied. More than satisfied.'*

'And that's all you wanted to know, that I heard the gap in the tape?'

*'That's all I wanted to know.'*

*'All?'*

*'Absolutely all.'*

'I'm glad I was useful,' said Robin sarcastically. 'I'm glad the call hasn't been wasted.' He hung on to the phone when he could have put it down. In spite of the late hour and his shortness with his younger brother, he was intrigued. 'Why the question in the first place? You knew I heard that damned tape, you were with me. You put it on.'

*'Because there isn't a gap in the tape now.'*

*'There isn't a what?'*

'No gap. Dad played it last weekend. He played it with the window open for us all to listen to. Whereas you and I heard a gap, Sophia and I didn't. Each Mazurka followed the next in perfect order, none more so than Opus 50 following Opus 63.'

'Is this some sort of game?'

'Not that I know of.'

Robin thought for a second, then said, 'In that case there must be *two* tapes.'

'That's what Sophia and Tony Playfair said.'

'Who's Tony Playfair, for God's sake?'

Oliver told him. 'He swore that the tape I showed him, the one Dad played to us all in the garden, was as pure and virginal as the driven snow. No one had tampered with it, no one had re-recorded anything over the original. It was dear old Stefan Sliwinski in all his perfect glory.'

'Have you spoken to Father about it?'

Oliver gave a sardonic laugh. 'How can I, when I nicked it out of his drawer?'

Robin grunted. 'I forgot . . .' He paused then added, 'Rum business, damned rum business.'

'While we're on rum business,' said Oliver, 'why should there be *two* tapes? Why should a famous pianist give his host two tapes, one with a gap in it and the other one perfect?'

'It's getting late,' announced Robin wearily, and changed the subject.

Oliver rang his mother three times that week but she was neither at home nor in either shop. There was nothing suspicious in that for Lady Eleanor was a woman of movement. In attending sales and visiting prospective buyers, she did a considerable amount of travelling. Nevertheless, Oliver was worried. His worries were as irrational as his actions in his father's study, but they helped to precipitate his return to Priors Hurst.

His first sight of his mother shocked him. The Indian summer of her health had gone. She was as listless and tired as she had been a month ago. As usual, but for the housekeeper and the policeman, she was alone. Oliver sat beside her in the sitting-room, staring at the old, unburned log fire in the grubby hearth, now littered with torn paper and fallen soot. He had a lot to say but so far had managed nothing but small talk. It was his mother

who, in spite of her evident frailty, had made most of the running.

'You seem to be always down here now, Oliver, dear,' observed Lady Eleanor. 'It's nice for us to have you, and of course, Priors Hurst will always be your home, but I do hope your frequent appearances haven't some deeper significance.' She paused, then added quite delicately, 'You haven't by any chance lost your job have you?'

Oliver shook his head.

'So Parigi and Crawford are still pleased with you?'

'So far as I know.'

'And your poor, dear father hasn't got to venture into the employment agency business yet again?'

'I've never known you take so much interest in my welfare, Mother.'

Her response was to tighten her grip on her son's hand and say that she was tired. She was going to bed at once and in ten minutes he could come up and read to her.

Oliver found her sitting up, a thick cardigan wrapped around her shoulders, the bedside lamp throwing a pale glow across her face, accentuating the pallor of her skin rather than diminishing it, and a P. D. James book, open and held out ready for him. He began reading and his mother shut her eyes.

He had read a couple of pages and thought she was asleep, but the moment he stopped, she opened her eyes, sat upright and asked him to read more. Oliver went on reading, but his thoughts were elsewhere.

His sudden appearance at Priors Hurst was not simply to check on his mother and return the recording of the Chopin Mazurkas. This time he was determined to talk about the enigma of the tapes. His problem was to catch his mother before she got too tired and then pin her down.

Very deliberately Oliver stopped reading and closed the book. 'I rang the shops three times last week hoping to get hold of you. Each time I got Molly. She said she didn't know where you were.'

Lady Eleanor opened one eye. 'What's so surprising about that?'

Oliver shrugged. 'In business hours she usually knows where you are. In the past she's always told me where the sale is. That sort of thing.'

Lady Eleanor remained silent. Oliver glanced at his mother's face. It was haggard and drawn, the eyes were glazed, the breath laboured. All the old energy had gone, Lady Eleanor epitomised illness. Oliver made an inspired guess. 'I wondered if you were going somewhere . . . to the hospital perhaps, for some sort of treatment . . . ?'

'Treatment!' She didn't move, but her expression changed and Oliver knew he had hit home.

'You're not well. You haven't been well for months. I thought you might be going to the hospital for treatment. Knowing you, you wouldn't tell anyone, but just get on with it.'

There was a long silence. Oliver had no idea what to expect. His mother's response, when it came, took him by surprise. In a voice scarcely above a whisper, her lips hardly moving, she said, 'I go to the hospital twice a week.'

There was no sense of pity or drama in the voice, just the bare statement, but Oliver found himself swallowing hard and the old empty, sinking feeling was back in his stomach.

'Why in the hell didn't you tell us?'

Lady Eleanor let out a great sigh. 'I do wish you wouldn't keep on pestering me, Oliver, dear, and would get on reading. I do so love P. D. James.'

Oliver stared at his mother, challenging her to meet his gaze. 'What's wrong with you, Mother? What exactly is it?'

She moved her arms in a vague gesture. 'Nothing really . . . nothing much . . . what they call a growth. A tumour.'

'Where?'

She tapped the bedclothes somewhere over her abdomen then, apparently satisfied with the information she had imparted, visibly relaxed, her shoulders slipping deeper into the pillows.

'A tumour?'

Lady Eleanor nodded. 'Lots of people get them, particularly at my age.'

The thought of cancer had never occurred to Oliver. He was twenty-seven; at that age no one thought about cancer. Even now he was quite satisfied to let the tumour be. He presumed that tumours could be cut out and that was the end of it.

'Does it mean an operation?'

'Possibly . . .'

'What are they doing now?'

'Giving me a few drugs. That's what's making me so tired.'

'If only you'd had the sense to tell us, someone . . . one of us could have driven you to the hospital.'

Lady Eleanor smiled. The obvious remained unspoken. Who could have driven her to the hospital? Her husband was seldom here, the rest of the family had their own homes.

Oliver picked up the book and read to the end of the chapter. Again he put the book down and very deliberately closed it. This time his mother didn't ask for more, but thanked him.

'Stefan Sliwinski gave you and Dad a tape of himself playing Chopin's Mazurkas. Dad played it the other Sunday when Sophia was here and we were all in the garden. You were there so you heard it. Think carefully, did you ever hear that tape before?'

Lady Eleanor frowned. 'Whatever are you talking about, Oliver?'

'Tell me, it's very important. Did you ever hear that tape before?'

'What an extraordinary question!'

'Either that tape had been tampered with or there are *two* tapes.'

Lady Eleanor said nothing. Her face remained impassive, her eyes closed as if in sleep.

'I played that tape,' said Oliver firmly, 'soon after Sliwinski's visit. There was a forty-seven second gap in it near the end. Between the Opus 63 and Opus 50, the normal break had been extended from five to thirty-five seconds and a further twelve seconds of the last Mazurka had been wiped out!'

'Wiped out? What do you mean, wiped out?'

'Erased.'

'So much fuss over a tape! You really are being most unreasonable, Oliver, most unreasonable. I told you I was tired. You've been very sweet to read to me, now please leave me and allow me to sleep in peace.'

Once again he was the very small boy, creeping into his mother's bedroom to confess. To shed all that guilt and hope for a kiss or a touch of forgiveness. 'I went into Dad's study, opened his drawer and found that first tape at the very back. I played it and it had the gap in it.'

She turned her head and stared at him. 'You went into your father's study and *opened the drawer of his desk?*' she asked in astonishment.

Oliver nodded. 'I know, I know how much he hates it.'

'What else did you do?'

'Played the tape to Robin.'

'And?'

'After that I put the tape back. Then, on that Sunday morning Dad played it, or rather, played what I now presume to be a second tape. That's when I got a hell of a shock. I was sitting there with Sophia waiting for the break when the last Mazurka just sailed straight in and on. I thought perhaps Dad had played it himself, spotted the break and re-recorded or got someone to do it for him. So I checked that out too.'

'How?'

'Took it to a chap we work with at the agency. Tony Playfair. He said the tape had never been touched. Sliwinski's piano was the first thing ever to go on it. There was no mush, no dirt, nothing.'

Her breathing was slow and heavy. Oliver thought she really was asleep, or that her mind had cut off with fatigue. Then very quietly, and in that old, reassuring maternal voice, she said, 'And all this worries you, Oliver, dear?'

'It's obsessed me. Don't ask why, but it has. The only answer I can find is that Sliwinski gave you and Dad *two* tapes, one with a break, the other OK. Why he should have done so, God knows.'

'Perhaps your father played the first tape, found it was faulty and told Sliwinski. Being a gallant Pole, Sliwinski gave your father a second one. Doesn't that sound reasonable?'

Oliver had to admit that it did.

'If you like, if it will make you sleep better, I'll ask your father. I'm sure there must be some quite simple explanation.'

Oliver brightened. His mother was about to solve all his problems.

He was at the door when Lady Eleanor said, in a most gentle, disarming voice, 'That time you went into your father's study to get that first tape, was his drawer locked?'

Oliver shook his head.

Lady Eleanor smiled. 'I'm so glad my son hasn't resorted to picking locks,' she murmured and closed her eyes.

Promptly at eight-forty-five on the morning of Tuesday 20th May, a fleet of large, black Zil limousines began entering the Kremlin through the Borovitskaya Gate. Passing the glittering 'fancy cakes' of the cathedrals and domes of the 'most beautiful palace in the world', the limousines made for the apex near the Arsenal where massive wrought iron gates shield the seat of Soviet Government from the eyes of its own citizens and the rest of the world.

Three floors up, in a section of the Arsenal with windows looking only on to the courtyard, is the room in which the Politburo hold their weekly meetings. Unlike the rest of Moscow, where the scale is massive, the room is relatively small. No more than fifty feet long, it is dominated by the heavy T-shaped, baize-covered table.

Before any of the Politburo entered, secretaries from Daranov's private office already occupied the arms of the T and the two small tables close to the wall. Not only could the Secretary-General be prompted should the need arise, but every word uttered would be written down and recorded.

Of the fourteen who make up the Politburo, only ten were present. They entered through the main door within seconds of each other and ranged themselves on either side of the stem of the table. They opened briefcases, took out files, lit cigarettes, shuffled ashtrays and glasses, talked and waited.

Daranov entered through a side door, almost invisible in the dark panelling, and sat at the head of the table. He looked at each face in turn and only when his gaze had encompassed the whole table did he seem satisfied. He pushed his papers forward on the baize and began in a quiet voice.

Not for four decades had the Soviet Union been faced with a threat of such magnitude. This was the most momentous matter to come before any Politburo since the American experiments with nuclear fission at Alamogordo in the New Mexico desert over forty years ago.

Daranov took a sip of water, glared through the rising clouds of cigarette smoke and to emphasise his point jabbed at his listeners with his finger: 'If the information we have proves correct, that the United States *are* working on a research programme, one step beyond the SDI, codename Project Blue Snow, leading to the ultimate use of high-energy, nuclear-powered lasers, or other somewhat similar devices, operating from space and intended to destroy nuclear warheads *immediately after or upon launch*, that is well within our own environment, then the consequences will be immense and it will be our task to face them whatever the implications!'

There were murmurs around the table. Daranov believed he'd shaken them and handed over to Safronov to present the KGB report. Safronov had made the report simple and concise and, as presented, it might be thought to amount to surprisingly little. Everything depended upon your belief in rumours, your imagination and your acceptance of man's ultimate ability to overcome apparently insurmountable scientific and technical problems as to how great you considered the threat.

There was surprisingly little discussion. The day was warm. The more elderly, the sprinkling of those over seventy-five left over from the previous regime, began nodding off as they usually did. One of those who would have had most to say, a candidate for membership of the Politburo and not yet a full member, Marshal Bukovsky, Minister of Defence, had not been co-opted. He had been bought off and would be at the private meeting later.

Daranov had kept it simple just as he had planned.

The newly promoted secretary for cadres and ideology had been briefed. He proposed a resolution noting the probability of Project Blue Snow, condemning it as a threat to the Soviet Union and world peace and instructing the KGB Chairman to spare no effort in finding out every facet of the programme as speedily as possible. The motion was passed unanimously.

No mention was made of Kvali.

The meeting ended, as so many meetings all over the world end, to allow the real business to be transacted.

At eleven-fifteen, two more large black limousines drove into the northern apex of the Kremlin. A few minutes later two men left the room in which the Politburo had met and together made for

the quiet of the Secretary-General's office. They walked side by side along the long corridor to the lift.

'Thank you for your help, Anatoly Michailovich, it went very well. Better than I expected, but just as I had hoped.'

'Now for the Marshal,' said Safronov grimly.

Daranov nodded. 'Now for the Marshal and what he likes to call "his down-to-earth common sense".'

They met in a large office, the views from its two windows still down into the courtyard, its décor still heavy with dark wood and marble, but now with just a single secretary taking notes instead of four.

Superficially they appeared to be split evenly into two members of the Politburo and two non-members. But the divisions weren't as simple as that. Daranov's closest associate wasn't his fellow Politburo member, Safronov, but Academician Yerokhin. As well as being Daranov's man, the KGB Chairman made sure he had reasonable ties with Marshal Bukovsky.

In spite of the civilities between them, the Marshal was quite aware that Daranov wanted a younger, so-called 'forward-thinking' soldier at the Defence Ministry, but had so far been unable to move the third arm of Soviet Russia, the Army. So Nickolai Vasilyevich Bukovsky, Minister of Defence, at the moment no more than a candidate for membership of the Politburo, sat and glared and tried to decide which of the three faces around the table were hostile and which he might call friendly.

Distrusting both the Secretary-General and his Scientific Adviser, and believing it wise to have an ally, Bukovsky settled for the KGB Chairman. Or, to be more exact, he settled for what he believed to be the only likely opposition to Secretary Daranov and the Academician.

But, of course, the matter of sides was convoluted. Although Secretary Daranov and the Academician were friends of long standing, so far as Blue Snow was concerned, their views were poles apart.

Although not at the Politburo meeting, the Marshal had seen the brief; Daranov had made sure of that. Now he listened to the Secretary-General, a mere boy, his junior by seventeen years, spelling out the devastating effect upon the Soviet Union should the Americans succeed in perfecting a weapon system capable of destroying Soviet ICBMs the moment they emerged from their silos.

They would be hoist with their own petards. The whole length of Russia would be laid waste. It would be the equivalent of a thousand Chernobyls. Medium-range missiles would be at the same high state of risk. Not just the aging SS-4s and SS-5s, but the new darlings of the Army, the SS-20s with their multiple warheads.

'The SS-4s and the SS-5s are one thing, Comrade Secretary-General,' cried Bukovsky, unable to control himself any longer. 'Everyone knows that they are old, lame, sitting ducks, and that's why we must replace them. But the SS-20s are quite a different matter.' His heavy, round face grew darker, his small, dark eyes half closed, his round cheeks rose, and as he spoke he leaned back in his chair and put his hands firmly over the upper part of his stomach. 'The SS-20s are all *on mobile launchers*. Each of the six armies of our Strategic Rocket Force is deployed in a different zone. In an emergency every missile will move to a different, pre-reconnoitred location. Those two factors ensure their complete invulnerability to any pre-emptive strike.'

'This wouldn't be a pre-emptive strike, Comrade Marshal,' said Daranov, matching the soldier's stare. 'I'm not talking about a pre-emptive strike. I'm talking about the destruction of *our* missiles the moment they leave their silos or launchers!'

'They have to *find* the launchers!' cried the Marshal. 'They can't do a thing if they can't find them! We don't have them sitting out on the tarmac waiting. They're in the woods, in the forests, in the quarries!'

Academician Yerokhin gave a wry smile and nodded. 'The Marshal is right, Comrade Secretary-General. You remember, we discussed this very matter. Targeting and communications.' He shook his head. 'I wouldn't like to be given the job of locating and targeting an SS-20 missile so that it could be attacked immediately after launch. That is, in the time you're thinking of.'

'The Secretary-General is out of date,' said Bukovsky, taking the opportunity so unexpectedly offered by the Academician. 'Not only are our SS-20s all mobile, but what about the SS-25s? Don't forget, we've now deployed seventy SS-25s, all *mobile ICBMs*.' He gave the Secretary-General a long, stabbing look, then added, with considerable satisfaction, 'They're going to take some finding, I can tell you. I can't see them being winkled out by any satellite system, not until they are up and away and launching their babies!'

Daranov ignored the Marshal and turned upon his friend the Academician. 'You think no work is going on in America over this, Sergey Allyevich?'

'I didn't say that, Comrade Secretary-General.'

Daranov indicated the KGB Chairman. Safronov cleared his throat and peered at his notes. 'From the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California we have reports of highly classified work on a project, codename Blue Snow, relating to the production of an X-ray laser . . .'

'That still wouldn't meet the Secretary-General's requirements,' said Academician Yerokhin quietly. 'A nuclear-pumped X-ray laser beam would have great difficulty penetrating the earth's atmosphere. The destruction of the missile would have to take place at a height of over 100 kilometers. That's certainly not right over the silos.' He paused, then added, 'Anyway, I've checked up on that one; we know quite a lot about the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory project. It has an official code number 0004.'

'We have two agents operating in the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory,' persisted Safronov, in his toneless voice, 'one in the prestigious "O Group", both exceedingly reliable.'

Academician Yerokhin shrugged. 'I still don't think we should get Project 0004 muddled up with Project Blue Snow.'

'We have reports from the Sandia National Laboratory at Albuquerque, New Mexico . . .'

began Safronov, when the Secretary-General banged the palm of his hand upon the table.

'Bugger the laboratories!' he cried. 'We have information from the Pentagon . . .'

'Disinformation,' said Bukovsky sourly. 'More like CIA disinformation to keep us all on our toes, get us swimming in the wrong direction. I know the Americans. They want us to dissipate our efforts, run down our conventional defences so that they can just walk in.'

The Secretary-General glared at each person in turn. 'Are you all telling me to do nothing? Is that what you're saying? Are you saying that this is no more than a wild goose chase? That no such work is going on in the USA and that if it is, it can't possibly lead to anything?'

'The matter must be checked,' said Safronov solemnly, and glanced at Academician Yerokhin sitting on his right. 'Whatever

the scientists may say it is our duty to check the matter out thoroughly. And that is what we're doing.'

'I'm not against it being checked,' announced Bukovsky. 'Everything must be checked. But if anyone thinks that the Army isn't ready, that it might be taken unawares . . .' He stopped and glared at the Secretary-General.

'It's happened once, Comrade Marshal, in 1941,' said Daranov pointedly. 'It is our duty to see that it never happens again.'

'That wasn't the Army! That was Stalin! The old devil decimated Military Intelligence!'

'In three weeks, Comrade Marshal,' said Daranov, his eyes burning, his forehead furrowed, 'the German panzers pushed 450 miles from Bialystok to Smolensk. I know. I saw the Army run, the Air Force destroyed on the ground. I was only a child of eight when the occupation began!'

'Official channels?' murmured Academician Yerokhin, pouring oil on the troubled waters. 'Why not try official channels? After all, a lot of things do work through official channels. The question could be put to the Americans. We know most of the things they are doing, they know most of the things we're doing. We have a pretty good idea of the way each other is thinking.'

'Bring it up at your next summit meeting, Comrade Secretary-General,' chuckled Bukovsky, with enough sarcasm to ensure that his true feelings weren't missed. 'Since you're now so friendly with the Americans, I'm sure you'll be able to solve the whole matter there.'

Daranov turned away from the Marshal and addressed the other two. 'The matter has already been tabled unofficially,' he announced blandly. 'But we've got nowhere. At the Geneva arms control talks, Comrade Karpov has twice put the matter of Project Blue Snow, in private, to his opposite number, the head of the American delegation, Max Kampelman. So far as I remember the American answer was to the effect that we'd just spent a weekend in Disneyland.'

There was silence. Suddenly the Marshal leaned forward with his arms spread on the table and said, 'Comrade Secretary-General, you're wasting your time and ours. For your project to have any meaning there has to be full satellite surveillance.' He stopped and looked questioningly at the Academician. Yerokhin nodded.

'You forget Gamut One. Two hydrogen bombs exploded up beyond the atmosphere and we've put the whole of their satellite surveillance system out of action. We would do it now with their existing DSP East and DSP West. We can do it with anything else they care to put up there.'

Daranov folded up his papers. It was the signal that the meeting was ending. Academician Yerokhin glanced at Safronov. 'So, for the moment, the matter is to be left in the hands of the Minister of State Security?'

The Secretary-General nodded. 'The Minister has already put certain matters in train. In a few weeks we should know more. I hope the next time we meet, Comrade Safronov will have something very specific to report.'

The Marshal nodded. He didn't like the subject and doubted whether Project Blue Snow existed, believing it to be no more than another figment of the new Secretary-General's fertile imagination, but that said, he did like the way the matter was being handled. The triumvirate that ruled the Soviet Union, the Party, the KGB and the Army, were all represented. That was exactly how it should be. Too often these days the Army was left out. Nevertheless, in spite of his misgivings about Project Blue Snow, he resolved to make a phone call the moment he got back to his office.

The three black Zil limousines swept out of the Kremlin through the Borovitskaya Gate. One returned to the Kurchatov Institute, a second to the ochre-coloured KGB building in Dzerzhinsky Square and the third to the Defence Ministry on the corner of Frunze Street. Immediately he was inside his office, the Marshal put a phone call through to a drab, nine-storey building on the edge of the Khodinka airfield, the old central airport of Moscow. After a short wait, during which he tapped the tips of his fingers impatiently on the desk, he was able to speak with the Deputy Chief of the General Staff.

'Are you busy, Tovarishch Konstantin?'

'There's always work, Comrade Marshal . . .'

'It's a matter of extreme importance . . .'

Army General Victor Nikolaevich Gurenko remembered. At nine that morning there'd been a meeting of the Politburo, followed by a smaller meeting in the Secretary-General's office.

There were often questions just before and after Politburo meetings. From the tone of the Marshal's voice it was evident that Bukovsky expected Gurenko to go to the Defence Ministry. But Gurenko had no wish to leave his office. Here he was in the centre of his own web where difficult questions could be fended down to deputies. Gurenko hesitated.

'Of extreme importance to national security, *Tovarishch Konstantin.*'

It was the emphasis on the '*Tovarishch Konstantin*' that did it. Gurenko knew that he would have to leave his office.

'You wish to see me, Comrade Marshal?'

'As soon as possible.'

It wasn't the moment to ask more questions. In Gurenko's world, plenty of questions were asked but sometimes not over the telephone, not even in Moscow with scramblers. For besides being Deputy Chief of the General Staff, Gurenko had a far more formidable title, he was Chief of the Second Directorate, better known as the GRU, Soviet Military Intelligence. Even within the High Command, more often than not he was referred to by his official pseudonym, *Tovarishch Konstantin*.

It took just thirty minutes for the General's car to sweep along the cleared lanes and reach the Defence Ministry. It took him another three minutes to reach the Marshal's office on the fifth floor. The moment Gurenko was seated, Marshal Bukovsky got up from behind his desk, lit a cigarette and started pacing the room. 'In essence, stripped of all unnecessary verbiage, the function of State Security is to protect the Soviet Union from *internal* subversion, the function of Military Intelligence is to protect the Soviet Union from *outside* threat. Would you not agree with that, Victor Nikolaevich?

'I would indeed, Comrade Marshal.'

'They are very clear divisions.'

Gurenko nodded, although he had always found the divisions exceedingly blurred. Indeed, as with almost everything in Soviet Russia, the duplications were considerable and deliberate, the long-accepted method of ensuring that no single organ of State gained too much control.

The Marshal stopped pacing the room; he turned and faced the General. 'I have seen no report on Project Blue Snow.' He had sprung the question quickly and unexpectedly.

This was the disadvantage Gurenko had hoped to avoid. Had

this been a telephone conversation in his own office, it would have been monitored by the GRU command post. By now, someone would have prompted him, given his memory a jog. Here he was on his own, at the mercy of the bulky figure of the Minister for Defence.

'Project Blue Snow, Comrade Marshal . . .'

Bukovsky nodded and waited.

Gurenko took a chance. After all, he was the head of Military Intelligence. 'We've had reports, Comrade Marshal, but we doubted their authenticity.'

The Marshal's face brightened. 'Ah, so we do know. Excellent. And you considered the matter disinformation?'

Gurenko nodded.

The Marshal beamed. He remembered his own words at the Kremlin meeting to the effect that they were dealing with disinformation to get them swimming in the wrong direction. It showed how far ahead of the KGB the GRU were in their policy of not circulating misleading disinformation.

'We know what little there is to know, Comrade Marshal. Now it's just a question of checking and double-checking.'

The Marshal nodded. 'Secretary Daranov is worried stiff, but at the moment he appears to be virtually alone. Academician Yerokhin is as sceptical as anyone else. This whole business of detonating nuclear warheads right over their silos seems as fantastic as all the other ideas our new Secretary-General is putting forward these days.'

Gurenko made a mental note: Project Blue Snow must be an extension to the American SDI programme.

'The point is, Victor Nikolaevich, this is not solely a matter for State Security. Indeed, I'm not sure it's a matter for State Security *at all*. Yet that's how it's been left. The KGB are to leave no stone unturned, you know the sort of thing.'

'You shall have a report, Comrade Marshal.'

'As soon as possible. And keep me well briefed. If the Army can make the Secretary-General of the Party and the KGB laughing stocks, so much the better.'

Gurenko left with two promises: one to the Marshal, that he would have a report on his desk by the morning, the other to himself. The moment he got back to his office, the Chief of the Directorate of Cosmic Intelligence would feel the sharpness of his tongue.

Oliver hadn't seen Ilse Lanzmann for six months. When she rang, he was surprised, but pleased, and agreed to meet her at the wine bar at the foot of Villiers Street.

It was a warm May evening and they took their glasses outside. Until one of the tables came free, they leaned against the stone wall and stared at the Victoria Embankment Gardens and the river. Ilse was now a journalist on the *Gazette Diary*. On their second glass, she suddenly came to the point.

'How's the illustrious patriarch?'

Oliver smiled. 'I thought this couldn't be just a social get-together.'

'Don't be hard on me. I've got a living to make. We're not all born with silver spoons.' She spoke with a twinkle for her father hadn't been poor.

'You don't really expect me to tell you anything do you?' asked Oliver. 'Even if there was something to tell, which there isn't.'

'Of course not.'

He'd known Ilse for six years. For a few months she'd been his girlfriend. Now the relationship was one of easy-going, occasional phone calls, occasional meetings. They could pick up a conversation cut off months ago as if it had been started only yesterday.

'There was that bit in *Private Eye* . . .'

'You know *Private Eye*,' said Oliver easily.

'Your father never sued.'

'I doubt if he ever saw it.'

'Everyone who is anyone sees *Private Eye*.'

She lit a cigarette. As she put the cigarette to her lips, Oliver watched first her hand then her face. She could have been Egyptian, Lebanese or even Iranian. In fact she was Jewish. Her dark complexion, Semitic skin and dark eyes contrasted vividly with the dark red of her lipstick. Now she sucked on the cigarette as if it was a life support system.

'You *are* under strain, aren't you?' said Oliver quietly. 'Is that

because you hope to quiz me, or the natural price of being in Fleet Street?’

‘Shall we just say that it’s seeing you again.’

‘Thanks,’ said Oliver laconically. ‘Thanks very much, but you should be on something better than the Diary. You’re too intelligent to waste your time on rubbish like that.’

She sighed and drew on the cigarette. ‘I like to think that it’s not all rubbish and a lot of people *do* read it.’ She looked up at him and smiled. ‘Anyway, with luck this will be my last job. In a couple of weeks it’s off the Diary and on to the Foreign Desk.’ She gave him another flashing smile. ‘So you see, Oliver dear, it all ties up.’

‘What all ties up?’

‘My interest in the Foreign Secretary. In particular, the present incumbent of that august position. There are, of course, stories, besides the bit in *Private Eye* . . .’

‘Look, I know nothing about my father’s private life, and if I did I wouldn’t tell you.’

‘What about his drinking . . .’

‘He likes his claret, always did.’

Oliver supposed he should keep his lips sealed and say no more. However well he knew Ilse, however fond of her he still was, and there were old echoes capable of being reawakened, she was a journalist, a reporter, out to make her living. The logical, sensible way was to buy her another drink and flee, but Oliver wasn’t feeling logical or sensible. His father so obsessed him, he liked nothing more than to talk about him. Indeed, he positively welcomed the opportunity. So he stayed and toyed with the dangers.

‘How are things at home?’

There was such a lot he could say, he had a struggle to rein himself in. In the end he merely shrugged and said, ‘Fine, absolutely fine.’

‘That sounds like a press hand-out.’

Oliver shrugged.

‘What about the Whitehall whispers? Members of the Cabinet not hitting it off with your dad, nasty exchanges, short tempers, the dropping of banana skins. You know the sort of thing. Time for a reshuffle, time for a move. He’s getting stale.’ She stubbed out the cigarette. ‘To use the old adage, there’s no smoke without fire.’

Oliver had certainly sensed plenty of fire, but to mention that to Ilse would be to condemn his own family. He doubted whether he should even tell her that his mother had been ill.

He went into the bar and got the glasses refilled. When he got back she was smoking again, but the moment she saw him, she stubbed the cigarette out.

'What about one tiny crumb for old times' sake? Something I can put a ribbon round and make Sir Adrian the knight in shining white armour?' She looked into Oliver's face. 'After all, if *Private Eye* isn't on to anything with that bit about your father groping the Brazilian Ambassador's wife then throwing up on their best carpet, surely we responsible newspapers should say so?'

'My father is a warm-hearted, home-loving man,' said Oliver with great seriousness. 'His duty to his family is second only to his duty to his country.'

'Not bad, not bad at all,' said Ilse sarcastically. 'But I remember you telling me that you hardly ever saw him?'

'That was when I was at school . . .'

Ilse smiled. 'As one journalist to another, how exactly did you get that photographic job with the Easton newspapers? A lot of people wanted to go to the Falklands.'

'Solely on merit.'

'My God, am I going to get a kiss from my editor for this!' cried Ilse.

Both laughed. People turned and stared.

The wine and Ilse's presence had warmed and disarmed Oliver. He was with a bubbling woman whose natural attractiveness was enhanced by a pure white dress patterned with huge slashes of black. Oliver wanted to please her and searched for what he might say. The tapes, still foremost in his mind, would lead to too many complications. In the end he settled for his mother's illness. It seemed the most innocuous subject to tell the Press.

'The one worry we've had is my mother,' said Oliver vaguely. 'She hasn't been well for some time. However, the last time I saw her she seemed a lot better.'

Ilse made sympathetic noises.

'That's worried us all, particularly my father.'

'You think his drinking and shouting at his Ministers of State has to do with your mother's illness?'

Oliver shrugged. 'Naturally he's concerned.'

Ilse stared at him. 'And the Freemantles haven't any other skeleton in their cupboard?'

'None.'

'You wouldn't say that your father is under any particular pressure?'

'All Ministers are under pressure.'

She kissed him on the mouth, made her excuses and left.

Without her, Oliver felt lost and disturbed. He stayed in the wine bar, had supper on his own and drank a whole bottle of claret. That his father was the subject of public gossip and speculation deeply worried him and brought back all his own fears and doubts. He hoped he hadn't said too much to Ilse but wished he had been able to say more.

The piece appeared in the *Gazette* Diary two days later. It bore little relationship to their conversation, and was full of the usual innuendos. Fortunately the source was not quoted by name but merely given as being near to Sir Adrian. Oliver read the paragraph once then tore it up.

A tall, military-looking man with grey hair, fading blue eyes and large shaggy eyebrows, wearing a light brown suit and a cavalry tie, a red rose in his buttonhole and a rolled umbrella firmly clasped behind his back, walked slowly between the rows of tents on the lawns of the Royal Hospital, Chelsea. He walked slowly yet purposefully, his eyes missing nothing. He particularly enjoyed the stand showing reproduction Victorian conservatories, for he stood and stared at the exhibits until the salesman walked over and handed him a brochure. The military man lingered, enjoying the ornate shapes of the structures, then he waved his umbrella at the salesman and still clutching the brochure went off into the crowds. As he did so, a second man, who had been enjoying the display on the adjacent stand, followed a few yards behind.

The military man stopped to listen to the band of the Grenadier Guards. The music, the scarlet jackets, the bandmaster all combined to bring a pang to the man's heart and tears behind his eyes. A whole kaleidoscope of memories came flooding back, from his days as a cadet at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, through tank battles in the Western Desert and the bocage of

Normandy, to more mature years spent as military attaché in such varied places as Washington and Moscow.

He stood and listened for several minutes, and the man following him stood twenty yards away. Then the military man dived into the big tent and walked slowly along the massed banks of flowers, the man following him keeping his distance as if held by an invisible string. From the interest each took, they might have been gardeners revelling in the riot of colours and scents after such a late and cold spring.

One particularly warm corner attracted the military man. Carnivorous, insectivorous plants vied and gaped in monstrous profusion. Cavernous, shark-teethed mouths grinned and glared in disordered ranks, rising like hideous amoebae from the peat of their birth. They looked like no other plants, no other shrubs, and had rightly been consigned to their own area. In the marquee at Chelsea, they were as Martians amongst mortals. Yet the military man enjoyed them, or appeared to do so. He examined several closely, and even seemed to enjoy the sight of the dead flies trapped and already dissolving in the slowly closing mouths, or the slender remains of their kinsfolk who had long nourished the plants. The sweat on the man's forehead might be thought to be due solely to the warmth of this particular corner of the tent, but that was not so. Colonel Symington had an onerous task to perform and this was the moment and the place in which he must discharge it.

He was leaning forward, looking at a particularly gruesome exhibit, a giant *Dionaea muscipula*, when the brochure he had acquired earlier slipped to the ground. The man who had been following, and who in the last few minutes had closed the gap and was now at the same demoniac stand, bent down and retrieved the fallen literature. After a surreptitious examination, he replaced the brochure in the Colonel's hand. The Colonel looked suitably surprised, muttered his thanks, and moved on.

Nikolai Grigorevich Shepelev, an expert on farm machinery, accredited to the Soviet Trade Mission in London, spent a few more minutes examining the floral exhibits then made his way the length of the tent and out into the May sunshine.

Shepelev sniffed the air with a sense of relief. Handing over the baton was always a tricky moment, but he was pleased that his

dealings had been with the English agent he knew only as Ajax. Ajax was good to work with. He was a military man, as his bearing showed, always wore a red rose in his buttonhole to ensure identification and acted properly and predictably at all times.

Before leaving the Chelsea Show, Shepelev made one more check. He had kept his hand in his jacket pocket, his fingers around the envelope, ever since receiving it. Now he took the envelope out and, concealing it in a newspaper, tore it open. A typed message told him all he wanted to know. He hailed a taxi and, instead of returning to his base in Highgate, told the driver to take him to the Soviet Embassy in Kensington Palace Gardens.

By lunchtime, the KGB undercover Resident at the Embassy, General Yuri Petrovich Zimin, knew that Kvali, the 'quiet deep furrow', was in imminent danger of being compromised.

Zimin's channel of communication was direct to the Minister of State Security. He was fully briefed on Kvali, indeed, he was the controller. His immediate concern was to get the information speedily and securely to Dzerzhinsky Square. He had two choices: coded radio transmission or a courier aboard the afternoon's Aeroflot flight. He picked up the phone and checked with the Aeroflot office that the two seats always kept vacant for his use were still free. On being assured that they were, Zimin made his decision. Instead of passing the information to the cipher officer for radio transmission, he despatched a courier in a diplomatic car for Heathrow.

By eleven p.m. local time, the cry from Kvali was in the hands of the Chairman of State Security.

Like Daranov, upon becoming a Deputy Chairman of State Security Safronov had learned the codenames for the handful of élite agents, men and women chosen as being of extraordinary promise when recruited by the KGB many years ago but encouraged to work their way upwards within their own country before being called upon. Some of the seeds sown at that time were now mighty oaks. Recruited when Britain and America were Russia's allies, they had reached positions of such influence in their national and international scenes as to make agents like Philby, Maclean and Blunt seem midgets. Activated, their value to the Soviet Union could be incalculable.

The day that the Secretary-General had phoned with orders that Kvali should be set singing, Safronov had been left with a quickened pulse and fluttering stomach. The rewards could be enormous, but so could the problems. Kvali wasn't an ordinary, run-of-the mill agent, but a mega-agent. To activate Kvali was like plucking a queen bee from a busy hive.

As he sat at his desk reading the London KGB Resident's despatch, Safronov knew that the problems were already with them. In spite of the lateness of the hour, he had no hesitation in phoning Secretary Daranov at his apartment in the Kremlin.

'Comrade Secretary-General, the Kvali alert has run into difficulties.'

Daranov remained silent, waiting.

'We have a report from the London Resident. Kvali is at risk. There have been a series of minor errors . . .'

'Minor errors, Anatoly Michailovich? *Minor errors?*'

'Not at this end, Comrade Secretary-General, nor at the London Station, but with the agent.'

'Are you saying, Anatoly Michailovich, that at this critical moment we are in danger of losing the most important agent we have?'

'It need not come to that . . .'

'I hope for all our sakes it doesn't!' shouted Daranov angrily. 'You know how important this matter is, Anatoly Michailovich. You were at the Politburo meeting, you were also at the meeting with Academician Yerokhin. You know that the future security of the Soviet Union rests upon the successful unravelling of Project Blue Snow.'

'Fortunately the London Resident has acted immediately on his own initiative.'

'You mean you are putting things right? Is that what you're saying?'

Safronov loathed Secretary Daranov when the Secretary-General put him on the spot. If things went wrong, if the KGB overstepped the mark or were over-zealous, Daranov was the first to let him know. But if the KGB were the least bit slack it was exactly the same. In their relationship, Safronov felt he was always the loser. Yet the KGB was the third arm of Soviet Russia; the Secretary-General couldn't exist without them.

'Action had already been taken,' persisted Safronov. 'More is planned. The matter will be put right. My phone call was to put you in the picture.' His voice changed; pointedly he added,

'Remember, Comrade Secretary-General, the activation of Kvali and the concern over Project Blue Snow were your conceptions.'

'Agreed to by the Chairman of State Security,' said Daranov quickly.

'But not discussed by the Politburo. The Kvali activation has never been tabled.'

'There was no need,' snapped Daranov. 'How many times have the Politburo been notified when an agent has been activated? Never!'

'This isn't an ordinary activation, Comrade Secretary-General, but an *extraordinary* one. Kvali has been deliberately kept silent. To activate Kvali is to invite considerable consequences . . .'

'There are plenty of precedents,' said Daranov soothingly. 'Hundreds. Now tell me, Anatoly Michailovich, tell me what you intend to do? You said that the London Resident had already acted on his own initiative . . . ?' Daranov waited.

'There are new people involved,' said Safronov carefully. 'They are now under close surveillance. In addition, certain illegals, specialists, have been alerted and are standing by.'

'Specialists? Are you talking about the eighth Department of Directorate S?'

'They may well be needed . . .'

Daranov grunted. 'All this thuggery is really necessary?'

'Yes, Comrade Secretary-General, very necessary.'

'Things *have* gone wrong, Anatoly Michailovich, haven't they?' said Daranov, his voice a mixture of sarcasm and disapproval.

'As I said, it was a matter of the agent . . .'

Daranov sighed. 'I leave it all to you, Anatoly Michailovich. I'm sure you know exactly what you're doing. But not too many footprints, please. It's not the time for footprints.'

Safronov wasn't at all sure he knew what he was doing, but he wouldn't have wished the Secretary-General to know. In any case, his path had already been plotted. Where it would lead he wasn't certain, but in the circumstances it was the only path to follow. The KGB General, the undercover Resident in London, had already set the ball rolling. All the Chairman could do was give it another kick. By two in the morning, British Summer Time, the cipher officers at the Soviet Embassies in London, Paris and Bonn were digesting a whole new series of follow-up orders to those initiated earlier by the undercover Resident in London.

\*

Colonel Symington went to the Chelsea Show of the Royal Horticultural Society every year. He was a member of the Society and although no longer a gardener, living as he now did in London, the interest he had acquired during his gardening days in Surrey had never waned. In the sixties and early seventies he had gone to the Show with his wife. He had greatly enjoyed those days and, although she was the true gardener, the Colonel had always enjoyed airing his bit of knowledge in her company and watching her airing her considerable knowledge in the company of those on the stands.

Today's visit had been different. Not only had he had to go alone, something he had done for the last ten years yet never quite got used to, but this time his enjoyment had been apparent rather than real. He thought he had got used to acting, but when it came to the test, he hadn't.

Back in his modest house in a mews off Holland Park, the Colonel was surprised to find that his shirt was wet and he needed a whisky and a bath. He filled the tumbler with twice his normal tot and noticed that his hands were shaking. He drank the whisky in a single gulp, threw his shirt and underclothes into the laundry basket, ran the bath and, in his desire to cleanse himself, almost leapt into the steaming water. In the bath he tried in vain to relax.

In the course of his very varied life, Colonel Frederick, 'Freddy', Kean Symington had been in many difficult and dangerous situations and had always appeared a model of British phlegm and stiff upper lip. He had not only appeared that model, he had *been* that model. His sang-froid had become a signature. Today, however, he felt very different.

He had longed for a bath the moment he had left the tent but at first he hadn't been conscious of feeling dirty or soiled. He had put down his desire to be immersed in water to the heat of the May day and the stuffiness of the marquee. But on the way home in the taxi the truth had become inescapable.

He was a traitor and had become one by default, by failing to stand up for the very principles he himself had once believed to be his Bible. He hadn't been caught at Cambridge in innocent youth, believing that Communism was the only path to the millennium. He had been caught in the simplest possible trap by a red-headed woman in the Metropole Hotel on Karl Marx Prospekt one cold, miserable winter's day when the Moscow sky was

grey and the pavements covered with snow. Only the woman's body was warm. He couldn't remember now whether the woman was beautiful or not, but hoped that she was. He could remember almost nothing of the actual event, only the awful aftermath. An aftermath he should have faced like a soldier and not a coward.

As he lay in the bath and felt the soothing hot water, the Colonel pondered on that one single act of folly. He had extricated himself, saved his career and pension, but at the cost of his soul. What fear was it that had made him trade with the devil? Fear of his wife, of the Ambassador, of the repercussions in England, or just the fear of being thought a fool to have fallen for such a well-worn bait? Whatever it was, it had cost him dear. For once the KGB had you, as the Colonel had discovered, they never let you go.

In purely mechanical terms, today's task had been simple. He had merely acted as a courier. He hadn't had to search Hampstead Heath for a dead-letter box, he'd gone to a favourite event and passed his 'very urgent' information to an 'illegal'. In moral and spiritual terms, however, the task had been traumatic. He had no idea where his action would lead, nor did he want to know. He consoled himself with the fact that he had been no more than a courier, lay back in the bath and contemplated his own toes.

But the Colonel was distressed and, as much as he looked at his toes, he saw something quite different. His bath was the Moskva River, the rim, the Naberezhnaya Morisa Toreza, the wall tiles the old pastel yellow British Embassy, a remarkable example of late-Victorian Russian architecture, with the best views of any building in Moscow. Filling his vision, right opposite across the river, were the glistening, scintillating domes and towers of the Kremlin. Two quite different cultures separated by a cold, often frozen river.

He remembered his excitement on first arriving at the Embassy. The fabulous gold and white ballroom helped transform him into another world. He was in Moscow, a diplomat behind the Iron Curtain. For one who still craved adventure and excitement after the end of the war, Moscow in the fifties, at the height of the cold war, was the place to be. How bitter had been the reality. The British Embassy on Maurice Thorez Quay had turned out to be the worst posting he had ever had.

Oliver was seldom phoned by his father, and never at a quarter to seven in the morning. His father had one of those cool, slow, deliberate, long-drawn-out, matter-of-fact lawyer's voices, requiring the full use of one's senses to discover the emotion. Now the emotion, while certainly not oozing out, was betrayed by the higher tone and the odd, uncharacteristic hesitation.

'I'm glad you're there, Oliver, I wanted to get hold of you before you heard the news.'

'News . . . ?' said Oliver vaguely, staring at the digital clock radio by his bedside.

'I wanted you to hear it from me.'

Oliver stifled a yawn. His father's voice rose a tone.

'It's Robin. He's had an accident. A car accident.'

'A bad one?'

'Very bad, I fear.'

Oliver swung his feet out of bed. '*How bad?*'

'The information I have is that he must have been killed outright.'

'*Killed? Robin killed?*'

Oliver felt the bed sway and an icy chill swathed his body. The muscles of his chest tightened and he found himself half sobbing, half choking. 'Robin killed! Killed!'

'I know, old chap, it's a hell of a shock. A terrible shock.'

'Where?' mumbled Oliver. 'Where . . . how? Where did it happen?'

'In France.'

'I thought he was supposed to be in Germany? What was he doing in France?'

'He was there with a detachment of the 3rd/12th. It's the anniversary of the D-Day landings. His regiment were in Normandy and they always send a detachment back there every year. This time it was Robin's turn.'

'How did it happen?' Oliver asked the question in a flat, almost

disinterested tone. When you were stunned, when your thoughts made no sense and your feelings were in shreds, then you asked another question in the sequence of questions, and you asked it automatically.

'There may have been a tyre failure, a blow-out, we don't know for certain. Whatever it was, his car turned over and caught fire.'

Oliver closed his eyes as if to blot out his own imagination. 'Was he alone?'

'As far as I know.'

Oliver stared at the digital clock. The alarm wouldn't be ringing for another twenty minutes, then he would wake up and find it was all a dream. The red-cheeked, roly-poly boy who no one would ever have thought would make a soldier, who had looked after him, chastised him, helped him, fought him, thwarted him and grown up just in front of him, his brother, was still alive. The voice at the other end of the phone, masquerading as that of his father, was part of the nightmare. It was his own subconscious reacting to all those thoughts and ill feelings he had harboured about the man who had sired him.

But when he looked at the room, it seemed unnaturally real. There was none of the crazy haziness of a dream. His bed, books, pictures, clothes, even the dirty wine glass from last night were all there in their perfection. He was awake and in his flat and the crack in the ceiling was the same length, depth and width as it had been all year.

'I've just got back from Washington. I'm going straight down to Priors Hurst to tell your mother.'

Oliver grunted.

'We're getting Robin's body brought back as soon as possible. We don't want this unhappy event hanging over us.'

Oliver's heart filled, tears were streaming down his cheek. He mumbled something and put the phone down.

Oliver washed, shaved and dressed in a daze. The whole of his childhood paraded before him. He was back in an age when the sky was always blue, the grass green, the days sunny and the people smiling. He played French cricket on the lawn and Robin swung the ball and hit his legs every time. Or did a feint and made him lift the bat. That was when his brother was his hero and pioneered the way.

At prep school Oliver basked in the old, reflected glory of Freemantle, R. who had gone before him. He'd followed Robin to public school too, but there, as he slowly climbed the ladder, the scales began to fall from his eyes and he learned that Robin hadn't been quite so great. Oliver was seventeen before he began to see the warts, and then they had grown in abundance, but now, in his grief, all those warts had fled. Robin was his brother, the man he could always talk to, confide in, and now Robin was dead. Or said to be dead. A charred corpse. It was so hard to believe that Robin could die, for the moment Oliver could only accept that he was said to be dead.

It was on the way to the agency that the reality struck him. He remembered the unexpected squall, the commando next to him saying in his cheerful Glaswegian voice, 'That's good cover, the Argies'll no see us now', the patch of clear blue sky, the sudden bang, the lurch, the beginnings of a downward, spinning disintegration, the occupants of the machine being flung from side to side like rag dolls, the last sight of the camouflage jackets as the cruel, grey waters swirled in over them and engulfed them as they still lived.

He remembered, too, an arm thrust up, a hand groping for life in a last fearful, hopeless gesture, the screams already drowned into horrendous splutters. They were dead, all of them. The only difference between his fellows in the helicopter and his brother, Robin, was that Robin's 'remains' would be brought home.

'Remains' was the right word. Oliver still remembered, with the same stifling nausea, his first sight of the blackened 'remains' of an Argentine pilot in the burned-out wreckage of his Pucara aircraft. The obscenity of a human being transformed into a sticky, black pulp had never left him.

After a sympathetic phone call between Sir Adrian and his opposite number in France, formalities were kept to a minimum, and the authorities in Calvados released the body into the custody of the British Consul in Le Havre without delay. It was flown by the RAF from the old airfield at Carpiquet near Caen to Brize Norton in Oxfordshire.

Such was the efficiency of the diplomatic moves, only six days elapsed between Robin's death and his interment.

It was three Christmases ago that Oliver had last sat in the front south pew with his father, mother and sister and then Robin had been in it with them. Now Robin was on the old trestles, at the east end of the aisle, in a coffin provided by an undertaker in Bayeux but covered with the Union Flag. Oliver thought it an odd juxtaposition of family but, when he considered it further, it was no more odd than having their father here with them.

Lady Eleanor had never looked more frail nor the skin on her face more transparent. Last night, when Oliver had arrived, they had done no more than exchange kisses. She had showed almost no emotion then and was showing none now. Just as Oliver expected, all her tears were inwards. The surface of her pallid cheeks was dry. He thought of her then as Mother Courage, and tried hard to understand how a woman must feel when the creature she has given birth to dies.

In the middle of the last hymn Oliver looked back towards the west door. The nave was packed, there were chairs in the aisles and people stood three deep in the gallery. It was as he was looking at the pews immediately behind the PM that he spotted a surprising face. The FO man who had come to the Sliwinski concert, Lawrence Morley, was at the end of a row staring straight at him.

Oliver couldn't analyse his feelings, nor justify them. All he knew was that the sight of Morley in the little church that morning upset him. He had no valid reason for his reaction, no intellectual argument as to why he should be so uncomfortable, but the appearance of the man, the upright, almost detached way he was standing, the disdain that seemed to emanate from his face, his thin moustache and that slightly supercilious look all added up to make Oliver uncomfortable.

He'd caught Morley's eye and they were staring at one another. In spite of the solemnity of the moment, Oliver knew he mustn't be the first to flinch. So he stood with his head turned, staring,

until Morley gave the flicker of a smile, and the hymn ended. When the congregation knelt, the view between the two was broken.

They went outside for the burial. The vicar said his prayer, a dozen automatic rifles cracked out a volley, a herd of cows stampeded across the water meadow, the poignant tones of the 'Last Post' echoed through the trees and Lady Eleanor threw a handful of earth upon the coffin.

Oliver became conscious how childish his action in the church had been. He had nothing against Morley. The man was a friend and colleague of his father and had every right to be present. Oliver had a sudden human desire to look for Morley and saw him standing a little way from the lich-gate staring at a tombstone. Morley seemed to sense that Oliver had seen him, for he suddenly turned and made a gesture. Oliver walked towards him.

'I'm dreadfully sorry,' said Morley. 'I haven't a brother, but I can imagine what it must be like.'

Oliver fought back the tears. When strangers talked about Robin it was worse than when the family spoke about him. It was having their tight ring of privacy ruptured.

'I met your brother twice,' said Morley, in a businesslike voice. 'Once quite recently in Germany, once some time ago when he came to see your father at the FO.'

'He told me he'd met you in Germany,' said Oliver flatly.

'It wasn't quite chance. I was visiting a Royals Signals unit, all quite official, you know, and your brother's regiment happened to be nearby. So I called in and made myself known.'

'Wasn't that an odd thing to do?'

'Not odd. Englishmen abroad, and all that sort of thing.'

Oliver suddenly looked into Morley's face and said, 'You always seem to have a reason for everything, don't you? And you always seem to have an answer. I've no idea what you do, but if the Foreign Office have salesmen, then I'd put you down as one.'

'I'm not quite sure how to take that,' said Morley, most seriously.

Oliver shrugged and stared at the tombstone.

The churchyard was almost empty. The soldiers were marching back to their bus, two men were shovelling earth into the grave, another was collecting the wreaths to lay on top of the

mound. Morley looked at his watch. 'Your father has been kind enough to ask me to stay to lunch.'

'It's a buffet. A case of helping yourself,' said Oliver and began walking out through the lych-gate.

They walked back to the house together. They walked side by side, neither talking, the only sound their feet on the gravel and the gentle cooing of the wood pigeons in the copse beyond the church. In the house, Oliver saw that Morley had a glass of wine and a plate of smoked salmon, then wandered off.

Oliver had his own thoughts. A funeral that was part family part State troubled him. Nor, in spite of his own experiences in the South Atlantic, had he come to terms with the subtleties of grief: whether it was better to weep, scream, tear his hair or emulate his mother who had evidently mastered the opposite approach.

Thinking did not stop him observing. As usual, he was astonished at his father's performance. Sir Adrian's face seemed a little ruddier than usual, but Oliver knew the freshness was from the quick double brandy upon arriving home rather than from weeping.

The Foreign Secretary moved between his guests with that astonishing calm, selflessness and apparent concern for each individual that had so helped to make him the great politician. But in his only son's eyes, Sir Adrian was now indulging in his greatest con trick, demonstrating to the gathering his paramount attribute, the ability to give at all times the impression of loving the common man whatever his colour, status or creed.

Lady Eleanor, on the other hand, seemed divorced from the whole event. She too moved amongst the throng, but in her case, although her lips occasionally moved, the human response ended there. Oliver doubted whether his mother heard a word that was said to her. She certainly wouldn't remember any.

It was the Colonel who broke Oliver's solitude. He came out into the garden, stared up at the trees, and talked of 'the fallen'. Robin was now amongst 'the fallen' just as surely as if he'd been felled in battle. The Colonel suddenly turned and fixed Oliver with his piercing stare. 'If this sad event had to happen, and I'm a great believer in fate – if a bullet has your name on it, then that's that – if it had to happen, then how ironic, you might even say how apt, that it should have happened in Normandy. *On the old battlefields.*'

Oliver was surprised by the remark. The Colonel seemed to be almost rejoicing, as if the place of Robin's death somehow diminished the pain.

'I don't see what a car accident's got to do with an old battlefield?'

The Colonel looked surprised. 'For God's sake man, Robin was a soldier, wasn't he?' he said sharply. 'Battlefields are where soldiers, real soldiers, die.'

The Colonel gave Oliver a nod, knocked out his pipe and strode back to the house.

Oliver watched him go. He'd never seen the Colonel so distraught. He must have loved Robin hugely.

A young officer with the badges of the 3rd/12th The Queen's Royal Hussars on his tunic came up and introduced himself as Lieutenant Peter Marr.

'You're Oliver,' said Marr. 'I've heard about you. Your brother, Major Freemantle, used to talk about you.'

Oliver was surprised and a little flattered.

'You were in the Falklands. You got out of a chopper.'

'I was flung out.'

Marr nodded. 'But you've seen war.'

Oliver smiled. That's what it was all about. That's why he was now a friend of the Colonel's, they had both seen war. 'I didn't see much,' he said modestly. 'After that ditching, when I got ashore, it was more or less all over. Just a lot of prisoners and mines.'

For a while neither spoke. Marr wanted to say something but couldn't get it out, so they stood side by side in the June sunshine and felt the heat on their faces. Suddenly Oliver said, 'Were you at this anniversary?'

Marr nodded. 'And I should have been with your brother in the car. As it happened, he was alone.'

Oliver suddenly felt that cold, sinking feeling inside him. He didn't want to say it, he wanted to forget the whole affair, but in the end he did say it. 'Tell me about the accident,' he said quietly. 'Tell me what happened.'

Oliver waited. Suddenly Marr said, 'Look, I didn't know I was going to see you today, and I didn't know I was going to say anything. I just got sent here to command the burial party.'

'What happened?'

'Every year the regiment sends a detachment to Normandy for the D-Day anniversary. We have a ceremony at a memorial on Hill 122 on 10th June.'

'Robin was killed on the night of the 10th, so you'd had the ceremony?'

Marr nodded. 'Everything was fine. We had the major of the local village, the band of the Cuirassiers, a French general, a whole crowd of veterans . . . the lot. Afterwards we went back to the pub at Bayeux. Your brother had a phone call, said he had to go out,' Marr paused.

'Go on.'

Marr looked puzzled. 'That's the odd part. We were both going to dine at the French mess. We'd been talking about it that morning. Suddenly your brother said he couldn't make it. He had this other engagement he couldn't put off.'

'Did he say what the engagement was?'

Marr shook his head. 'Your brother was a major, I'm just a subaltern. Subalterns don't question majors where they're going to dine.'

'He went out in his own car. Did he seem agitated, upset?'

'A bit short-tempered, but then Major Freemantle never showed much emotion.'

'What about witnesses?'

'None so far as I know. It was late, on a pretty deserted stretch of the Caen, Tilly-sur-Seulles road. The police and fire brigade didn't get there till after midnight. It was a hell of a mess. Whatever went wrong was damned sudden. The car turned over and caught fire.' Marr hesitated, then added, 'I'm not sure I've really told you anything. I'm not sure I've really anything to tell you.'

Oliver gave a grim smile. Marr had already told him a great deal. Robin was a good driver and as far as Oliver knew a perfectly straightforward, far from clandestine sort of person. Yet he had exchanged one engagement for another, made sure he went out on his own and got killed in a blazing car. Then, of course, there was the factor that Marr knew nothing about, the tape. It was to Robin that Oliver had played that first tape on the way to Lyneham.

He found Sir Adrian in the dining-room deep in conversation. When they saw Oliver, the group broke up. Suddenly Oliver was face to face with his father.

'Did you know that Robin broke one engagement for another, a surprise one?'

Sir Adrian shook his head. 'No, that's news to me.' He paused, then added, 'On consideration, however, I don't find that particularly startling. From time to time we all break engagements.'

'He deliberately went out alone.'

'Robin was a grown man. If he went out alone, no doubt he had a perfectly good reason for doing so.'

'Have you seen the police report on the accident?'

'A preliminary one. There's certainly nothing in there to cause concern. Other, of course, than the actual accident.' Sir Adrian put his hand on his son's arm. 'It's a very sad business, my boy,' he said slowly. 'Very sad. It's upset us all. None more so than your mother.'

Oliver read the code. His father was busy, there were important matters to be discussed with important people and he was dismissed. But Sir Adrian didn't want his wife forgotten; Lady Eleanor needed looking after.

Lady Eleanor was not in the house nor in the front garden. At such a traumatic time, the rose garden was the place to look. Oliver was not disappointed. His mother, a red jumper over her black dress, a white cricket hat upon her head, a trug slung over her left arm, was clipping dead heads from the 'Rosa Mundi'. Lying beside her, panting in the sunshine, was Septimius Severus.

A few guests walked through the rose garden and smiled at Lady Eleanor, but none stopped to talk, for none knew quite what to say. Even the least sensitive appreciated that she was surviving in her own particular way. Oliver wanted to cry out, 'OK, here is your *only* son, what do you think about that?' But it would have been too cruel. Instead, he sat on the grass, watched her and pulled the ears of the dog.

He wanted to ask whether she'd tackled his father on the number of tapes Sliwinski had given them, but it wasn't the moment. For the present he would stick to the matter of immediate concern.

'Robin was alone in his car that night,' he said quietly. 'I've had a word with the officer who was supposed to go with him. Robin

scrapped a dinner invitation for them both and went out on his own.'

Lady Eleanor stopped snipping, turned her head as if she'd only just noticed Oliver then, bending down, kissed him on the forehead. 'It's nice to see you looking so well,' she said. 'You must get outdoors all you can. That's what I tell your father.'

'Robin was alone in the car and at the last moment *scrapped an official dinner engagement to meet someone else!*

Lady Eleanor brushed a fly from her face and wielded her secateurs with increased vigour.

'Can't you understand?' shouted Oliver. '*Robin's death isn't as straightforward as it looks!*

'Please, Oliver, please,' said Lady Eleanor, and put her hand to her forehead. 'Not today of all days.'

Furious with her, Oliver, also admired her. She was not going to be drawn and that was final. He watched her for a while, then very gently asked if she still went to the hospital.

She nodded. 'Once a fortnight at the moment, but that's an improvement. A big improvement.'

Oliver held her hand. 'How are you really?' he asked with great intensity. 'How is this tumour? You don't say anything about it, you keep it all to yourself. You shouldn't you know, it's bad for you.'

Lady Eleanor gave a wry smile. 'The tumour is no worse, that's the important thing.'

'Does Dad know?'

'Of course.'

Oliver had no idea if she was telling the truth.

On the way back to the house, Oliver saw his sister. As they walked across the lawn together, Oliver suddenly burst out, 'I've just seen Mother. It's bloody eerie the way she behaves. Why can't she break down and cry like anyone else? That's what she needs, a massive great weep. Buckets and buckets of tears. She needs to beat her breast and tear her hair! We ought to have a damned great wake for her, like they have in Ireland.' Oliver looked into his sister's face. 'She's just lost her firstborn for Christ's sake! It's positively indecent the way she bottles everything up.'

Sophia gave him a calming kiss on the cheek.

'She creeps off to that bloody hospital every week. Never tells anyone about it. Molly knows more about her than any of we do.'

'Chemotherapy,' said Sophia casually, 'They can do great things with cancer these days.'

'Did you say *cancer*?' breathed Oliver, screwing up his face in horror.

Sophia nodded.

Oliver shook his head, his mouth wide open.

'They've been giving her chemotherapy for weeks now. From what she says it's keeping it all in check.'

'*Mother has cancer?*'

'It's not the end!'

Oliver was shocked, but he was also bitter. He'd been cheated. 'Why didn't she tell *me* she had cancer?' he demanded angrily.

'She did more or less when she told you she had a tumour. You're just not used to the language, that's all.'

Oliver was struggling. He had just watched his brother being buried, now he had learned that the mother he adored had cancer. And cancer was the Satan of diseases. Although he knew that his mother had been ill, he had never thought of her as dying. But with cancer came death. His whole world was collapsing and there was nothing he could do. He hadn't been able to stop Robin from being killed; he couldn't stop his mother's cancer. Sadness, bitterness, but above all frustration rose up to choke him.

'How bad is it?' he mumbled.

'Not good, but they can do a lot with the new drugs these days. And mother's a fighter, that helps.' Sophia gave him a smile. 'Don't worry, she could have a good few years yet.'

The principal mourners had thinned, many cars had gone. Oliver was surprised that Morley was still at the house. The Foreign Office man was sitting alone in the drawing-room staring at the chessboard that sat up on the walnut table near the small side window. Once the board had seen frequent use, when Sir Adrian and the children played, but in recent years it had become an ornament and an antique.

Morley had white and had made a move, pawn to Queen Four. He looked up when Oliver entered the room.

'Do you play?'

'Not much,' said Oliver, in an offhand manner.

Morley looked disappointed. 'But you have a board.'

'We played a bit when we were kids, but I don't remember being particularly good at it. My father was the best, then you'd expect him to be, he's got a lawyer's brain. He can always see five moves ahead.'

Morley motioned Oliver to the other chair. 'It's no fun playing on your own, and if it reassures you, I'm very much a novice.' He looked up and smiled. 'If it would help, I can always suggest the moves you might make.'

Oliver stood stock still. He wasn't thinking of the chess game. Through the disorientated haze of his mind, and the sickness in his heart, he was thinking of his mother. But he couldn't talk to Morley about his mother, he couldn't talk to anyone about her, not even his father.

'You look as if you need to relax,' said Morley. 'You must think of yourself. Look after yourself. It's been a most difficult day.'

All Oliver's frustration welled up. He stared down at Morley, struggling to contain his anger, conscious that this was the man he had set out to be friends with.

'Why do you always look so bloody self-satisfied?' he cried angrily. 'Why are you always in control of everything?'

'My dear fellow . . .'

'You sit there as if you owned the bloody place!'

Morley half rose. 'I only asked you to play a game of chess. I had absolutely no idea you were in such a distressed state.'

'I'm not in a distressed state!'

Morley stood upright. 'If you feel like that, then it's time I went.'

Under Morley's affronted gaze, Oliver suddenly shook his head and dropped into the other chair. If he couldn't talk about the matters that worried him most, he might as well try and occupy his mind with something else: resign himself to playing chess.

'I'm sorry,' he mumbled. 'As you say, it's been a difficult day. Bloody difficult.'

Morley sat. 'Are you happy with black? We didn't draw for colour so we could start again.'

'I'm happy,' said Oliver and stared at the board. But he didn't see the black and white squares or the pieces. He saw a burned-out car. 'Have you seen the French police report on my brother's death?'

Morley nodded. 'It did come my way . . .'

'I suppose it's been circulating all over the Foreign Office?' said Oliver sarcastically.

Morley gave that thin smile. 'My dear fellow, the report on your brother's accident is personal. Not that there is anything particular surprising in it, of course. Personal files don't circulate all over the FO. Far from it.'

'If it's personal, how did you come to see it? I mean, if it's personal, then presumably it's personal to my father?'

'Your father asked me to look at it.'

'You mean, he was worried about it?'

'I wouldn't say worried. Of course, as one would expect, he was deeply upset. He merely asked me to get it translated and have a look at the details. You see, I had already been instrumental, on your father's behalf, in making the arrangements to get your brother's body flown home. So you could say that I was in on the unhappy affair from the beginning.'

'The story is that Robin was driving alone and had a blow-out?'

'That's the generally accepted theory.' Morley looked down at the board. 'Now what about making a move?'

Oliver hesitated. Morley indicated the board.

'Why not make the same move as me? I understand it to be a fairly standard opening.'

Oliver made the same move: pawn to Queen Four.

'Good,' said Morley, with considerable animation. 'Now we really have started.'

'You saw nothing in the report to worry you?'

Morley looked up into Oliver's face. 'Should there have been something?'

'Did it say where my brother had been that evening?'

A flicker of a shadow crossed Morley's face. 'As far as I remember, the presumption was that he'd been out to dinner.'

'It was only a presumption?'

'The French police had an unconfirmed report that your brother had been seen with a man earlier but, as I say, it was unconfirmed. Completely unauthenticated.'

Oliver wished he knew Normandy better. He must get a Michelin of the whole area. At the moment he felt he was swimming in a vast ocean and getting nowhere.

'The accident was on the Caen, Tilly-sur-Seulles road . . .' said Oliver vaguely.

'If you're asking me to give you a detailed account of your

brother's movements that day, I'm afraid I can't.' Morley gave Oliver a long, searching look. 'Look, old chap, I have no idea why you are asking me all these questions, but I can assure you, when I read the police report it was all perfectly straightforward.' He made a gesture with his hands. 'It's damned bad luck, I know, but we all have accidents.'

Oliver would have liked to mention the tape but he couldn't. It would only make him appear more foolish, more at sea. Morley saw the look on his face. 'If you're really worried about something, why not talk to your father about it? Sir Adrian is a very understanding man. At least, I've always found him so.'

'You don't think there was any foul play?'

'Why should there be?'

Oliver shrugged. 'That's just it, I've no idea why. None at all.'

Morley looked down at the chessboard. 'I think it would be more profitable if we just get on with this,' he said quietly, and moved a pawn to Queen's Bishop Four.

## 16

There was nothing in Erzsébet Sándor's passport to suggest that she had started this particular journey from Moscow's Shermetyevo Airport. Her passport was Hungarian and in her real name, Erzsébet Sándor. She was using the Hungarian national airline, Malév, and had boarded this particular flight, MA611, at Budapest. As her passport showed, this was her third visit to London, and as her other papers indicated, she was coming to the United Kingdom as a Malév employee and would be based at the airline's offices in Vigo Street. Further inspection of her papers would have shown that she had previously worked for Malév in Paris, Munich and Stockholm.

As the Russian-built Tupolev Tu-154 crossed high above the other half of the Old Empire, and the jagged white peaks of the Austrian Tyrol passed slowly beneath them, Erzsébet thought of her journey.

As usual, at this stage she had little idea what might be expected of her. Even the order to go to London had come in the most casual way. Anatoly Michailovich had given it. They had

had dinner, and he'd been sitting beside her, smoothing the hair over her shoulders, when he'd suddenly said, 'Zoya, there's a problem in London . . .' She had twisted her head and looked into his face, but he showed no emotion. Nothing. His thin, aesthetic face was unmoved, his eyes focused on the ceiling.

'I shall hate to lose you.' He had given the faintest smile and added, 'But no doubt you will enjoy having a break from an old man like me.'

She had asked no question then for there was no point. She would get her detailed instructions later. The producer at Mosfilm would tell her in confidence that a casting director would like to meet her and name the place, perhaps one of the hotels like the Rossiya or the Ukraina. There, in the bar, or in one of the rooms used for those purposes, a plain-clothed KGB colonel would give her her passport, tickets and money. After that she was on her own until contacted by one of the 'illegals' in London. Or perhaps by someone from the AVH Residency in the Hungarian Embassy in Eaton Place. It depended who was to control her, the Hungarians or the Russians. The Russians might well like to remain in the background for this one, with the Hungarians up front. But with the KGB Chairman himself instigating this particular journey, whoever actually controlled her, the KGB would be close.

The initial phase had worked out much as expected, except that she had received one further visit from Anatoly Michailovich. The visit was a considerable surprise. After London had been mentioned, Erzsébet had expected the KGB Chairman to leave the matter there. State Security was full of colonels who could carry messages. But Anatoly Michailovich had come himself. He hadn't come just for the love-making although, of course, that had happened; he had come with a final message. A sort of warning.

'You are an actress, Zoya, a very good actress.'

'Thank you, Anatoly Michailovich.'

'The London problem is extremely important, it is also extremely delicate. It must be handled with the greatest care.'

Erzsébet had nodded.

'Your cover is good, you're Hungarian, but you'll need all your wits and guile. A person has to be watched, his movements checked. The next few weeks, months are vital and he has to be

steered in the right direction.' Safronov glanced at her. 'You might say . . . kept occupied, entertained.'

'I understand . . .'

'You will have to act as you've never acted before, and this time without a director!' He gave an expressive grimace that raised his glasses and emphasised the hollows in his cheeks. 'You must keep your own inner emotions in check. Your personal feelings must never be allowed to mar your professionalism.' He spoke in a deadpan voice. 'There may be times when you feel stripped bare, metaphorically speaking. You must remind yourself on every occasion that this is a mission of the greatest importance.'

She bit her lip.

'I'm talking to you like this because we're friends.' He seemed to catch a look in her face, for very quickly he asked, 'We are friends, Zoya, aren't we?'

Erzsébet smiled. Only an hour ago they had been in bed together. He was more than twenty years older than her and, although she supposed she liked him, she did not love him. As far as she knew, she loved no one.

'We are friends, very close friends,' he said firmly and stopped.

That seemed to be all he was capable of saying. Not even that he would miss her should anything go wrong. That this was such an important task, he was sending a little piece of himself. But she hardly noticed the omission. For Anatoly Michailovich he had already said a lot, a very great deal. He had never said so much before. He had certainly never mentioned feelings and emotions prior to sending her on a journey.

'My chauffeur, Oleg Sergeyeovich, will take you to the airport . . .' An astonishing offer. 'I would like to send him to Budapest and even to London to look after you, but that wouldn't be wise.'

She kissed him gently on the cheek.

'One word of warning, Zoya, don't accept any of Oleg Sergeyeovich's vodka. It's bootlegged stuff, very bad before a flight.'

He had made the joke. Erzsébet smiled at his joke, but Safronov's face did not alter.

She was an agent, a spy, but she never thought of herself as that. It was an occupation she had floated into. She had four useful

attributes. She was Hungarian not Russian and that helped quieten any suspicion. She was calm, beautiful and a woman to whom languages came easily. She was working for Hungarian television when a director from Mosfilm spotted her. That took her to Russia. Within weeks the KGB too had their eyes on her, but her rise wouldn't have been so meteoric without the visit of the Chairman of State Security to a film set.

The Russian movie industry had continued to provide Erzsébet's cover until her links with the KGB, and in particular with the Chairman, tightened, and a new cover had to be found. The Hungarian national airline, Malév, with its offices in more than forty countries provided the answer.

Erzsébet appeared to take the privileges of her job with the same cool detachment she applied to everything else. Her apartments in Budapest and Moscow, the luxurious and costly furnishings, the Volga car with which she was often provided weren't actually hers, but they were all for her use. She accepted that the Japanese televisions and videos, the Italian fridges, the German kitchens, even the French paintings, were the props that went with her position. Were she to fall, everything that set her life so far apart from others would vanish with her. If the matter ever came to disturb her, and it seldom did, she would remind herself that even the President of the richest country in the world left his ranch behind when he died.

Her life style depended upon her relationship with one man. She was content, for the moment, that Anatoly Michailovich should provide for her in his own particular way. It didn't worry her that throughout her life men had abused her sexuality. She didn't see herself as a whore any more than she saw herself as an agent, but she did believe that if men were going to use her they should pay. And Anatoly Michailovich paid handsomely.

Oleg Sergeyevich Romanov had driven her to Sheremetyevo Airport. She enjoyed the ride in the big Zil limousine and even when the driver had turned and leered at her, as he had done on half a dozen occasions, it had not spoiled the luxury of the journey. She had not gone through customs and police clearance with the rest of the passengers; Oleg Sergeyevich had guided her along a separate set of channels with the minimum of formalities.

It was when her cases had been taken care of and she was

waiting in the VIP lounge that she got her greatest surprise. Instead of going back to his car, Oleg sat next to her and lit a cigarette. For one awful moment Erzsébet thought that the Chairman had carried out his expressed wish, that his driver should accompany her to Budapest and London.

'There's no hurry, Zoya,' Oleg had said, blowing a cloud of smoke across her face, 'there's another half an hour before you'll be called.' He had turned and looked at her. His lips were wet, his breath smelt, his grin was a leer. 'I've waited a long time to chat to you like this, you know, as one servant to another.'

Erzsébet stiffened. Oleg smiled.

'You don't like me talking to you like this, do you, Zoyenka Semyonovna?' He used the name by which she was known in Russia. 'I'm not good enough for you, am I? I'm just a chauffeur, a driver, while you're a . . .' He stopped and laughed. 'Well, we all know what you are. You don't need me to tell you.'

'Thank you for taking me to the airport,' said Erzsébet coldly. 'I can manage on my own now.'

Oleg laughed. His bullet-shaped head with its thin crop of hair seemed to vibrate. 'Stuck-up bitch, aren't you?' he said. 'And you're not even Russian. You're bloody Hungarian!'

'You're drunk!'

Oleg shook his head. 'I'm not drunk. I may have had a drink, but I'm not drunk.' He suddenly stood up. 'That's all I wanted to tell you, that you're a stuck-up bitch. A bloody stuck-up bitch!' He stared down into her face. 'Just remember, you and I are both serfs with the same boss. I drive him, you lie on your back and show him your arse. You get your nice cosy little flat off the end of the Kutuzovsky Prospekt, I get a blind eye turned to my vodka. There's not a lot of difference.' He smiled. 'When you come back, if you do come back, maybe we can be friends? Good friends?'

Erzsébet stood up and matched Oleg's stare. 'Wouldn't it be more sensible to say all this to Comrade Safronov rather than to me?' she said icily.

Oleg pinched Erzsébet's thigh. 'We live in a socialist paradise,' he said mockingly. 'All the good things are for sharing. One day, when you're out in the cold, you'll need a good friend.' He grinned and Erzsébet shuddered. She thought of the times she had ridden in the big, black Zil with Anatoly Michailovich and stared at the back of Oleg Sergejevich's head. Now she had to

stare at his face, so close she could see the pores of his skin and feel the warmth of his breath.

'Good luck with the English,' said Oleg, making an obscene gesture. 'Knowing you, you'll entertain them all right.'

Very deliberately Erzsébet turned, and walked towards the window that looked out across the airport.

Oleg stared at her, looked as if he was about to spit into the large ashtray that stood in the corner, then walked from the room.

Unpleasant though the experience had been, Erzsébet had forgotten about Oleg Sergeevich before the plane had cleared Russian airspace.

This was Erzsébet's third visit to London. She knew the city almost as well as a resident. A Malév representative met her at Heathrow and took her to a hotel in South Kensington. Three days later she moved into a flat in Linden Gardens where the Bayswater Road meets Notting Hill Gate. She went each day to the offices in Vigo Street and worked as one of the staff. At the end of her first week she was contacted by a Soviet journalist from Novosti and given an invitation to a party. The party was for the following Saturday at a house in Inverness Terrace.

Erzsébet had a problem making out the name of her host for the ink on the invitation had been smudged, but after much consideration decided that it must be Anthony Playfair.

In the gendarmerie off the Rue de Geole in the Norman city of Caen, the Inspector leaned back in his chair, glanced at Oliver's passport open on his desk and gave a thin smile. 'So you are Monsieur Oliver Stephen Freemantle.' He looked up, straight into Oliver's eyes. 'And you are here seeking for information on the accident to your late brother, Major Robin Freemantle?'

Oliver nodded. 'My brother was killed in a car accident on the Caen, Tilly-sur-Seulles road on 10th June.'

'A traffic accident.'

'So I understand . . .'

'And a report has been sent to the English police.'

Oliver shrugged and said nothing.

'Have you seen that report, monsieur?'

'No.'

'Then I suggest that you ask the British police to show it to you.'

Oliver remained silent. The Inspector picked up Oliver's passport and glanced at it. 'I am at a loss to know why you are here, monsieur.'

Oliver thought of saying a lot. In the end he asked one question: 'Have you seen the report, Inspector?'

The Inspector shook his head. 'It was not my department. Now, would you care to answer my question? Why are you here, monsieur?'

'To see where my brother died.'

'Ah, that is understandable.'

The Inspector picked up the telephone and there ensued a rapid conversation in French. The Inspector got up. On the wall behind his desk was a large map. With a pencil he began to trace the road from Caen to Caumont. Five kilometres beyond the edge of Carpiquet airfield he stopped. 'The accident happened about there. Just beyond the British war cemetery.'

Oliver remembered Colonel Symington's remarks about Robin 'falling' on the old battlefield. 'The car was burned out?'

'So I am told.'

'There was nothing to suggest that it wasn't an accident?'

The Inspector grimaced and made a dramatic movement with his hands. 'Let us stop playing games with each other, monsieur. The reason I am talking to you, the reason that the sergeant did not show you out into the street, is because of the important nature of this particular accident. Your brother was the son of the English Foreign Minister. As such, in our small, parochial area, the accident was, for a few days, a *cause célèbre*. Now, when the other son of Sir Adrian Freemantle comes to France making enquiries, what am I to make of it?'

'If you didn't handle the accident, Inspector, can you please tell me where I may find the police officer who did?' asked Oliver blandly.

The Inspector shook his head; his small round face looked doleful. 'The officer in charge of the original enquiry is away.' He indicated the phone. 'I have been talking to a colleague of that officer who has been reading from the report.' He gave a massive shrug and added, 'I know no more.'

He got up to show that the interview was over. 'Let me assure you, monsieur, had there been anything the least suspicious

about the accident, the matter would have been taken out of the hands of the ordinary gendarmerie and into the hands of the regional crime squad. As that did not happen, you may set your mind at rest.' The Inspector opened the door. 'You wished to see where your brother met his death. Take the D9 at St-Germain La Blanche Herbe. You will pass the airport on your left. Continue along that road for five kilometres, past the villages of Marcelet and St Manvieu-Norrey, and it was along there.'

The Inspector went out into the corridor and down the stairs. Oliver followed. In the street the Inspector looked up at the sun and said, 'It is June, the grass grows quickly in Normandy in June. There may be very little to see.' He held out his hand. 'Nevertheless, I wish you good luck on your pilgrimage.'

Oliver stood in the street. He had been neatly dismissed. He looked at his watch. It was nearly eleven. He had been in the gendarmerie for an hour and learned virtually nothing. Only that Robin's death had been classed as a traffic accident and the French CID had not been involved. He looked up at the building. One thing he could be certain of, the telephone lines would be humming. Soon a duty clerk in the Foreign Office would have a message to the effect that the Foreign Secretary's son had been asking questions in a Caen police station. It might have been better if he'd started his 'pilgrimage' in some other way. What way he had no idea.

He passed the British War Cemetery at St Manvieu-Norrey and once on the straight, rather featureless road kept a hopeful look-out for the remains of a recent accident.

Robin had been killed less than a fortnight ago but, as the Inspector had pointed out, it was the height of the growing season. There had also been rain. Oliver didn't expect to see the burned-out wreckage of the car – that would have been removed long ago – but after a fierce petrol fire there should be something left, some evidence visible. Bits of tyre, severe trampling of the grass and presumably a large patch of burned vegetation.

Half a kilometre beyond a minor crossroads, tucked around a strand of barbed wire, part of the fence that marked the edge of the field, was what looked like a piece of dirty cloth. Oliver stopped and walked back. When he got the object unravelling, it turned out to be a tattered leather glove. He was standing

undecided when he noticed three yards from him, deep in the ditch, the charred remains of a book. The remains were sodden, a coagulated mess, but clearly visible, in the top left-hand corner near the binding, were the letters AA on a yellow square. His heart raced. He peeled the fragile pages apart and saw English words. It was an AA Continental handbook.

He began to search with a mixture of freneticism and caution, freneticism to find all he could, caution not to miss anything. He found the black patch, large and relatively new. Young grass shoots were already pushing through, but the extent of the blaze was evident. He found a half-burned shred of tyre, glass, bits of charred cloth and twisted, blackened fragments of metal. He also found the detritus of the police and firemen: cigarette packets, matches and the sodden pages of a notebook. Then he went back and looked at the crash site from the road.

He realised that he had no certain idea in which direction the car had been travelling. Marr had said they 'went back to the pub at Bayeaux'. Presumably that's where they'd been staying. In which case it was logical to assume that at the time of the accident Robin had been driving westwards towards the hotel, in the same direction that Oliver had approached the site.

If all Oliver's suppositions were correct, then the car hadn't skidded across the road but crashed into the near side, the right side. Oliver examined the road carefully but could find no tyre mark. He was standing on the grass, when an ancient Citroën van drew up and a man got out and opened the gate into the field. The man drove a few yards into the field and stopped. Half a dozen large-eyed Normandy cows came towards him. The man got a bucket and stool out of the van and began milking in a way Oliver had thought had vanished with Thomas Hardy.

As the man milked, his face closed to the flank of the cow, so he watched Oliver.

Oliver raised his hand. '*Bonjour . . .*'

The man said something indecipherable. Oliver went on searching in the grass.

Suddenly the man stopped milking, said something and made an expressive gesture with his hands. Oliver heard the words *accident* and *incendie*. He opened the gate and went into the field.

'You know there was an accident here?' he asked, in the best French he could muster.

The man nodded. 'In the night. The car burned like a beacon.'

'You saw it?' asked Oliver eagerly.

The man shook his head.

'Then how do you know it burned like a beacon?'

'The wreck was here in the morning . . .' Again the man made the expressive gesture with his hands. 'The police asked me questions, didn't they?' The man looked at Oliver. 'You are English?'

Oliver nodded.

'It was an English car,' said the man, and rubbed the palm of his hand down the side of his cheek.

'The driver was my brother.'

Again the man looked at Oliver. His eyes were as dark as the eyes of his cattle. He said nothing but, having finished milking the first cow, pushed it away and called to the next beast. After a while the man said, 'Was your brother the man who ran away?'

The question was simple, its implications enormous. Oliver felt the shock of the words. His whole body tensed, goose pimples rose on his back, when he tried to speak his throat was dry. 'Did you say, "Was my brother the man who ran away?"'

The man nodded.

'You mean there were *two* men in the car? Another man beside my brother?'

The man put up one finger. 'The police found one body. That is official. That is all that is official.' He paused then added, 'What the police say is *official*, understand?'

Oliver nodded.

The man remained silent.

At last Oliver said, 'If you know that there was a second man who ran away from the burning car, why haven't you gone to the police?'

'I know nothing. Nothing!' The man paused, then asked, 'The body in the car was your brother?'

'Yes.'

The man thought for a long time. At last he said, 'Go back to your own car. When I leave here, follow me.' The man went back to his milking. Oliver walked back to his car and waited.

The man finished his milking, put his bucket, cans and stool back in the van, then very slowly drove to the gate and out into the road. Oliver followed. They went back towards Caen, took the small road to the right and passed through the village of Cheux. Just beyond Cheux, the van turned down a narrow, dusty

track to a building site. A half-finished house, the bones of its roof framing a sapphire sky, stood amidst a white shroud of cement dust. Sitting on a pile of breeze blocks, eating his midday bread, was a man of about thirty, naked from the waist up.

The farmer got out of his van. The two men shook hands. There followed a rapid, *sotto voce* conversation during which both men cast glances towards Oliver, still sitting in his car. Suddenly the farmer beckoned. Oliver got out of his car, shook hands with the builder and the farmer explained.

'I have talked to my friend about the accident and the inferno. I have told him that the body in the car was your brother . . .'

Oliver nodded. The builder nodded. Oliver waited.

The farmer pointed at his friend. 'He was not there, you understand. He was nowhere near the district. He was in Caen with his friends in the Café du Port. You understand?'

Oliver was beginning to. He glanced at the builder. The man was of swarthy build, a true Norman. His skin was bronzed by the sun, sweat glistened on his face, his blue eyes were strong and challenging. He was not a man to be trifled with.

'He was there that night, but he was not there, is that it?' asked Oliver.

The farmer nodded. The builder remained impassive.

Suddenly the builder said, 'A man ran away from the car. He was silhouetted against the flames.'

'You saw the man?' asked Oliver quickly.

The builder grimaced.

'My brother has been *killed*,' cried Oliver. 'A man has been killed! This is murder! You're a witness, you must go to the police!'

The two men looked at one another. The builder spat. Suddenly he said, 'Your brother is dead. The police can do nothing.'

There was a long silence. In the hot afternoon sun, Oliver felt the hostility. Both men were glowering at him. It was evident that neither had any intention of going to the police. Were Oliver to bring the police to them, they would deny everything.

The man needed an alibi. He was either a thief or a lover. Oliver decided that he was a lover. That evening he had been to see a woman. It was just Oliver's luck that he should find the only witness to the accident and that witness would refuse to make a statement.

'Can you describe the man who ran away from the burning car?'

The builder shrugged. 'It was all very quick. There was another car. He was soon in it and away. There was much screeching of tyres.' He lifted up his slab of bread and waved it. 'Zoom! It was like that.'

'My friend was hurrying home, *to his wife,*' volunteered the farmer pointedly.

'And as you weren't playing cards with your friends in the Café de Port, but were with your girlfriend, you can't go to the police? Is that it?'

'I have nothing to say to the police.'

'Did you see the number of the other car?'

'It was night! It was dark!'

'But the blaze had lit up the night. Surely it was light enough to see the number plate of the other car?'

The builder turned to the farmer. 'You fool!' he shouted. 'I told you to keep your big mouth shut!' He pointed at Oliver. 'And now you bring this Englishman to see me and ask questions.' His hand moved across the stack of breeze blocks towards a mason's hammer that lay a yard from him.

Oliver took a step back and held up his hand. 'OK,' he said quickly. 'I understand. I'll forget all about it.' He looked from one to the other. 'I'll forget I ever saw either of you.'

He dared not turn his back and walk to his car, so he stood staring at both men and waited. The builder got up and moved towards him, the hammer in his hand.

'Your brother's death is not my business. I've already told you more than is good for me to tell you. The man who ran from the flames that night was no more than a figure. I couldn't stop and help your brother, any more than I can tell the police. I tell you all this because you are the dead man's brother, and because I couldn't stop and help him. It's worried me that I couldn't help him. I'm not a man to leave another man to burn to death.' The builder paused as if he wanted to say more, then very quickly he added, 'Ask no more questions and go!' He pointed at Oliver's car.

'Thanks,' said Oliver. 'Thanks a lot.' He ran back to his car, got in and reversed down the track. Both men stood watching him.

That afternoon Oliver bought *Le Figaro*. His eye was caught by a box advertisement on the 'Spectacles' page. That evening, the great Polish pianist, Stefan Sliwinski, was to give a concert of Chopin's music at the Salle Gaveau in Paris.

By three in the afternoon, certain now that he had a murder case on his hands, Oliver was exceeding the speed limit along the A13 for Rouen and Paris.

## 17

All the seats had been sold. Oliver had supper and, when the concert was due to finish, went round to the stage door. Stefan Sliwinski emerged preceded by his minder, the tall American woman, Grace Kuberski. Oliver pushed his way through the flurry of autograph seekers.

'Mr Sliwinski, we met when you came to my father's house in England. I'm Oliver Freemantle.'

The little man looked startled. He peered at Oliver in the dim street light and shook his head.

'Mr Sliwinski is very tired,' announced Grace Kuberski imperiously. 'It's been a long concert.'

Oliver ignored the woman.

'You came to my father's house in the spring. You gave a concert there in the evening.'

Sliwinski looked helplessly towards his minder. Kuberski ushered the little man towards the car. Oliver blocked the way, getting between the pianist and the open car door.

'My father is Sir Adrian Freemantle . . .'

'Of course, *Oliver Freemantle*,' cried Sliwinski, as if he had just remembered. 'The young man who left my concert to look after his mother.' He put out both hands and grasped Oliver's hand. 'How is your dear mother?'

'Considering everything, not too bad.'

'Good. Please give the dear lady my felicitations.' He gave a little bow. 'And how is your father?'

Kuberski pulled up the collar of Sliwinski's overcoat and tied the white scarf a little tighter. 'We have a plane to catch first thing

in the morning,' she said firmly. 'Mr Sliwinski is exceedingly tired. It was nice meeting you.'

Kuberski was a tall, stately woman who dwarfed Sliwinski. She had just dismissed Oliver and was used to being obeyed. As far as she was concerned the interruption was over. But Oliver had learned too much that day to be put off.

'If you don't like us talking here, I'll come back to your hotel and we can talk there.'

Sliwinski glanced at his minder.

'Impossible!' cried Kuberski. 'If you don't get out of our way and stop molesting us, young man, I shall call the police.'

Oliver glanced at the car. The rear door was wide open, held by the driver.

'You gave my father a tape . . .' Oliver blurted out. 'Did you give him *one tape or two?*'

Sliwinski looked worried. Oliver knew he'd stung a nerve. He moved quickly. Before Kuberski or the driver could stop him, he slipped into the back of the car and sat in the far corner waiting.

'Do we discuss it here or at your hotel?'

The driver made a move to pull Oliver out; Kuberski stopped him. 'Why don't we all go back and have a nice drink?' she said, smiling. 'That's what we all need, a nice, strong drink.' She got into the car, helped Sliwinski in and then, sitting back against the soft leather seats, told the driver to drive on.

Sliwinski was staying at the Hotel George V. They drove to the hotel in silence. Once, as they were driving up the Champs-Élysées, Sliwinski hummed a few bars, but they were so brief, so quiet, Oliver was unable to identify them.

At the hotel, Kuberski collected the room key and the three went up in the lift together. The moment they were in the suite, Kuberski hurled her cape on to the bed, opened the fridge and took out a bottle of champagne. From the bottle she filled three glasses.

Sliwinski sat on the couch, took off his jacket and shoes, and put his feet up on a chair. He held up his glass and squinted through into the tiny bubbles. 'And how is your father, you never told me how he was?'

'My father's fine,' said Oliver quickly.

Sliwinski nodded. 'Good. That is excellent. The world needs men like your father. Men of vision and integrity.'

'Let me ask the question again,' said Oliver brusquely. 'The

evening you came to our house in England and played, you gave my father a present of your own music. Did you give him one tape or two ?'

Sliwinski grimaced. 'I find that a very strange question.' He looked up at his minder. 'Don't you find that a very strange question, Grace?'

'Very strange. Really weird, but then the whole evening is turning out to be weird.'

Kuberski refilled the glasses.

'Why did you give my father *two* tapes of the same music?' asked Oliver suddenly. 'Why wasn't one enough?'

Sliwinski threw up his hands. 'I can give your father five tapes, a hundred tapes of the same music if I want to! There is no one to stop me!'

'You're not feeling well,' said Kuberski, coming close to Oliver, and looking down into his eyes. 'You look tired. You need a good night's sleep.'

Oliver ignored the woman and addressed Sliwinski. 'There were two tapes, identical yet different. Both had the same Mazurkas in the same order and you were the pianist. Both cassette cases were identical and had been signed by you with the same dedication.'

Sliwinski shrugged. 'So?'

'One tape had an abnormally long gap and some of the music had been erased.'

While he spoke, Sliwinski and Kuberski stared intently at Oliver. Each word, each cadence was listened to with rapt attention. When he finished speaking their faces showed relief amounting to joy.

'Is that all!' cried Sliwinski. 'One tape had a gap?'

Oliver nodded.

'You wait for me at the stage door just to tell me that the tape I gave your father had a fault? Is that what you waited for?'

'Did you know that that first tape was faulty?' persisted Oliver. 'And did you then give my father a *second* tape?'

Kuberski suddenly sat on the arm of Oliver's chair and picked up his hand. 'Tell me,' she said quietly, 'exactly what is all this about?'

Just as had happened with Ilse at the wine bar, the drink had warmed and disarmed Oliver. 'It's all part of a jigsaw,' he murmured, 'a very puzzling jigsaw.'

'It's the Falklands war,' said Kuberski sadly, shaking her head. 'We've heard all about it. For the veterans it's the same as for our veterans from Vietnam. They believe they're OK, normal like everyone else, but they're not. War leaves its scars.' She squeezed Oliver's hand. 'Not just physical, mental too. We have guys who can't live in a house any longer. They have to live in the woods like the Indians.' She looked at Sliwinski. 'We've heard all about this young man in the Falklands, haven't we, Stefan?'

Sliwinski nodded. 'A hero. A hero, indeed. But then we Poles know how heroic the British can be.'

Oliver shook himself free and jumped to his feet.

'There's nothing wrong with me! *Nothing!* I'm perfectly rational, perfectly sane. One tape had both a longer gap than normal and an erasure, the other was perfect.' He screamed the words: '*I came here to find out why!*'

He stared at them both. They returned his stare with gestures of sympathetic hopelessness. At last Sliwinski said, 'Young man, I would help if I could, just for the sake of your father. But I can remember nothing about the matter. Nothing. You must believe that. All the tapes I give away as presents come from my agent. I don't check them, I don't even open them. I just autograph them and hand them over.' He glanced at his minder for support.

Kuberski nodded.

Sliwinski got up and went into the adjoining room. Kuberski sat and watched Oliver. From time to time she smiled. Oliver grew sleepy and for an instant wondered whether the champagne had been doctored, but reassured himself that Sliwinski had drunk from the same bottle.

Sliwinski came back into the room with a small gift-wrapped package. With an exaggerated bow, he placed the package into Oliver's hands. 'To make up for the one that was faulty and has caused you so much worry and concern.'

Oliver looked down at the package.

'It's great to have met you,' said Kuberski, and opened the door wide.

'We don't see each other for a year, then it's twice in a month,' said Oliver, 'Either I'm trailing you or you're trailing me.'

'Sorry to hear about your brother,' said Ilse.

Oliver grunted, but again he felt those tears storming up behind his eyes.

Ilse gave him a glance. 'I won't apologise for the bit in the Diary. But in view of everything, the timing might have been better.'

Oliver nodded. 'I didn't expect much and I remembered your career.'

'Thanks. Thanks a lot. Anyway, it's the last time. I really am coming off the Diary.' She paused, stubbed out her cigarette and said, 'Our man in Moscow is lined up for an appendectomy. So it's yours truly who's standing in. I'd rather it was somewhere a bit more romantic. Rio or Acapulco.'

They were at Tony Playfair's. Oliver was looking about the room when Ilse suddenly said, 'I don't know who that Madonna-like creature is, but she's certainly got her eyes on you.'

Oliver followed Ilse's glance. A tall woman, standing next to the window, besieged by two men, turned her head away as Oliver caught her eye.

'The tall one by the window, with the chequerboard sweater?'

'That's her. The one with the almond-shaped face and green eyes.'

'Never seen her before in my life.'

'It's a good job I don't get jealous easily, darling.'

Oliver laughed.

'There was a time . . .' said Ilse provokingly.

'Long, long ago.'

'That's the perverse side of human nature. Give a man up and then see another woman wanting him . . .' She kissed him on the cheek and whispered, 'I do love you, Oliver . . . still. You know that, don't you?'

They laughed. Oliver wished her fun in Moscow, and they wandered apart.

'Oliver, your glass is empty and there's someone I want you to meet.'

He turned towards the voice. Tony Playfair was old-fashioned and civilised: he still introduced people. Now he was about to introduce the woman whom Ilse had spied.

'Erzsébet Sándor. Oliver Freemantle.'

Erzsébet said, 'Hi!' Oliver grinned. Tony Playfair filled Oliver's glass then disappeared.

'Sándor?'

'Hungarian. A most undistinguished name, as common as Smith or Brown in your country.'

'How is it you know Tony Playfair?'

She shrugged. 'A friend of a friend, you know the sort of thing. The world is a very small place. Tell me about you?'

Madonna or Helen of Troy, he wasn't sure which. She was beautiful and sympathetic and at the moment all that sympathy and attention were beamed on to him. Her calm self-assurance as she talked quietly in that Middle European voice with the soft American garnish was riveting. So was her strength.

'I'm in advertising. A sort of tea boy. What about you?'

'I work here in London for our national airline, Malév.' She looked about the room and smiled. 'I'm getting very used to your city. You see, this is my third visit. I know parts of London almost as well as I know Budapest.'

They talked. Oliver warmed to her personality. He was conscious too of her clothes and the ease with she wore them. On anyone else, the chequerboard sweater with the contrasting coloured sleeves and the pale pink trousers might have looked odd, even stupid. On Erzsébet they looked perfect.

'You haven't always worked for Malév. What did you do before that?'

She shrugged. 'Odd jobs.'

He looked at the elegant way she stood and held her body even in the congestion of a party. 'I'd have laid ten pounds to a penny that you were either a model or an actress.'

She laughed. 'I've done some modelling, but not much. In my country the opportunities aren't as great as over here.' She smiled and added, 'Let's talk about you. I'm sure you're far more interesting. Do you live in London?'

Oliver ignored her. He had the bit between his teeth. Erzsébet had appeared at exactly the right moment. Within half an hour of meeting her, he was turning her into a myth.

'I have a vision of you,' he said teasingly. 'I can see you as a young, elegant Mother Courage.' He motioned with his hands. 'You're pulling an old cart with creaking wheels, full of howling kids, across the Great Hungarian Plain. You're dressed in stinking rags but looking stunning . . .'

She smiled. 'I did do a little acting . . .'

'I knew it! What was it, TV, films, the theatre?'

'Films, in Hungary.'

'I've seen some Hungarian films . . .' began Oliver when Erzsébet shook her head. 'Sorry to disappoint you, but I wasn't a star.'

'I'm surprised. I'm more than surprised, I'm amazed, bloody amazed.'

She laughed but made no mention of Mosfilm.

Already they had developed a secret, personal communication with their eyes. After the traumas of the last few weeks, Oliver felt warm and safe. They stayed together for the rest of the evening. When the party dribbled towards its close, Oliver had no doubt that he would be taking her home.

Apart from the small talk at the party and the love talk in the night, they had their first real conversation in the morning. It was Sunday. Oliver took her to Henley and they sat on the river bank under a large coloured golf umbrella and held hands. In front of them, the gentle June rain pitted the surface of the water.

Oliver kissed her gently on the cheek. 'You've caught me on the rebound,' he said quietly. 'On a massive rebound. And that's not meant to be derogatory. I wanted to be caught. I needed to be caught. It was in my soul to be caught.'

'You mean you've just finished an affair?'

'Oh, no, it's not that sort of rebound.'

Erzsébet looked puzzled.

'It's not to do with a woman, it's to do with my own family.' He paused, then said, 'Three weeks ago my brother was killed in a car accident.'

'I'm sorry. Very sorry.'

'He was in the Army. He had a car accident in France.' Oliver paused, and stared at her, unsure how much further to go. But her face reassured him. 'It was called an accident. The French police said it was an accident.'

'You mean, you think it was something else?'

Oliver nodded. 'But I haven't a shred of proof. Not a thing. The official story is that my brother was alone and his car went off the road and caught fire. But I know there was someone with him. Someone who ran away to another, waiting car. The trouble is, the only witness to that second man won't come forward.'

For a while they were silent. At last she said, 'Why should anyone want to kill your brother?'

'That's another problem, I haven't the faintest idea.'

'Do you have to carry this worry all on your own? What about your father and mother? Surely you should tell them?'

It was all ready to pour out but he held himself back. He was falling in love, if he hadn't already fallen. One day soon he could tell her everything, even about the tape, but that moment wasn't quite here.

Oliver slowly lifted the umbrella. 'Let's celebrate. Let's go and have a bottle of Bollinger and talk about something important like you and me.' He held her and kissed her. 'Let's ask each other why we've been so foolish and wasted so much of our lives.'

They walked back to the car arm in arm.

## 18

Oleg Sergeyeovich was a peasant from generations of peasants. For hundreds of years his ancestors had lived in one-roomed hovels where stairs were unknown. Old ways of life go deep, and for Oleg Sergeyeovich a bedroom wasn't a bedroom unless it was at ground level. In Moscow he had to live in an apartment and hated it, but at the dacha near Barviha he slept in the annexe, his window open wide and the earth no more than three feet below the wooden sill. In Moscow he slept fitfully and only the vodka helped him to a decent night, but here in the country his sleep was as sweet as it had been in his young days beside the Dnieper.

Nellya Dmitrievna knew where his room was but had never been in it. She had once passed when the door was open and glimpsed pin-ups and a rich, quilted bedcover. She made her way there just before midnight, when the night sky was still light and the crickets were alive in the grass. She didn't stop to consider whether she was mad, whether her action would cause her pain or pleasure; it was something she knew she was going to do.

She was surprised to find the annexe door unbolted, the door to Oleg Sergeyeovich's room ajar and the light on. He was lying on the bed in his shirt and trousers, a bottle of vodka, a plate of salt herrings and a bowl of caviare beside him. Open in his hands was a Western girlie magazine.

'I thought you never read?'

'I don't. I just look at the pictures.' He held up the magazine. Nellya saw a nude. She grabbed the magazine and threw it on the floor.

He filled a small glass with vodka and handed it to her. She took the glass and gulped the liquor.

'You needed that,' said Oleg simply, and sat up on the bed and looked at her.

Nellya looked about the room. It was smaller than she had expected, smaller than she was used to, but it was homely in a simple, peasant way. The quilted bedcover she had glimpsed from the corridor was worn and shabby and more like rags sewn together, but it was still the most striking and colourful object in the room.

'My mother made it,' said Oleg, watching her eyes. 'She lived under it and died under it.'

Nellya nodded.

Only the nude pin-ups on the walls contradicted the peasant image. He saw her looking at them and smiled. 'If I'd known you were coming, I'd have covered them up.'

It wasn't a cold night but she shivered. He offered her his own jacket. She put it round her shoulders and smelt the sweat.

'You'd look nice in the KGB,' he said quietly. 'That jacket makes you look really good.'

He took his peaked cap from a chair, put it on her head, then sat back on the bed and looked at her as an artist would look at his model.

'You drive my husband, Anatoly Michailovich. You know where he goes, who he sees.'

Oleg refilled his glass but said nothing.

'You must know a great deal about him, about what he does. Have you ever heard of anyone called Kvali?'

Oleg shook his head, leaned across and refilled Nellya's glass. As he did so, Nellya saw his broad hairy chest and smelt the strong, bitter male sweat. For an instance he leered at her, then the leer turned into a grin and he settled back on the bed.

'Was it Anatoly Michailovich who talked about Kvali?' he asked suddenly.

'He used the name once.'

Oleg started humming to himself, his eyes on Nellya, his hands behind his neck, resting his head.

'He said it was the name of a newspaper . . .'

Oleg seemed uninterested. He held his glass and, instead of staring at Nellya, stared at the colourless liquid.

'But he was lying . . .' The moment she'd spoken, Nellya regretted it. She was talking to her husband's driver, an NCO in the KGB. Her husband was the Chairman of the KGB. The vodka had loosened her tongue and made her make a fool of herself.

Oleg had raised his eyebrows and was looking at her. She felt confused. She grabbed the bottle to refill her glass, but the bottle was empty. Oleg felt down under the bed and produced a full bottle which he opened. Without a word he filled her glass to the brim and handed it to her.

She drank and then stared at the bed.

'Your door was open,' she said quietly. 'Do you always sleep with your door open?'

'When I'm on my own.'

Very deliberately Oleg got up, shut the door, pulled off his shirt then, unzipping his trousers, let them fall to the floor. Without saying a word he got back into bed and left the bedclothes open.

Oleg Sergeyeovich's blankets were as grubby as everything else in the room, but the lamp was dim and the vodka warming. Nellya's head was light. Keeping the cap on, she took off the jacket. Unbuttoning her dress from the back, she let it drop to the ground and stepped out of it just as Oleg had stepped out of his trousers.

'I don't know why I'm doing this,' she said stupidly and looked at Oleg.

He grinned and she let her underclothes fall as her dress had fallen.

Oleg moved across the bed towards the wall. For an instant, Nellya saw herself in the mirror. She thought she looked beautiful and hoped that Oleg thought so too.

The light was on and the window wide open. Oleg was smoking an American cigarette, Nellya lay on her back, staring at the ceiling.

'There's a model, an actress called Kapa . . .' She raised her head and looked into Oleg's face. 'Kapa for Kapitolina.'

'So what?'

'Do you know her, do you know her other name, anything about her.'

He shrugged. 'It doesn't mean anything. There may be an actress called Kapa, there probably is. Actresses have all sorts of names, but that one doesn't mean anything to me.'

'Vera?'

He grunted.

'Maria?'

'Is this some sort of game?' He drew hard on his cigarette. 'Just now you asked me about Kvali. Now you ask me about Kapa, Vera and Maria.' He turned his head and glanced at her. 'What's it all about?'

'It's about a model, an actress. Do you remember that day in the spring when Eugenia Matveyevna had that stupid dress show? There was one woman in particular, tall, at the very back, in the rear row . . .'

Zoya!'

'Zoya!' cried Nellya and remembered the movement of her husband's lips. 'Yes, that could be her name, Zoya!'

'Zoyenka Semyonovna, a stuck-up bitch if ever there was one.'

'You know her?' asked Nellya eagerly.

'Oh, I know her all right.' Oleg put his hand on Nellya's belly. 'Mind you, I don't know her as well as I know you, but I certainly know her.'

'Tell me about her?'

'She's Hungarian. Zoyenka Semyonovna is only one of her names. I don't know her surname, I've never heard it used.' He lit another cigarette and again glanced at Nellya. 'What do *you* know about her?'

'She's my husband's mistress. I saw him looking at her that day. I saw his lips move, I saw him mouth her name.'

Oleg said nothing but sat with his back against the pillow, Nellya's head against the side of his chest.

'You said she was Hungarian so she must have a Hungarian name?'

'Could be. If she has, I don't know it.'

'Does she live in Moscow?'

Oleg nodded. 'In a cosy little apartment at the best end of the Kutuzovsky Prospekt.'

'You've taken my husband there?'

He blew a cloud of smoke towards the ceiling. 'Now, you wouldn't expect me to tell you that, would you? I may be a clot of a peasant, Nellya Dmitrievna, and I may have had a fair amount

of vodka, but I'm no more going to tell you that I take Comrade Chairman Safronov to Zoya's little pad than you're going to tell him that you went to bed with his chauffeur.'

She looked up at him. 'I might tell him.'

He ran the tip of his finger around her lips. 'You won't. Of course you won't.'

Anatoly Michailovich had had many girlfriends since their marriage. He attracted women like a dung heap attracted flies. Zoya, however, was different. The others Nellya could call trash. She'd been hurt and angry before but she'd never hated like she hated now. She had only seen Zoya once but it had been enough. 'It's that cold superiority,' she murmured, 'that bloody elegance . . . *that damned poise . . .*'

'Stuck-up, like I said.' Oleg paused, then said, 'Still, you don't have to worry for a while. She's out of the country, gone to London. She could be there a long time.' He glanced at Nellya. 'You see, this time it's the big one.'

'The big one?' asked Nellya, puzzled.

Oleg nodded. 'The very big one. For one thing the Comrade Chairman's different. I've never known him like it. You'd think it was him that was going. He's changed all the routine. Even got me to take Zoya to Sheremetyevo Airport in his own car.' Oleg paused then said, 'When you think of all those colonels hanging about Dzerzhinsky Square, it's a bloody waste isn't it?'

Nellya looked surprised. 'You mean she works for State Security?'

Oleg nodded. 'I drive for Galina Borisovna,' he said jokingly, using the KGB nickname; 'Zoya lies on her back for it.'

They were silent for a while when Nellya murmured, 'London. Zoya's gone to London . . .'

Oleg nodded, stubbed out his cigarette and began fondling her again. She saw his face in the glow of the lamp and thought him immensely ugly and stupid.

Nellya Dmitrievna was in the Great Palace of the Kremlin, in the magnificent, glittering, white-walled St George's Hall, beneath massive chandeliers and spiralling columns, not because her husband, Anatoly Michailovich, wanted her with him at the reception but because Secretary Daranov believed that Politburo wives softened official functions and enhanced the Soviet image.

Nellya was enjoying herself. There was vodka and champagne and she was sufficiently assured to roam the gathering, smiling and flirting.

Late in the evening she found herself face to face with a tall, handsome man in the uniform of a general. She had no real knowledge of the function of the GRU, but she did know that Victor Nikolaevich Gurenko was to do with Military Intelligence and decided he might well be the man she was looking for.

'A question, Comrade General,' said Nellya provokingly, and indicated the gathering. 'Here we are in the Georgievsky having this great reception for the President of Angola, and yet none of you men are even talking of Africa?'

'Receptions are for the exchange of gossip!' cried Gurenko, laughing. 'A time to speak with beautiful ladies. To talk about a hundred and one things. Everything from caviar and football to . . .'

'The big one?'

Gurenko's eyes half closed, his face hardened. 'What big one?' he asked quickly.

'What do you know about Zoya? Zoyenka Semyonovna?'

Gurenko played his usual game when caught unawares, he frowned momentarily and then assumed his nonchalant look. 'I know of her, of course. Is there something particular I ought to know?'

Nellya was on slippery ground. 'Does Kvali mean anything to you?'

'As a name?' asked Gurenko quickly.

She nodded.

'I have heard of it . . .'

'Is Kvali a person, I mean . . .'

and she stopped.

'Go on, please.'

Nellya felt the bright blue eyes boring down upon her, taking away her will, hypnotising her.

'Something very big is happening . . . something to do with State Security. There is a person called Kvali . . . there is a person, a Hungarian woman called Zoya . . .'

She spoke mechanically, as if her mind no longer worked.

'Zoyenka Semyonovna?'

She nodded.

'Go on, please. You interest me.'

'That's it,' she said vaguely. 'It's to do with something big . . .'

'How do you know, Nellya Dmitrievna, that this event with Zoyenka Semyonovna is to do with something big? Has someone told you?'

She shook her head. 'It's just a feeling,' she murmured. 'No more than a feeling.'

'No more?'

'No, just a feeling.'

'You know nothing about this mysterious Kvali or the Hungarian woman with the Russian name, Zoyenka Semyonovna?' Gurenko looked down into her face. 'I can't help you, unless you tell me everything.'

'Only that Zoyenka Semyonovna has left the country. She's not in Russia now. She's in London.'

Gurenko bowed, excused himself and made his escape.

Nellya stood, a deep sense of anti-climax making her feel lost and alone. She hoped she hadn't made too much of a fool of herself and remembered that she had approached the General in the hope he might have been able to help her. All she had succeeded in doing was helping him.

With her empty glass held in front of her, she set out in search of a waiter.

## 19

'Oliver, are you free on Friday evening?'

He was having three days off and taking Erzsébet out of London to show her the real England. He hadn't a firm timetable: he could be back on Friday or they could go on down to Cornwall. As far as he knew Erzsébet was free.

'I've got two tickets for a Sliwinski concert,' said Sir Adrian, at the other end of the phone. 'At the Festival Hall, seven-thirty.'

The last thing Oliver had expected was that his father would want to take him to a Sliwinski concert. He hadn't mentioned his meeting with Sliwinski in Paris and to meet the pianist with his father could be hugely embarrassing.

Oliver had kept the strange ideas that nagged in the nether regions of his mind well suppressed. Meeting Erzsébet had helped that suppression. There were moments now when he

actually forgot. But to be with his father at a Sliwinski concert and to go backstage afterwards would resurrect it all.

'I appreciate that Chopin isn't exactly your cup of tea, but it's a long time since we had an evening together . . .'

Oliver wanted to leave the weekend free. He had planned it that way. It was crazy to return to London on a Friday. But there was a third person in this conversation neither mentioned. Had Robin been alive and in the country, he'd be the recipient of this phone call, not Oliver. Sir Adrian was pining for his lost son.

'It leaves the weekend free.'

He was a small boy again, bent before his father's will. 'I could make it, I suppose . . .'

'I thought we'd have dinner afterwards. It doesn't have to be at my club. If you know of a place, somewhere quiet, where the wine's decent, where we can have a chat. You know the sort of thing.'

Oliver mentioned a restaurant in Covent Garden and said he'd book a table.

They both hung on the phone as if more had to be said but neither knew quite what. Oliver was full of doubts. Doubts about his father, about committing himself, about leaving Erzsébet.

'How's Mother?' he asked.

'A little better. You haven't been down lately, she'd appreciate a visit.'

'Yes,' said Oliver vaguely, 'I'll get down there soon.'

'Good fellow. See you Friday. I'm off to Washington on Tuesday, but I'm back Thursday evening. I'll be ready to relax by Friday.'

Oliver admired his father's energy.

Nellya Dmitrievna had chosen the moment when Anatoly Michailovich was away and Oleg Sergeyeovich was driving him. She had another servant drive her in the Volga. She said she was tired of the Kremlin shops and wanted to visit Gastronom Number One in Gorky Street. She found a telephone booth near the junction of Gorky Street and Sverdlov Square, and dialled the number she had acquired from a friend.

'*Sovoritie po russku?*'

A woman's voice answered in English. 'I'm sorry, I don't understand. Do you speak English?'

*'Sovoritie po russku?'*

'Hold on one minute. I'll find someone.'

Nellya had no idea what was said, but she held on to the phone in hope.

In the small office she shared with two other correspondents, Ilse also held on to the phone and called to Katia, their translator. Katia took the phone, talked rapidly, animatedly in Russian and made jottings on the pad. Ilse watched the pad.

The phone went dead. Ilse heard the noise of the dialling tone and looked questioningly at Katia. 'Well, what was it all about?'

Katia looked confused. 'It didn't make sense . . .'

Ilse picked up the pad. "'Kvali" . . . "Zoyenka Semyonovna". Are they names?'

Katia made an action as if to tear the paper from the pad, then changed her mind. 'It was a woman . . .' she said vaguely.

'I know it was a woman, I heard her. What did she want? What did she say?'

'She was very excited, very difficult to understand.'

Ilse Lanzmann had been in Moscow five days. She knew very little about the city and nothing about the inhabitants. She had taken over her predecessor's apartment and lived in a block reserved for foreign journalists and diplomats: a policeman, in the regulation wooden cabin, was posted at the entrance to discourage the ordinary Muscovite from entering.

She had yet to break out of her isolation, have phone calls from dissidents or build up contacts of her own. She was feeling her way in a strange, alien world and, when her fellow correspondents were out of the office, the only human near her capable of speaking English was the translator provided by the Ministry of Information.

Katia was devoted to them but, like all Soviet citizens in contact with the Western Press, had to make regular reports to the KGB. Katia's face left no doubt that the telephone conversation would be a matter for the KGB file.

'Come on then, what did she say?'

Katia looked at the pad in Ilse's hand. 'She mentioned a Hungarian woman . . . an actress . . . who's gone to London . . .'

'Zoyenka Semyonovna?'

'Yes, but that's not a Hungarian name.'

'What about Kvali?'

'That's not a name. It's not even a Russian word. It's a Georgian word and means the furrow.'

'Why do you think she wanted to tell us about this woman?'

Katia shrugged. 'I've no idea. She just said that you ought to know. That it was very important.'

Katia said nothing more but it was evident that the call had disturbed her. When the first of Ilse's colleagues returned, neither Ilse nor Katia mentioned the strange phone conversation. Ilse kept it to herself for twenty-four hours then phoned the British Embassy and arranged to meet the Press Attaché for lunch at the Aragvi on Gorky Street.

That afternoon, the details of the phone call were in the hands of the undercover Resident of MI6.

'One?'

'Egy.'

'Two?'

'Két.'

'Three?'

'Három.'

'Please?'

'*Kérem szépen . . . Elég! Elég!* For God's sake, I've had enough!'

Erzsébet laughed. '*Elég is enough food.*'

'To hell with that, we're not looking at the countryside, we're driving straight through! This is Dorset!' cried Oliver, with a sweep of his hand. 'You don't know England until you've seen Dorset.' He thought for a moment, then added, 'And Yorkshire. Dorset and Yorkshire are England.'

Erzsébet said nothing, just stared ahead at the dripping trees, the gentle hills and the rain.

They were on the Sherborne-Dorchester road, winding down the valley of the Cerne. They stopped to admire the Giant, newly cleaned, his blanco white outline dimmed by the wet, then Oliver turned on to a minor road that climbed Dickley and Cowdown Hills. Even through the misty rain and shrouded with their summer crops, the fields still wore their Celtic birth. Then it was down into the warm valley of the Sydling Water.

'The cradle of Britain,' observed Oliver, with satisfaction. 'The beginnings of it all.' He glanced at Erzsébet, and she smiled. 'I'm

talking about two thousand years before you Finno-Ougrians settled in the Carpathian basin.'

'You have been doing your homework.'

'I set out to understand and entertain,' said Oliver modestly. 'I can hardly bring you to Dorset, extol the virtues of Wessex and not know something about your country. It wouldn't be decent.'

'You must let me return the hospitality,' said Erzsébet puckishly. 'You must come to Budapest one day.'

'I will, that's a promise. I'll get a visa next week.'

He turned up a lane, shadowed beneath a group of ancient tumuli, to a Georgian house, now a hotel.

They had the dovecot. A round, domed room of surprising size, white-painted, warm and cosy, with an enormous double bed, whose blue head frame peaked like Gothic arches, and a bathroom that formed the chord that cut the round and had its splendid bath beneath the holes that doves had once called their home.

Erzsébet was enchanted. She delighted in all the little touches: the two bathrobes, the shampoo, the 'goodnight' chocolate, the choice of bedtime reading, the prints on the walls and the soft feminine frills of the bedcover. She cried out that she had seen nothing like it before. She stood in the middle of the room, laughed and wrung her hands in joy. Then she kissed Oliver and announced that it was quite the most wonderful place for a honeymoon. 'You're so very clever, Oliver. I can tell you now, this will be the best honeymoon I've ever had.'

'Have you had many honeymoons?' enquired Oliver.

She thought for a moment, tilted her head and said, 'Not really. Not real honeymoons, not like this one.'

A surge of jealousy made Oliver pry. 'Tell me about some of them?' he asked harshly.

The joy and excitement of the last few moments flickered and died. 'They're not worth recounting, any of them. There's never been a memorable one, never.'

'Not with any of them?'

A glimpse of Anatoly Michailovich flashed through her mind. 'Never!' she said vehemently. '*Never!*'

It was the way she said 'Never' and the hint of tears that made him stop.

That night, as she lay in his arms and he knew he was in love, Oliver promised that the next day would be sunny and bright and

that he would take her to a coast as primeval as the day the earth began.

They got up late and breakfasted late. Soon after ten, the sun came out as Oliver had promised. They drove south to the sea and walked along the shingle until there was no other living person in sight: just the cliffs behind them, the waves in front, the gulls above.

On the drive from London Erzsébet had taken a keen interest in the route. She'd had the map open on her lap. Now, when they sat close together in the shelter of a great rock, she suddenly said, 'You live in Hampshire, which you said was a lovely county, but you take me to Dorset?'

'I explained. Hampshire's all right, but Dorset is really England.'

'We passed a road, you said it led to your home?'

Oliver nodded. 'A long way down. We weren't really very near.'

Until he met Erzsébet he'd seen his mother every week. Now all those journeys to Priors Hurst had stopped.

'My mother hasn't been too well. Until recently I've been down pretty regularly.' He looked at her and smiled.

'You mean, I've taken you away from your filial duty?'

Oliver tightened his arm around her and said nothing.

Erzsébet might well be a modern international woman, with her many languages and her ability to appear at home in England or Timbuktu, but their upbringings couldn't have been more different. Erzsébet was Hungarian, from a Communist state, part of the Eastern bloc. All Oliver knew of Hungary was what he had read.

'Are you a Party member?' he asked suddenly.

She looked surprised and shook her head.

'A Communist?'

'I'm a socialist.'

'But you enjoy being in a capitalist society?'

'Adore it.'

'You're like my mother,' said Oliver, laughing. 'She's a born capitalist yet she used to vote Labour when she was young.'

'Your mother sounds a very sensible woman.'

'She was with her father, my grandfather, in Spain during the

Civil War. She saw Guernica soon after it was bombed. It turned her left for a while.'

They sat staring out to sea. Suddenly Oliver said, 'I have to go back to London on Friday . . .'

Her face fell. 'Another woman? Another date, Oliver? I bet you've got lots of girls, only you don't tell me about them.'

'This is a man,' he said vaguely, but made no mention of his father. Suddenly he brightened and added, 'But there's no reason why we shouldn't go off somewhere on Saturday.'

He wanted time to freeze. Clocks to cease ticking, quartz crystals to stop pulsing. He wanted to lie in the sun with Erzsébet beside him for ever. On this Dorset beach, in this primeval setting, with nothing to remind him of civilisation, he was safe. There were no thermonuclear weapons, no problems, not even families, just the two of them.

But all this would vanish at the Festival Hall. Sitting next to his father, waiting to see Sliwinski, his palms would be wet, his stomach sinking.

'Given one wish, what would it be?'

She thought for a moment, then said, 'I'd like the sea to be warmer, the sun hotter and there to be a nice restaurant on the beach.'

'This is Dorset, England!' he cried. 'Not the south of France. You haven't even got a bloody sea in Hungary!'

'It was nice of you to come.' Sir Adrian spoke without turning his head. 'As I said over the phone, I know that Chopin isn't exactly your choice. Nevertheless, I hope you'll enjoy it.'

Oliver had waited in the foyer. He walked with his father down to their seats.

'How was Washington?'

'Hectic, then it always is.'

They sat, looked at their programmes and chatted.

Sliwinski appeared, was applauded and sat down to play. While his father and the audience was instantly transported by the maestro's first note, the moment the stocky figure walked on to the stage Oliver was reminded of all his doubts and suspicions. He felt stifled sitting next to his father, remembered every detail of Robin's death, and dreaded the dressing-room meeting.

He remembered nothing of the opening of the concert. The first three works slid past without touching his consciousness. He came to during the *Fantaisie-Improptu* in C sharp minor, Opus 66. He came to, not because of the music, or the quality of the playing, but because of the slightest incongruous sound.

Half-way through the work, at the moment when the melody floods out, there was the faintest noise. Masked by the music, just audible between the notes, it sounded like the hiss of a snake and for those few who heard it, in the very front rows of the auditorium, it seemed to emanate from the piano.

Sliwinski appeared momentarily annoyed and distracted. His right hand moved down from the keyboard and he seemed to flick his thigh. He lost a note, but such was his professionalism he quickly recovered. For the next few bars it was as if nothing had happened. He played the second half of the *Fantaisie-Improptu* with his usual perfect touch and interpretation.

Oliver had heard the sound and seen Sliwinski move his hand. He assumed that the pianist had been stung by an insect. When Sliwinski recovered, and played with all his old assurance and fire, Oliver forgot the episode and went back to thinking about the dressing-room meeting after the performance.

There was a lengthy pause. Sliwinski wiped his forehead with his handkerchief, then tentatively began playing the *Improptu* Number 1 in A flat major, Opus 29. The opening bars were laboured, with too much care and deliberation.

Half-way through the work it was apparent that something was seriously wrong. As the music slowed, Sliwinski slowed. He swayed on his stool, gasped, swallowed and struggled to remain upright. For those nearby he seemed to be without breath. Before the final bars, he was missing notes, the allegros were beyond him, his hands had barely the strength to carry across the keyboard. It was obvious he could no longer continue.

Sliwinski collapsed, his legs crumpled and his body slid forward on to the piano. Two men in evening dress and a woman in a brilliant turquoise gown ran on from the wings. The stage lights dimmed, the house lights came up and the stage manager asked if there was a doctor in the audience. Two men got up from their seats and climbed on to the stage. The tall, formidable form of Sliwinski's minder, Grace Kuberski, knelt and cradled the stricken man's head.

There was the hush of shock, then the auditorium filled with

the buzz of bewildered questioning. Oliver tried to get forward on to the stage, but his way was blocked.

'I hope it's nothing too serious,' observed Sir Adrian anxiously. 'It could have been the heat, it's a warm evening. I think we should go and enquire.'

Sir Adrian had his minder. The detective, who had been at the back of the auditorium, came down the gangway and cleared a path for Sir Adrian and Oliver to the stage.

Sliwinski lay on the boards. Two doctors from the audience knelt beside him, Kuberski held his head and a knot of theatre officials in evening dress and stage hands in jeans and T-shirts formed his audience.

'Did you hear that sound?' asked Oliver. 'Like the hiss of escaping air?'

Sir Adrian shook his head. The detective at the back of the Hall had heard nothing but the music.

Sliwinski had his eyes open and was conscious, but could neither speak properly nor move. One doctor was massaging his chest, the other feeling his pulse. Sir Adrian shuffled a little nearer and enquired how bad it was.

One of the doctors looked up and saw the Foreign Secretary standing behind him, peering down with evident concern.

'There's paralysis . . . ' said the doctor and his colleague nodded.

'We've called an ambulance,' said a voice.

'I knew he'd overdo it,' said Kuberski. 'I've been warning him for days, but he wouldn't listen to me.'

On the inside of Sliwinski's thigh, a few inches below his groin, was a small red spot, scarcely visible on the dark grey of his trousers. Oliver saw it first.

'He flicked at his thigh when he was playing,' said Oliver. 'I thought he'd been stung.'

Sliwinski understood for he tried to move his hand down his leg. One of the doctors opened Sliwinski's flies and inserted a hand. He brought his hand out with the fingers covered in blood. 'There's something sticking in his flesh, something hard, I can feel it.'

The doctors cut open the top of Sliwinski's trousers and pants. In the flesh of his leg was a black hole, no more than a few millimetres in diameter. Blood welled from the hole and trickled down the leg.

Oliver was no longer looking at Sliwinski but at the piano. He wasn't thinking, just staring, remembering the hiss like the hiss of a snake. The piano hadn't been touched since Sliwinski had collapsed. Oliver looked up under the keyboard. The underside was in shade and at first he could see nothing, just the flat base. Carefully he felt with his fingertips, then recoiled as if stung. Fixed between the two upright legs that held the pedals was a small, dark box. Pointing from the box, straight into Oliver's face, was a narrow tube like the muzzle of a pistol.

They said nothing in the taxi. Oliver's mind was teeming with disjointed thoughts. Elements of supposition that had percolated down to his nervous system had left him chilled. He should have been warmed and comforted by the presence of his father, but he wasn't. He had so much to pour out, but his father was the last person for his confidences. He wished he had refused concert and dinner, and longed to be with Erzsébet.

Sir Adrian was relieved to find the restaurant dimly lit and the tables well spaced. He was even more relieved to find his own table in the corner far from eavesdroppers and the curious. Satisfied with his venue, he settled back in his chair, unfolded his napkin, tucked it into top of his jacket, and ordered a large Scotch. Oliver joined him.

'For Christ's sake!' cried Oliver, unable to contain himself any longer. 'That was an assassination attempt! Someone's just tried to murder Sliwinski!'

'I left instructions that we are to be kept informed . . .' said Sir Adrian gravely and sipped his drink while studying the menu.

Oliver might have felt reassured by the use of the word 'we' but he wasn't. He was angry, frightened and frustrated.

'I don't understand you, Dad! I can't figure you out!'

'What don't you understand?' asked Sir Adrian patiently.

'Your lack of concern . . .'

'I'm greatly concerned, I can assure you. Deeply concerned. It's been a most distressing evening. One of the most distressing evenings I can remember.'

'You didn't even look under the piano. You never saw that thing. It was a sort of pistol. It had been fixed with the muzzle aimed at the thigh of whoever was playing the piano . . .'

'Scotland Yard will take all that into account. The matter is now in their hands.'

'Is that all you can say?'

'That is all that it is prudent to say at the moment.'

'But I saw the damn thing! It was a sort of gun!'

Sir Adrian ignored Oliver's outburst and gave their order. Suddenly Oliver blurted out, 'I went to France the other day. I went to see where Robin was killed.'

Sir Adrian nodded. 'I know, I heard about it.' He smiled. 'As you're a Freemantle, and my son, things like that filter back to me.' He looked grave. 'I hope you didn't find the journey too harrowing. Personally, I'm glad you made the visit rather than me.'

'Robin wasn't alone in that car,' said Oliver quietly.

Sir Adrian said nothing.

Oliver glanced at his father. 'There was someone with him. Someone who ran to another car and left Robin to die in the blaze.'

'Are you sure you know what you're saying?' asked Sir Adrian carefully.

'Yes.'

There was a pause then Sir Adrian said, 'You are quite certain there was a second party?'

'Absolutely certain.'

Sir Adrian stroked his chin. 'Did you put this matter to the French police?'

Oliver shook his head.

'Why not?'

'The person who told me wouldn't go to the police.'

'Ah,' said Sir Adrian in his best lawyer's voice. 'Perhaps he didn't think his evidence would stand up to cross examination?'

'It was nothing to do with that. He was married and had been with a woman. He didn't want anyone to know. But what he said to me in confidence, I believed. He told me he saw a man, silhouetted against the flames, running from the burning car to another waiting car.'

'Did your witness get a description of this second man?'

Oliver shook his head. 'It was all too quick.'

'Pity,' said Sir Adrian with more than a touch of sarcasm.

The detective appeared and informed Sir Adrian that Sliwinski was in intensive care in St Thomas's Hospital.

When the detective withdrew, Sir Adrian said, 'If there was a second person present in the car, and the French police have been negligent, then I shall obviously have a word with the Minister of Justice.' He glanced at his son. 'I take it you know the name of your reluctant witness?'

'We weren't introduced. It wasn't that sort of meeting.'

'His address? His whereabouts?'

'He was working on a building site. I know where it was, I could always find it again.'

'How did you find him in the first place?'

Oliver felt as trapped as a rabbit in a gin. He was in the witness box, his father was the prosecuting counsel. As he waited for Oliver's answer, Sir Adrian sipped his wine and glanced at his son.

If Oliver was under stress, so was Sir Adrian. Beads of sweat covered his brow and temple and his hand shook.

Oliver had said enough and wished to say no more. Sick at heart he realised he no longer trusted his own father.

'Where did you find him?' repeated Sir Adrian.

The answer choked in Oliver's throat. Since the switch in tapes, he'd had thoughts about his father that he dared not put into words. But when faced with thinking, when the night was long and dark, he was convinced that he had strayed into a dangerous conspiracy, although what that conspiracy was, he couldn't define.

'If there was some other factor in Robin's death unknown to the police, and you know about it, Oliver, it is your duty to speak out.'

Robin had resembled his father. When Oliver looked at his father now it was impossible not to remember his brother. The vision of the one seemed to fade neatly into the reality of the other. It was the memory of Robin, the fact that they shared a common father, that caused the sudden switch in Oliver's mind.

Robin had been Sir Adrian's son. If there was a conspiracy, it was inconceivable that his father could be involved.

'Beside the road where Robin's car crashed there's a field with half a dozen cows. While I was there the farmer arrived to milk them. I got talking to him. He took me to the man on the building site.'

Sir Adrian gently squeezed his son's arm.

Over port, Sir Adrian talked as he had never talked with Oliver before. He talked of his last visit to Washington, recounted stories about the American administration, joked gently about the Secretary of State and made wry comments about the President. Oliver realised that he had inherited Robin's mantle. When they had dined together in the past, as they often had, his father must have let his hair down with Robin as he was now letting it down with Oliver.

'Henry VIII had syphilis, Napoleon's piles were so bad at Waterloo he couldn't mount his horse, Pope Leo VIII died copulating, Goering was a morphine addict, Hitler a misogynist and Selwyn Lloyd wore a false moustache, and we still haven't found anything better to lead us than run-of-the-mill humans. People with all the gifts, all the failings the Creator could think of bestowing.' Sir Adrian chuckled. 'It's the same East or West. Humanity is the same old kind, kinky, cruel matter wherever you are. There are as many honest men in the Kremlin as there are in the US Senate and as many rogues too.' He stared into his glass and sighed. 'It's very humbling really. We politicians stick our necks out, go on our own ego trip, beg people to trust us, give promises, get elected, and then more often than not let everyone down.'

'Have you let everyone down?'

Sir Adrian tilted his head. 'There hasn't been a war . . .'

'That's been your yardstick?'

'As Foreign Secretary, yes. It's meant helping to keep the balance of terror, maintaining the MAD philosophy of Mutually Assured Destruction and that's not a nice thing to have to espouse.'

'And you really believe in that?' asked Oliver.

'Absolutely,' said Sir Adrian without a second's hesitation. 'It's been the possession of nuclear weapons by both superpowers that's kept the peace for forty years. There are enough hawks on both sides to precipitate a Sarajevo. Indeed, if you look around the world there have been enough Sarajevos to light the powder keg a dozen times. That is, had it been just an ordinary, conventional powder keg.'

Sir Adrian warmed to the subject. His eyes shone, he mopped his brow with his table napkin and spoke with great fervour.

'The most dangerous scenario possible is that one or other of the superpowers should appear to be gaining an ascendancy in

nuclear weapons. If the scales of the balance of terror even *seem* to be tilting, the result would be devastating.'

'But surely,' asked Oliver, 'as America's ally, if the scales are tilted at all, you should want them to tilt in their favour?'

'That would be disastrous!' cried Sir Adrian. 'Absolutely disastrous! Were the Russians to see such a thing happening, their hawks, and they've plenty in their Defence Ministry, would demand an immediate pre-emptive strike. It would be the end of the world!'

'In that case, you can hardly be enthusiastic about the President's Star Wars programme? If that works, it's going to shatter your Mutually Assured Destruction. The Russians' missiles won't be worth a damn.'

'Until we can have real, supervised multilateral nuclear disarmament, the top priority for any politician is to ensure that neither superpower gains the ascendancy in nuclear weapons or space systems. It's the only way mankind can sleep peacefully in their beds.' Sir Adrian paused, then added very quietly, 'It's current research that worries me.'

'You mean, in America, on SDI?'

'Research is a progressive thing,' said Sir Adrian darkly. 'Unfortunately it isn't something that stops and stays still. Nowadays it can move astonishingly fast. Faster even than the expectations it fosters.' He glanced at his son. 'Even current ideas on SDI aren't the end of the road. It's quite conceivable that in a few years one side will acquire the capability of producing a weapon that would make the existing weapons on the other side not just obsolete, but a liability!'

'You mean the Americans have something *beyond Star Wars*?'

Sir Adrian didn't answer. 'You know what would happen then, don't you?' he asked after a while. 'The disadvantaged side would strike *before* the advantaged side could put its new weapon into production. The holocaust would be upon us.'

Sir Adrian looked at his watch and called for the bill.

'I'll drop you off on the way home,' he said, and took out his cheque book.

In the taxi, Sir Adrian was as silent as he had been garrulous during dinner. As he dropped Oliver off he said, 'I'll keep in touch about Stefan Sliwinski, and thank you for telling me about

Robin. I'll see what I can do about that.' Then he smiled and added, 'Be a good chap and keep that other conversation we had under your hat. I just wanted you to understand, that's all.'

'Understand?' asked Oliver.

'Understand,' said Sir Adrian and shut the cab door.

## 20

'You're back from your mystery outing earlier than I expected. Wasn't she very co-operative?'

Oliver let the joke pass and helped himself to a brandy.

'I went to a concert tonight . . . you've heard of Stefan Sliwinski . . . ?'

'Of course, who hasn't? Was he the artist?'

Oliver nodded. 'Twenty minutes into the concert he collapsed.' Oliver stared at Erzsébet. 'It wasn't an ordinary illness, he didn't have a heart attack or anything like that. Someone tried to kill him.'

'Someone tried to kill Sliwinski?' cried Erzsébet in disbelief.

Oliver nodded.

'They tried to kill him in the concert hall, in public, in front of everyone?'

Oliver recounted the details, omitting only that he was with his father. She listened intently and when he finished just shook her head. Oliver was surprised.

'First it was my brother, Robin, now it's Sliwinski. It's odd, isn't it, horribly odd?'

She still said nothing'

'Don't you think it's odd?'

'In the case of your brother, you told me that the French police said it was an accident. In the case of Sliwinski, if someone wanted to kill him, why do it in front of a concert hall full of people? I find that the oddest thing.'

'You don't find it odd that I knew them both?'

'I didn't know that you knew Sliwinski. You never told me you knew him.' She came and sat by him and put her arm around him. 'I'm glad I was here. I should have hated you being on your own tonight.'

For a while they were silent, then Oliver said, 'I must go down and see my mother, I haven't seen her for ages.' He held Erzsébet close as if he might lose her. 'But I'll be back tomorrow evening. We can still go out Sunday.'

'The weekend is getting shorter and shorter,' observed Erzsébet wryly. 'First we were to have five days together, then two days and now just Sunday.'

'I'll make it up to you, I promise.'

He awoke in the night, with Erzsébet beside him, his arm curled around her, her hair across his face. He listened to her gentle, rhythmic breathing yet the pleasures of having her close didn't stop him thinking.

He'd told Erzsébet only so much; he had very deliberately stopped well short of touching on the mystery he believed surrounded his father. He would have liked to wake her now and tell her the rest, starting with the tape, but he wasn't sure that he could. Yet without that information, none of his anxieties made sense. Nor had he told her who his father was. It had become an obsession to keep that a secret. Yet that too was an essential ingredient in his story, the cornerstone of his fears.

The effect of the drink had worn off, darkness encompassed him and his conversation with his father began to assume gigantic proportions. Every word Sir Adrian had uttered grew in significance.

His father might call himself an ordinary person, but he was certainly in a most extraordinary position. He was the British Foreign Secretary. He moved from capital to capital and talked with the world's leaders. He was privy to the secrets of government. He knew what the Americans were doing, to a lesser degree he knew what the Russians were doing. He was as informed as any human could be, so when he said that his greatest fear would be the apparent ability of one superpower to change the balance of terror, he must have had good grounds for expressing that fear.

By implication the MAD philosophy of Mutually Assured Destruction was about to end.

The concern about research, the hint that the SDI programme was only a step to something beyond, was the seed. Oliver's sci-fi vision was limited, but it wasn't the hardware of the nuclear

holocaust that concerned him, nor at that moment his own possible obliteration, but the web in which he now found himself, the strands of which were becoming ominously clearer.

To allow his mind the freedom to think was a momentous effort. His father had made two points last night. The first, that he was committed, with a missionary fervour, to keeping the balance of terror: the second, that he wanted Oliver to understand.

Oliver was just beginning to understand, and the implications were stunning. If his father really was a foreign agent – and the thought was still hypothetical – then, to live with the concept, Oliver had to metamorphose the traitor into something more acceptable.

He chose a statesman form of Robin Hood. A man of great international wisdom who stole from the powerful and gave to the weak. But upon closer inspection, that was no more than a romantic illusion. There was still Robin's death.

Oliver heard of Sliwinski's death over the car radio. The greatest exponent of Chopin this century had died early in the morning in St Thomas's Hospital, London. The cause of death was not given but Scotland Yard's Special Branch had been called in.

As he drove down to Priors Hurst, Oliver tried to assess exactly where Sliwinski had fitted into the web, and why he had had to be eliminated. He saw the pianist as a courier, and idly wondered whether in the world of the web all couriers were eventually extinguished.

Now that he had made the quantum leap concerning his father, Oliver felt strangely calm. He himself wasn't a courier and therefore might expect to be safe. On the other hand, so far as he knew, Robin hadn't been a courier either.

Lady Eleanor was seated at her desk, surrounded by all the paper paraphernalia of her business. Oliver hadn't seen her for several weeks and was shocked by her appearance. All the old grey was back in her face, her cheeks were sunken, her neck so thin it made her dress appear several sizes too large, and her hair lank and lifeless. Yet in spite of her evident illness, there was a strange youthfulness about her. The cancer that was consuming her had also cleared her skin.

They exchanged gentle kisses and Oliver took his mother's hand. Although it was summer, the fingers were white with cold.

'How are you feeling?'

She gave a faint smile. 'Tired . . .'

'Are you still having treatment?'

She nodded. 'Molly takes me . . .'

'Have you heard about Stefan Sliwinski?'

Her face clouded. 'That was very sad, very sad indeed. Your father rang me just now.'

'We were there last night at the concert . . .'

She nodded.

'You do know that he was assassinated, don't you? That someone murdered him?'

She shook her head, closed her eyes and murmured, 'Terrible, quite terrible. Why should anyone want to kill a nice man like Stefan Sliwinski?'

They prepared a salad lunch and were sitting down together, when Oliver suddenly said, 'Agents, spies, moles, call them what you like. They really are men of great courage, aren't they, Mother?'

Lady Eleanor turned her head. 'What an astonishing remark!'

'What do you think of them, Mother?' asked Oliver eagerly. 'We never give agents the honour they deserve, do we? We call them traitors when they're heroes. I bet there aren't any spies' names on the war memorials and yet working on their own, behind the lines, they're braver than ordinary combatants. I think they're bloody brave, and some of them must have real, deeply held beliefs. We should make much more of them. We should go about rooting for agents and moles.'

He'd spoken with a feverish fervour. His mother looked at him with astonishment. 'Oliver, are you sure you're all right? Are you quite sure you're not feeling ill?'

He'd gone too far to stop. It was all about to pour out. What he'd been unable to say to his father and to Erzsébet, he could say to his mother. If it shocked her, he was sorry, but he could no longer control himself.

'I'm fine, perfectly well. In fact, I've never felt better. You see, I'm just beginning to understand something that's puzzled me for weeks. Why shouldn't a great statesman, one of the world's leaders, believe that he had a mission?'

Lady Eleanor pulled her pullover closer around her shoulders,

toyed with her piece of lettuce, gave Oliver a glance and said, 'Really, Oliver, I'm in no mood for this sort of thing. If you want to talk rubbish, go and talk it to someone else.'

'It's not rubbish, Mother, it's deadly serious. I want you to think about it. Why can't there be a sort of statesman Robin Hood?' He saw his mother's face. 'Oh, I'm not talking about miserable little spies like Burgess, Blunt or Maclean, I'm talking about a man of great integrity who really believes *that what he is doing is saving the world!* Why shouldn't that be possible? It's only the obverse of a Monsignor Bruce Kent or a Professor E. P. Thompson. Just because you're on the other side doesn't mean you haven't got integrity.'

Lady Eleanor got up and went to the sideboard. 'I fancy a glass of wine,' she said quietly. 'Would you like one?'

Oliver nodded. Lady Eleanor laid an open bottle and two glasses on the table. Oliver filled the glasses.

'Last night, after the Festival Hall, I had dinner with Dad. We'd had a pretty traumatic evening. Dad had had a lot to drink, we both had. Did you know that he had a missionary zeal about nuclear weapons and Mutually Assured Destruction? He's obsessed with the fear that one side will acquire the capability of changing the balance and the other side will act before it's too late. In effect, we get Armageddon by trying to avoid it!'

'Maintaining the status quo in nuclear weapons and working for multilateral disarmament isn't an uncommon belief amongst thinking people,' said Lady Eleanor quietly.

'Ah, but Dad also wanted me to understand something. At first I couldn't think what he meant, then I remembered what he had said earlier. After that, bits of the jigsaw began to fit together.'

'Jigsaw?'

'The tape . . . Sliwinski's murder . . .'

'I really don't know what you are talking about, Oliver. All I hope is that that terrible experience you had in the Falklands hasn't had any permanent effect.'

'Sliwinski was murdered *because he was a courier!*' cried Oliver. 'He brought the tape . . .'

'He brought the tape . . .' repeated Lady Eleanor vaguely. 'What do mean, he brought the tape?'

'Don't ask me any more, because I don't know any more. All I do know is that something very strange is happening, and it's all centred around Dad!'

'Stop! Stop! Stop!' cried Lady Eleanor and put her hands to her ears. 'For heaven's sake stop talking like that!' She was silent for a moment, then she pushed her plate away and sighed. 'I do find this conversation most distressing, Oliver.' She gave her son a sad, pleading look. 'Do you really have to continue with it?'

Oliver took a deep breath and blurted out, 'Dad's an agent, a Soviet agent!'

Lady Eleanor's jaw fell, her mouth opened, slowly she shook her head. 'You're mad, Oliver, quite mad! You can't possibly know what you're saying.'

'He's a Soviet agent!' Oliver was so tense, he shook as he shouted the words.

'Your father is a most distinguished man, a most respected man. A man of great integrity!'

'Now very close to an alcoholic!'

Helplessly Lady Eleanor shook her head. 'Oh, Oliver, dear, you just don't understand, do you? Your father has great responsibilities. Strains of that sort take their toll on any man!'

'It's more than that, much more, and you know it. Everyone's talking about his drinking, the Press are full of it. It isn't just his job that's sent him on the booze.'

'I'll hear no more, Oliver, not another word! You're talking absolute rubbish. Your father is a Cabinet Minister, the British Foreign Secretary!'

'So his spying opportunities are all the greater, aren't they?' cried Oliver. 'He must have access to information the Russians would give their eyes for. As for his position, that's fabulous cover. Blunt looked after the Queen's pictures, a former head of MI5 was a Soviet agent. All Dad's done is to get on better than any of the others and no one would ever suspect the Foreign Secretary. They'd be mad if they did!'

Lady Eleanor got up from the table, went to the window and stood looking out across the lawn.

'I think it best if I forget this conversation, forget it completely. It's as if you had never spoken.'

'Too much fits together . . .' said Oliver and was about to mention Robin's death but stopped.

'It only fits together in your poor mind, Oliver, nowhere else.' Lady Eleanor swept towards her son and hugged him. 'I do wish you had a nice, steady girlfriend, someone with whom you could

share your joys and sorrows, someone who would understand you. You need a woman very close to you, Oliver, someone to love you. It would make such a difference in your life.'

The unspoken words were that she was ill and would soon die. 'I have someone.'

Lady Eleanor seemed surprised, then her eyes opened wide with joy. 'You have?'

Oliver nodded.

Lady Eleanor beamed. 'I'm so pleased, Oliver dear, so very, very pleased. That's the best news I've had in ages. The best news I've heard all year. Tell me about her.'

Oliver was surprised and delighted by his mother's reaction.

'She's Hungarian . . . works in London for Malév . . . she's a good linguist, intelligent, calm and very gentle, she has a slightly Eastern look, she's tall . . .'

'Her name?'

'Erzsébet. Erzsébet Sándor.'

Oliver felt the old, frail arms compressing him. He was astonished at her strength. She raised her face and kissed her son on his forehead. 'I'm so very glad, Oliver dear, so very glad. I hope you will both be very happy.'

His mother's affection amazed him as did the assumption that his friendship with Erzsébet would be permanent.

Although there was no one else in the room, Lady Eleanor suddenly whispered, 'Take Erzsébet away somewhere, somewhere beautiful and very romantic. There are some lovely islands in the Indian Ocean.'

'I will one day . . .' said Oliver, pleased.

'Take her *now*.'

'Now?'

Lady Eleanor nodded. 'As soon as you can.'

'Why now?' asked Oliver anxiously. 'Why do you tell me to take her away now?'

'I want you to enjoy your life while you're young.'

'Is this anything to do with Robin . . .' he asked quickly, and wished he hadn't spoken.

She didn't answer, nor did she look at him. They went out into the hall, the dog got up from his place just inside the door and waddled towards his mistress. Without another word to her son, as if he no longer existed, as if their conversation had been no more than a dream, Lady Eleanor went out into the garden, the

dog walking slowly behind her. She crossed the lawn to the rose beds. The blooms were dying, but she held each fading head with reverence.

Oliver watched her until she disappeared from his view, then got into his car and drove quickly away.

Two miles from Priors Hurst, on a narrow road that suddenly straightened and gave a good view in both directions, he glanced into his mirror. A black Sierra had just appeared a hundred and fifty yards behind him. There was nothing special about the Sierra, he couldn't even read its number plate, but with a sickening feeling he realised that he had seen the car before. Several times on the journey down he had noticed the black Sierra behind him. On the motorway it had caused him no concern; on a Hampshire lane it was a different matter.

'You're chain smoking, I didn't know you even smoked.'

'I don't,' he said angrily, and stubbed out the cigarette. He refilled his glass and said, 'I bought a packet on the way back. The first packet in four years.'

Erzsébet was sitting looking at him, a puzzled expression on her face.

'Four years ago, I had a bad experience. I was in a helicopter when it was shot down off the Falklands.'

'You never told me.'

He shrugged. 'It didn't seem very important. I wasn't a combatant, just a photographer, and that job was set up . . .'

'But now, suddenly, it is important.'

He didn't answer her question but asked if she thought he was mad.

She laughed. 'I hadn't really noticed it.'

'My mother thinks I'm mad. She thinks my famous war experience has deranged me. She believes I'm suffering from that spell in the icy ocean.' Oliver glanced at Erzsébet. 'Talking of oceans, my mother suggested that I took you away on holiday to a beautiful, romantic island in the Indian Ocean.'

'That was nice of her.'

'And most out of keeping.' Oliver paused then added, 'She thinks you're good for my welfare.'

'Then why the cigarettes and the Scotch? Am I that much of a strain on you?'

Oliver went to the window and looked down. A man was standing fifty yards away on the other side of the street staring in their direction. Oliver beckoned to Erzsébet. While they watched, the man got into a small Renault and continued his watch from the comfort of the driver's seat.

'We're being watched,' said Oliver grimly. 'Or rather I am. I was trailed today.'

'Why should you be trailed?'

Oliver shrugged. 'That's just the trouble, I've no clear idea, at least no crystal clear idea.' He picked up the evening paper and held it out towards her. 'It ties up, but it doesn't tie up, if you understand me.'

She shook her head.

Oliver indicated the paper. 'I told you about my brother Robin, I told you about Stefan Sliwinski. In case you didn't know, Sliwinski died this morning. According to the paper he was poisoned. They've done it before with an *émigré* Bulgarian journalist in London. Then they shot a pellet of ricin into his leg. With Sliwinski they shot it into the flesh of his thigh.'

'They?' asked Erzsébet. 'Who exactly are they?'

'The people who don't like me.'

'Why don't they like you?'

He tossed up in his mind whether to tell her everything, but the coin came down tails.

'All I want to know is, am I mad?'

'Of course you're not. You're just scared, that's all.'

He should have been relieved that he was sane, but sanity brought its own fearful reality. In spite of his mother's defence of his father, he had no doubt that his accusation was true. His father was a Soviet agent, and Oliver was now laden with that terrible information. It sat upon him like a boulder.

'Let's talk about you!' he cried. 'For God's sake let's talk about you!'

Lady Eleanor's phone call worried Colonel Symington. She had sounded uncharacteristically overwrought and talked vaguely of 'tidying up' and said that she needed his help.

He went down to Priors Hurst with considerable misgivings. He had hardly got out of his own car before he was whisked into Lady Eleanor's old Volvo Estate and driven erratically ten miles to

an Iron Age hill-fort. It was there, on the hilltop, with the dog Septimius Severus trailing behind them and a gentle south-westerly dappling the sky with clumps of high cumulus, that Lady Eleanor suddenly said, 'Freddy, last summer, at that gala performance at the National, you introduced me to a man called Khaleen, Abdulrahman Khaleen. Tell me more about him.'

The Colonel gave her a glance. 'I don't really know all that much. He's reputed to be a Kuwaiti and as I'm sure you found out for yourself he's exceedingly plausible and charming.'

'An anti-Zionist?'

The Colonel shrugged. 'He supports the PLO openly enough, but is careful to denounce international terrorism. He's like so many of them, a godfather to anyone who wants to take a potshot at the Israelis, yet manages to keep his own hands clean.'

'Is he in London at the moment?'

'That I would have to find out,' said the Colonel cautiously.

'I want his address.'

It was some time before the Colonel replied. At last he said, 'On the phone you said you wanted to "tidy things up". What exactly did you mean by that?'

The path took them through the entrance to the ancient ramparts. They scaled the first bank, dipped into the ditch, then climbed slowly up the slant of the inner bank. Lady Eleanor had great difficulty breathing. The Colonel took her arm. He was surprised at the frailty of the limb; it was like holding nothing but bone.

'Do you want to go back?' he asked gently.

Lady Eleanor shook her head.

'Are you sure you can manage it?'

She stopped and surveyed the towering ramparts. 'I've always got to the top, I must get to the top now.'

They walked slowly on and upwards to where the natural shape of the hill took over again and the countryside lay open and toy-like before them. The Colonel took off his coat and laid it on the grass. They sat together and, after a while, Lady Eleanor slipped her hand into the Colonel's hand.

'No heroics,' she said quietly, 'no self-pity, just a fact. I haven't got all that long . . .'

'I may not be ill,' said the Colonel sombrely, 'but I'm seventeen years older than you and I doubt if I've got all that much time

either.' He shook his head and added, 'And that doesn't particularly worry me. I don't want all that much more time. Not now. Not any more.'

Their entwined fingers tightened.

'Then you know exactly what I meant by "tidying things up",' said Lady Eleanor, staring out over the fields and woods that patterned the landscape. 'Things have got out of hand.' She hesitated, searching for her words. 'Things have got difficult . . . hurtful . . . messy.' She glanced at the Colonel. 'Don't you think things have got very messy, Freddy?'

'You're an astonishing woman, Eleanor, a most astonishing and wonderful woman. I've never seen such strength, not even in a man.'

She laughed. 'Oh, Freddy, you're so old-fashioned. Strength isn't the monopoly of men, if it was, you'd have the babies. You've been asking me what I meant by tidying up. I'm asking you whether things haven't got very messy?'

'They've been messy for years,' said the Colonel grimly. 'Bloody mesay.'

'Then trust me. Tell me Khaleen's address.'

He looked into her face. 'It's different for you, Eleanor, quite different. You . . .'

and he stopped.

'I said trust me. I want Khaleen's address. Or better still, I want you to arrange a meeting for me. I'll meet him up here, if you think it's a suitable place?'

The Colonel shook his head. 'This is far too beautiful a place to meet a man like Khaleen. It's a place of good memories.'

'I don't want to travel far, it's too tiring.'

'Of course.' The Colonel thought. 'What about a National Trust house, say The Vine, it's not far away.'

She laughed and said, 'And very, very respectable.'

'I'll try and fix it and let you know, time and date.'

'Soon, Freddy, soon,' she said with great urgency. 'I haven't got long.'

'I'll make it as soon as I can.'

She squeezed his hand. 'Thanks, Freddy, thanks a lot.' She kissed him on the cheek with cold lips.

They sat silently, hand in hand, staring out at the beauty of the land, watching a herd of cows grazing on the lower slope, miniatures that might have been made of lead.

The tears that the Colonel had controlled for so long began to

trickle down his cheek. If Lady Eleanor saw them, she showed no sign. She struggled to her feet and said in a businesslike voice that it was time to go as she was getting cold.

They walked slowly and painfully back the way they had come, Lady Eleanor leaning on the Colonel's arm. Only once, just before they reached the car, did the Colonel speak and that was to mutter. 'I hope to God, Eleanor, that you know what you're doing?'

'It *has* all got very messy, Freddy, hasn't it?' said Lady Eleanor as if discussing the contents of a cupboard. 'It really is time to tidy the whole thing up. I like to think that when I go I've left the place neat.' She glanced up into the Colonel's face. 'If you know what I mean, Freddy?'

The Colonel didn't answer. He knew what she meant and yet, thank God, he didn't.

## 21

Marshal Bukovsky got up from his desk and went to the window. The day was fine, the few clouds staying well above the Moscow skyline. He saw Gurenko's car turn across Gogol Boulevard into Frunze Street and stop outside the Defence Ministry. The Marshal went back to his desk and waited. Two minutes later, Gurenko was ushered into his office.

The Marshal indicated a chair. Gurenko sat, his briefcase on his lap.

'Well, Victor Nikolaevich, what have you brought me this time?'

Gurenko opened his briefcase, took out a slim folder and handed it to the Marshal. 'You read the first report on Project Blue Snow, Marshal?'

The Marshal nodded grimly but said nothing.

'It's a difficult one, Comrade Marshal. A case of putting fragments together.' Gurenko indicated the file now in the Marshal's hands. 'Those are the comments of the Chief of the Directorate of Cosmic Intelligence. You will understand from that, Comrade Marshal, that the time-scale envisaged in any possible deployment of actual weapons systems is considerable.'

The Marshal opened the file and glanced at the pages. 'Considerable? What is meant by considerable?'

'We are talking about the early part of the next century.'

The Marshal laughed. 'A lot can happen between now and then, Victor Nikolaevich. The world may be a very different place. Certainly, at the rate we're going, Russian will be a very different place.'

Gurenko said nothing.

The Marshal waved the file. 'But is it practicable? That's what no one will tell me. Can such a system *ever* be put into operation? Or is it, as Academician Yerokhin said, all science fiction?'

Gurenko shrugged. 'We know that the Americans are working on it, Marshal. They don't follow blind alleys for long. It's true that so far we only have an outline, but details are expected shortly.'

The Marshal looked at the file. Suddenly he said, 'We know damned little, Victor Nikolaevich, in hard facts, almost nothing. The point is, do we know as much as the KGB?'

Gurenko nodded.

'You're certain of that?'

Gurenko wasn't certain but, in view of the problems, obstacles and secrecy the GRU had so far encountered in their search for information, he believed it a reasonable assumption.

'Certain, Comrade Marshal, quite certain.'

The Marshal's eyes half closed. His broad face grew even broader. 'In that case we know as much as the Chairman of State Security *and* the Secretary-General?'

'Most certainly.'

'Good! Excellent! That should allow me to ask a few awkward questions tomorrow.' As an afterthought he snorted, 'All this effort for something that might never even exist!'

'There's another side to Blue Snow, Comrade Marshal,' said Gurenko and stopped.

The Marshal looked puzzled. 'Another side? What side?'

In the car, on the way to the Defence Ministry, Gurenko had debated with himself whether to share his new information. Strictly speaking, it was not to do with the task the Marshal had given him. It was merely related to it. Technically he would be correct in keeping the information to himself.

'In connection with Project Blue Snow, has any mention been made of Kvali at the Politburo meeting, Comrade Marshal?'

The Marshal winced. 'As you know quite well, Victor Nikolaevich, I am not a full member of the Politburo, but I do see most of the papers and the minutes. The answer to your question is that I have never seen nor heard the name. Why do you ask?'

'The KGB have deployed considerable resources in their quest for information on Blue Snow.'

The Marshal nodded. 'That was agreed at the May Politburo meeting . . .'

'They have deployed a certain woman agent, a personal friend of the Chairman for State Security.'

The Marshal grinned. 'Comrade Safronov's a randy bugger, the randiest bugger in Russia. But it does surprise me that he's sent one of his own women. Perhaps he wants to get rid of her?'

'She's in London at the moment.'

'London?' cried the Marshal. 'Why London, why not Washington or Los Angeles?'

'For this one, the KGB are working through London. They have a high-level agent in the British Government. In all probability a minister. Someone with close associations with the United States.'

'Do we know who this person is?' asked the Marshal eagerly.

Gurenko shook his head. 'All we know is the codename. It could even be the Prime Minister or the Foreign Minister.'

'As high a position as that?' cried the Marshal in astonishment.

'All the evidence points that way . . .'

The Marshal emitted a long, low whistle of surprise. 'Kvali,' he said thoughtfully. 'A British Cabinet Minister, a KGB agent! What a kettle of fish!' There was a long silence then the Marshal's face slowly broke into a smile. 'Are you thinking what I'm thinking, Victor Nikolaevich?'

'I don't know, Comrade Marshal.'

The Marshal glanced at the window. 'It's stuffy in here,' he said, yawning, 'and outside it's a fine day for a walk. I think we'd do better talking on the pavement.'

They went down in the lift and walked slowly along Frunze Street towards Borovitskaya Square.

'Can we first of all agree that if there is any substance in Blue Snow, the GRU, whose job it really is, will ferret it out?'

'Correct, Marshal.'

The Marshal nodded, and glanced at his companion. 'In which case, KGB activity is redundant?'

No Chief of the GRU would have failed to accept the carrot. In matters of this sort, the GRU considered themselves a class above State Security. 'Agreed, Comrade Marshal, in this case the KGB are redundant.'

'So, Comrade General,' said the Marshal in a puckish voice, 'if you were to let it be known, in the right quarters, of course, that a British Government Minister was a KGB agent and that the KGB were using him to get vital information *from the Americans* . . .

'It would be a severe embarrassment, Comrade Marshal.'

'It would be more than that!' cried the Marshal. 'It would be one great, hell of a kick up the arse for the Americans, the British, the KGB, the Secretary-General, everyone except the Red Army.'

Gurenko bit his lip. A leak of that sort could be counter-productive.

'It would muck up the next summit, disrupt Secretary Daranov's prospective visit to London and seriously upset the disarmament talks in Geneva,' roared the Marshal gleefully. 'I take it you have your means of disseminating such information, Victor Nikolaevich?'

'That wouldn't be difficult, Comrade Marshal.'

'Good.' The Marshal paused then said, 'I am invited to tomorrow's Politburo meeting. I shall surprise them all by keeping my counsel and commenting only on the paucity of their information.'

The Marshal chuckled, did a smart about-turn and marched back to the Ministry with a sprightly step.

The Marshal kept his word. At the Tuesday morning meeting of the Politburo, he restricted himself to pointing out that, stripped of its verbiage, the latest report on Blue Snow contained nothing new. Certainly nothing to suggest that the scientific advice proffered by the Secretary-General's own scientific adviser was in any way at fault.

When it was proposed that the matter should be given a lower priority until the project was proven, the Marshal sprung his second surprise. He thumped the table and cried out that, for the security of the Soviet Union, Blue Snow must be kept at the top of the agenda. 'At the top!' he roared, glaring at the Secretary-General. 'At the *very* top!'

Daranov won the morning, but as he left the meeting with the

KGB Chairman he wondered just how. 'The Marshal isn't really a devious man,' said Daranov thoughtfully. 'He hasn't enough brain.' He glanced at Safronov. 'So what exactly is he playing at wanting to keep Blue Snow on the top of the agenda?'

'If the matter were to prove a damp squib, Comrade Secretary-General,' said Safronov cautiously, 'then the Marshal might think that both the Party and the KGB would become laughing stocks.'

They got out of the lift and walked towards Daranov's office.

'You see no other reason, Anatoly Michailovich? No deeper, more nefarious reason?'

Safronov shook his head.

They went into Daranov's office. Daranov motioned the KGB Chairman to sit.

'Now, Anatoly Michailovich, no whitewash, no red herrings, the truth!' snapped Daranov suddenly. '*The absolute truth!*'

'You have seen Kvali's preliminary report, Comrade Secretary-General.'

'*Bumph!*' cried Daranov. 'Nothing but old lavatory paper!'

'You must understand, Comrade Secretary-General, that just as with the Stealth Project, officially Blue Snow does not exist!'

'Even if it does . . . ' said Daranov drily.

Safronov nodded. 'However, progress is being made. The British have officially asked for information on Blue Snow. In Washington, the Pentagon, the State Department and the White House are all involved. The British Military Attaché is active, instructed through the Kvali contact. Data from all sources, including verbal discussion with the President's National Security Adviser, the Secretary of Defence and the Secretary of State, will be collated and available in about fourteen days.'

'Anything from the Second Future Security Strategy Study?' asked Daranov sharply.

'We hope to get both reports and the very important updates.'

Daranov was soothed. He nodded with satisfaction. 'So Kvali is really singing . . . '

'Like a nightingale.'

For a while they were silent then Daranov suddenly said, 'What about the American woman, Kuberski?'

'She was questioned by the British police as a matter of routine.' Safronov saw the Secretary-General's face. 'There is no danger. The woman had nothing to do with the matter we're

discussing and can say nothing. Once the enquiry is over, she will be free to leave the country.'

Daranov shook his head. 'We should have got her out earlier.'

'That was impossible. It would have drawn attention to both of them. As it is, British Intelligence have no dossier on either. Their questioning of the woman is purely routine.' Safronov smiled and added, 'She is an American citizen, Comrade Secretary-General.'

'I know she is!' cried Daranov in alarm. 'And what's going to happen if she talks? Imagine the complications!'

'She won't talk, she has every reason not to talk,' said Safronov soothingly. 'She wouldn't want to face the FBI.'

There was a pause then Daranov said, 'Is there more dirty work for the specialists?'

'There is one,' said Safronov cautiously. 'Not exactly a big fish but one that could possibly be an embarrassment to us. It may come to a task for the specialists, but we very much hope not.'

Daranov nodded. He too hoped that no action would be necessary but, if it was, he prayed that the 'one more' wasn't another great artist.

At the north-east corner of Dzerzhinsky Square, where the ground rises to a slight hill, there stands an ochre-coloured building. With its neat façade and white-curtained windows, it looks like a bank or an Edwardian insurance office, which in fact it once was. Beneath its windows, the man responsible for its transfer into the headquarters for the Central Administration for State Security of the USSR, who gave his name to the square, Feliz Dzerzhinsky, head of the Cheka, the forerunner of the KGB, stands on his plinth, thirty-six feet tall, amidst the noisy, swirling traffic.

From within his office on the third floor of the Lubyanka, Anatoly Michailovich Safronov stared down at the founder of his empire and took stock of his present position. He considered what the old 'sword of the Revolution' would have done and decided that his first action would have been to protect himself and 'The Organ' and then take the fight to the organised opposition.

So far as the KGB were concerned the organised opposition

were the Party and the Red Army. Safronov could see no imminent threat from the Red Army, but he could see a very definite threat from the new Secretary-General of the Party. It would be prudent therefore to have a weapon ready in the KGB armoury should the need arise. The Kvali affair had given him that weapon.

Sliwinski's old minder, Grace Kuberski, would ultimately be brought back to Russia. She was a much-travelled American citizen, a constant visitor to Poland, the USSR and all the socialist countries and therefore a prime subject for CIA intervention. There would be no difficulty in preparing a case against her. The brief could be held, its threat of activation sufficient. The last thing Secretary Daranov would want at the moment would be the arrest of an American citizen.

Safronov didn't make the matter official. He knew a man in the building devoted to the 'The Organ' and no friend of the new order. He went over the head of the Chief of the First Chief Directorate, picked up the internal phone and dialled.

' . . . get hold of her file and read everything about her. Particularly her background in the United States. She's at present in London, and has been interviewed by the British. She may well have been compromised. I want a foolproof case on a charge of espionage under Article 65 of Soviet law ready in the file should *we need to protect State Security.*'

The KGB colonel understood exactly.

## 22

Oliver knew the pub although he hadn't been there for some years. In his younger days it had been a favourite courting place. It was down a deep, narrow lane by the river and in spring the tall banks were covered in snowdrops. Today, in the height of summer, the snowdrops had withered back into their bulbs, and poplars, willows and ash trees would have turned the valley into a green paradise. It would make a pleasant contrast to London. His only regret was that he had not brought Erzsébet, but then the Colonel had been quite specific: he was to come alone.

To have received a phone call from the Colonel was strange

enough, to have received one at the office even more extraordinary. But events no longer surprised Oliver. Much of his conscious time was now spent wondering about his father but, after the visit to Priors Hurst and the conversation with his mother, he seemed to have come to a dead end. The Colonel was his father's old friend. Oliver welcomed the visit, he was even excited by it for it might well lead somewhere.

Cars cluttered the lane, couples stood on the wooden footbridge watching the swans, families sat on the benches and ate their pâté and smoked trout, coots and moorhens, scurrying under the overhanging branches that scoured the river, bickered over nesting places. The Colonel wasn't in the bar. Oliver tried the river bank.

He crossed the footbridge and walked along the path. When the path turned right, away from the river, Oliver stayed on the bank, climbing the stile into the area of private fishing. Two hundred yards downstream, the Colonel was standing on the water's edge, his rod held forward, his fly just visible, a speck amongst the ripples. Behind him on the grass was an old-fashioned wicker hamper.

When he saw Oliver, the Colonel reeled in his fly. Then he sat on the wooden bench tucked into the trees and opened the hamper. 'Not a good day,' he said, looking up at the sky. 'Altogether too brassy. They don't like this sort of weather, nothing's rising, nothing at all.' Then he looked at Oliver and said, 'Damned good of you to come. Damned good.'

'Not being a fisherman, the day suits me very well,' said Oliver. 'It's nicer here than in London.'

The Colonel was a man of order, elegance and taste. The interior of the hamper was neatly packed. There was brown bread, caviare, peaches, damask napkins, silver pepper and salt holders and even a bottle of champagne wrapped in ice. As the Colonel parcelled out their lunch and opened the champagne, Oliver commented on the excellent way he looked after himself when fishing and asked if it was his birthday.

'I thought we'd make an occasion of it,' said the Colonel, and Oliver caught the smell of whisky in his breath. 'I thought we'd make it a day to celebrate.'

They touched glasses and began their lunch. Oliver waited. The Colonel was evidently in no hurry to explain his phone call.

'A lot's happened recently, a hell of a lot,' said the Colonel

suddenly, and glanced at Oliver sitting beside him. 'I don't need to tell you.'

'You mean Robin's death and Sliwinski's assassination?'

The Colonel nodded, drained his glass and refilled both glasses. 'It hasn't been very pleasant for your family.'

Oliver felt the thump of his own heart, the shivers down his spine, the clamminess of his hands. He wanted to blurt everything out, dozens of questions were milling around in his head, but he restrained himself. He would have liked to launch straight into the mystery surrounding his father, but the Colonel was like one of the fishes he loved to catch. He needed playing.

Oliver had never felt particularly at ease with the Colonel and it was apparent that the Colonel found talking to Oliver equally difficult, for after the opening sally he fell silent and they sat together and ate their lunch to the gentle sounds of summer nature.

They were eating their peaches when the Colonel suddenly said, 'Ever been to Burma?'

Oliver shook his head.

'Take a holiday there, or better still, get a passage on an old tramp steamer and go around and explore. Burma's a fascinating place. Full of temples, magnificent places. Always been interested in Buddhism. Wish I was young again.'

'It sounds as if you're trying to get me out of the country.'

'It might not be a bad thing . . .'

'My mother gave me the same advice the other day. I thought it odd then, I think it odd now.' Oliver stared at the Colonel. 'Why did you ask me down here? It wasn't just to tell me about Burmese temples, surely?'

The Colonel sat tight-lipped, staring into his glass.

'Perhaps it was to do with two deaths, and my father's strange behaviour?'

'Your father's strange behaviour?' snapped the Colonel.

'His drinking . . . the Sliwinski visit to Priors Hurst . . . the two Chopin tapes . . . the one with the blank in it, the other quite perfect . . .'

Colonel Symington gave a great cough to clear his throat, took out his handkerchief and blew his nose. 'You're in the middle of something, Oliver,' he said abruptly. 'Something that I myself don't profess to understand. Great forces are at work.' He glanced at Oliver. 'Ruthless forces on both sides . . .'

*'On both sides?'*

The Colonel nodded. 'Oh, yes, in this game, one side is just as bad as the other.'

'What exactly is "this game"?' asked Oliver, holding his breath.

'Second oldest game in the world,' said the Colonel. 'Joshua knew all about it. Remember, "Joshua the son of Nun sent out of Shittim two men as spies secretly, saying, Go view the land, and Jericho. And they went, and came into the house of an harlot . . ."' He stopped and laughed.

'Is my father a Soviet spy?' asked Oliver quietly.

'I don't know,' said the Colonel, staring straight at the river.

'Was Stefan Sliwinski?'

'I don't know, but I suspect that he was.'

Oliver was suddenly aware how old the Colonel looked. In the last few minutes his face seemed to have shrunk, his shoulders had sagged, and his Adam's apple stood stark and gaunt.

'Are you a Soviet agent?'

As if to highlight the bizarreness of the situation, a trout jumped in the river, baring its silver belly to the leaden sun, and with a streak of scintillating blue a kingfisher darted from the branch of a tree to a post that formed a fine diving platform.

'Let me put it another way,' said Oliver, filling his glass. 'How did you get involved in "this game"?''

'That's a long story, a damned long story, and if we sat here till nightfall, I couldn't explain it.' Again the Colonel glanced at Oliver. 'Except to say that we all do foolish things from time to time. And pay for them.'

'Why was Robin killed?'

'Probably for the same reason that Sliwinski was killed, because he knew too much. That's the normal reason for disposing of people in this game.'

Oliver let the information gyrate in his brain. At last he said, 'Are you saying that Robin was an agent?'

The Colonel shrugged. 'I'm not saying anything. I don't know. Just because you're an officer in her Majesty's Forces, it doesn't mean that you . . .' He stopped.

Oliver felt the sudden chill of realisation seep through his body. 'My God, it could have been something I told him!' he cried in horror. 'I played him the tape. I rang him about it. The phone could have been tapped! His death could have been my fault!'

The Colonel seemed not to be listening. He had opened a tin of

flies and was carefully examining each in turn. It was as if the details of the events in which he was enmeshed were too much for him.

'If we both had the same information,' said Oliver in a hushed voice, 'why get rid of Robin and not me? Why didn't they get rid of both of us?' He looked at the Colonel for an answer, but got none. '*Why get rid of Robin and not me?*' he shouted.

'I'm as much in the dark as you are,' said the Colonel, 'but the thing you've got to remember, Oliver, is that the people who run these organisations have damned weird minds. They don't think like you and me.' He paused then said, 'Given that you both had the same information, why get rid of Robin and not you?' He pondered the question. 'That's a nasty one to ask. It could be tempting fate. I think you're treading on dangerous ground there, damned dangerous ground.'

'That's why you wanted me to go away somewhere?'

The Colonel nodded. 'It could be wise.'

They were silent for a while then the Colonel said, 'I can offer you a scenario, God knows if it's the correct one. If you were the only one privy to a particular piece of information, then that might be tolerable. After all, one person uncorroborated isn't a great threat. The powers that be can always maintain that you're mistaken or certifiable, but if there are *two* witnesses, that's a very different kettle of fish.'

'Why are you telling me all this?'

'For your own good.'

'And yours?'

The Colonel drained the champagne bottle, refilling both their glasses. 'Oliver, my boy, I've known you since you were three weeks old, pushed by a nursemaid in a pram. I've known your father and mother for more than thirty years. When my dear wife died, your mother treated me like a brother. Your father has been one of my closest friends. I liked Robin too, he was a damned fine chap. All in all, not having a family of my own, your family has meant a great deal to me.'

'That still isn't enough,' said Oliver quietly. 'Your fondness for me and my family doesn't account for you telling me what you've told me this afternoon.'

'I've told you to go away, get out of the country,' said the Colonel sharply.

'You've told me a hell of a lot more than that! You've told me

you're in "the game". That's a pretty stupendous bit of information even after a couple of Scotches and four glasses of champagne.'

The Colonel said nothing but slowly began to repack the hamper, wrapping each article with care and stowing it back in a predetermined order of his own. As he worked, he kept a damask napkin over the bottom of the hamper, so that the weave of the base was never visible. When Oliver tried to put his own empty glass back in the hamper the Colonel, gently but firmly, took it and packed it himself. The rigid habits of a man who had lived on his own for many years, thought Oliver, and forgot about it.

'It was a woman!' said the Colonel suddenly, with all the fire of an Old Testament prophet. 'A red-headed doxy in the Metropole Hotel on Karl Marx Prospekt, and but for that red hair I can't remember a damned thing about her! Not a damned thing!'

'Is that how it started?' asked Oliver sympathetically.

'More or less. We had lunch there, in that bloody great gloomy dining-room. It was snowing outside.' The Colonel smiled. 'But I do remember one thing, her body was warm. I remember that. I remember the warm flesh . . .'

'What are you going to do now?'

'See that you're all right!' cried the Colonel, and Oliver glanced around to make sure that no one else was in earshot.

'But what about you? You said it was a day to celebrate.'

'It is, it's a great day! A magnificent day! I've shared something I've kept inside me for more than thirty years!' The Colonel put his hand on Oliver's shoulder and gripped with all his old strength. 'You don't know what that means, my boy. It's like coming in off the desert and having a bath, or getting out of a shoal of piranha fish.'

He took out his pipe, filled it with evident satisfaction and lit it.

'I feel a different man,' he said cheerfully. 'Ten years younger for a start. All I want now is to know you're off to the Dutch East Indies.'

The Colonel was unnaturally excited, almost manic. Oliver had never seen him like this.

'What about your masters?'

The Colonel smiled. 'They can go hang for their damned Project Blue Snow.'

'Project *what*?'

'Blue Snow, that's what they call the blasted thing. Comes from some American folk story.'

The Colonel closed the hamper with a theatrical gesture, slapping shut the wicker catch and tightening the leather strap with a pantomime air. Then he picked up his rod, knelt a yard in from the edge of the bank and examined the river upstream with all the concentration of an experienced fly fisherman.

'Thanks for the lunch and the champagne,' said Oliver.

'That tape you talked about,' said the Colonel, still staring into the river, 'it wasn't meant for your father, it was meant for me.'

'Thanks for telling me that,' said Oliver. 'It's taken a great load off my mind.' But he knew that the Colonel was lying.

Oliver walked back along the river bank, crossed the footbridge and went into the pub garden. The lunch crowds had gone, the publican was collecting the glasses and the litter. 'Been talking to the Colonel?' asked the publican. Oliver nodded. 'Nice old chap,' said the publican. 'Real martinet over that hamper of his. Insisted on everything being perfect and packing it all himself.'

Oliver smiled. He wondered what the publican would think of the 'nice old chap' if he knew that his guest was a Soviet agent.

In the distance, faintly, almost like the popping of a cork from a bottle, a single shot rang out. The publican looked surprised. 'That wasn't a shotgun . . .'

Oliver turned and ran back the way he had come. The publican put down his empty glasses and followed.

Colonel Symington lay on his right side, in a hunched embryo pose, midway between the hamper and the river bank. In his right hand, visible from under his body, was a Webley .38 Mark 4 service revolver, his finger firmly gripped around the trigger. The entry wound in the side of his head was masked by the way he had fallen, but blood spread slowly across the grass and cradled the old man's head. The exit wound, in his left cheek, was dark and ragged, and the blood drained down across his open mouth. His cap, pipe and dentures were on the ground beside him. In death he looked very aged and very pathetic.

As he had run along the bank, Oliver had noticed that the hamper was open. Now he looked inside. The lid had been thrown right back and in one corner the damask napkin that had hidden the bottom had been pulled aside. An open leather

holster lay on the wicker. The hamper of celebration had been a hamper of death. No wonder the Colonel had made such an effort to ensure that no one else looked inside.

'What the hell made him do that?' asked the publican when he had got over the first shock. 'He was cheerful enough this morning. Didn't seem to have a care in the world.'

'He was a lonely man,' said Oliver, 'ever since his wife died.'

'Did you have an inkling that he was going to do that?' asked the publican pointing at the body.

Oliver shook his head. 'No, I had no idea, but he'd had a fair amount to drink.'

'You mean he was getting up Dutch courage?'

'He didn't need Dutch courage. He had plenty of his own. In some ways too much.'

Oliver took the Colonel's raincoat, covered the body then sat on the bench and waited while the publican got the police.

Even before he found the letter in the hamper, the detective sergeant had no doubt that it was suicide. Oliver agreed.

## 23

They didn't talk in Morley's office but while watching the ducks in St James's Park. Tony Redpath had wanted it that way, and Morley had been happy to oblige.

'We've been watching a certain Hungarian lady,' said Redpath, himself watching a great crested grebe driving a mallard away from its nesting site. 'Purely as a matter of routine, you understand?'

Morley nodded. It made sense. Redpath was head of Section D1, responsible for countering Soviet espionage.

'She works for Malév, but she's an "illegal" if ever I saw one. She's got "Them" written all over her. The point is, old man, while we were keeping tabs on her, we made an odd discovery. She's got an English boyfriend. Without putting too fine a point on it, they're pretty close. What the lawyers call intimate and it's been going on for some time.' Redpath glanced at Morley. 'The chap's called Oliver Freemantle.'

Moreley drew in his breath.

'Thought the name would ring a bell,' said Redpath cheerfully.

'That's why I thought it better coming in a personal chat rather than over the phone. A damned delicate situation, Morley, damned delicate. The Foreign Secretary's boy mixed up with a Soviet "illegal"! God, it's ten times worse than the Profumo case. If it got out, it could do endless harm.' He paused, then added, 'I'd say that speaking for the Service as a whole, we're reasonably happy with the present set-up. Certainly I haven't met anyone in MI5 or MI6 who'd exactly welcome a Labour Government.'

'You're certain about the woman?'

'Positive.'

'Tell me more.'

Redpath shrugged. 'There's not all that much to tell you. Her real name is Erzsébet Sándor, in Russian she goes under the name of Zoyenka Semyonovna, her codename is Sofia. She's been around a while, her face is familiar enough, and damned pretty too.'

'You're certain that it is Oliver Freemantle she's involved with?'

Redpath nodded. 'We've trailed him back to his flat and down to the ancestral home. I've seen the photographs, there's no doubt, no doubt whatsoever.'

They fell silent and walked slowly along the path together, their hands behind their backs, their heads bent. At last Redpath said, 'I've kept it completely under wraps. The D-G doesn't know, no one knows. You're intelligence liaison FO and secretary to the Joint Intelligence Committee. You're also a chum of the Foreign Secretary. In view of the implications, I couldn't think of anywhere more suitable to pass the buck.'

'Thanks,' said Morley drily. 'Thanks very much.'

Redpath glanced at his watch. 'If you want any help in any direction, just let me know.'

'I've got to take your word for all this, haven't I?' said Morley aggressively. 'I mean, I have to accept that this woman is what you say she is. You've given me the starting point and all the parameters, I didn't make them.'

'She's what she is,' said Redpath grimly. 'I didn't send her to training school.'

Morley had built up his career with diligence. Hard work, care and patience, combined with his natural legalistic brain, had taken him from a small tenement house in Tottenham to a luxury

flat just outside Guildford. That his father had worked on the sludge beds by the Lea Navigation was no longer a topic of conversation, for Morley no longer hobnobbed with sewage workers' families but with Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State, Assistant Secretaries and Principals. He was now a much-respected civil servant, a member of two London clubs, and his name should soon appear in the Honours List.

The fruits he was beginning to enjoy were sweet and he had no intention of throwing them away. The information he had just received was breathtaking, and he was not unflattered that a senior officer in MI5 should have confided in him without telling his own chief, even if that officer had passed on a venomous snake. Nevertheless, MI5 motives were often convoluted and even nefarious and Morley had been in intelligence circles long enough to know that he would be a fool to take the information at its face value. His first move therefore was to check on the woman.

In his few years in the business, Morley had developed an axiom of his own: told something by one arm of the Service, you were wise to check it with the other arm. There were well-defined, well-protected boundaries between MI5, the Security Service, and MI6, the Secret Intelligence Service, but more often than not, if one said there was a fire, the other knew where. Morley now phoned John Hooper, his most reliable contact in Century House.

'Do you know of a Hungarian woman agent who goes by the name of Sofia?'

'Sounds as if she should be a Bulgarian.'

Morley let the joke pass.

'Her real name is Erzsébet Sándor. In the Soviet Union she goes under the name of Zoyenka Semyonovna.'

'I'll check and let you know.'

'It's urgent, John, very urgent.'

Hooper came back in fifteen minutes. 'The woman exists,' he said curtly.

'Anything else?'

'God, you're greedy! First you tell me what you know about her.'

'She's operating in London under a Malév cover.' Morley stopped and waited.

'It's really quite a bizarre story. A sort of one-off. Our Moscow station got the tip-off. An anonymous woman phoned a British

journalist with the information that a Hungarian actress with a Russian name, Zoyenka Semyonovna, had gone to London. The journalist put the Embassy on to it. We checked it all very thoroughly then told MI5.'

'That doesn't mean the woman's an agent.'

'You can take that as proven.'

'And she was given away?'

'So it seems.'

'Why?'

Hooper laughed. 'If we knew that we'd take the rest of the week off.'

'You're sure we're not just getting disinformation?'

'I'm not sure about anything, old man, no one up here is. If the tip-off is a personal grudge, we're unlikely ever to know. The woman works for the other side, remember.'

'Anything else?'

'Along with profession, nationality and Russian name, the anonymous telephone caller gave one other bit of information. It was the Georgian word "Kvali". It doesn't mean a damned thing here.' Hooper paused, then said, 'Does it mean anything to you?'

'Nothing.' \

'Now you know it all, old man, everything, lock, stock and barrel. Let me know if I can be of more help.'

Morley put the phone down and doodled on his pad. The doubts had been removed. He was now the possessor of a devastating fact. The Foreign Secretary's son was the boyfriend of a known KGB agent.

Morley had no idea how much Sir Adrian said to Oliver about his work, but it was reasonable to assume that there was some communication. There were also the despatch boxes that were regularly sent down to the Foreign Secretary's home, or to Chevening, where Oliver also had access. There were the Cabinet Ministers, politicians and military men, all of whom were human and talked, especially after their claret and port. Whichever way Morley looked at it, Oliver's opportunities to acquire information must have been legion.

He had in his hands the seeds of a great scandal. Tony Redpath had reminded him of the political implications were the facts to be known, and that the Intelligence Services would look upon any change of government with dismay. The buck hadn't just been put on his desk, it had been hurled through his window.

As Morley pondered the matter, his first-class honours brain could see only three possible ways ahead. He could take the whole problem to the Foreign Secretary. That might appear the honest, true, clean-cut English way, but in practice it had immense difficulties. He knew Sir Adrian well, and Sir Adrian had been very supportive to him, but telling him that his son went to bed with a Russian agent broke new ground.

He could try and put the whole thing back where it came from, but MI5 had made it quite clear that they wanted it out of their hands and into his. Finally he could tackle it all on his own. At that moment, he had no idea how.

With those courses of action in his head, inching towards the idea of tackling the affair on his own, Morley locked his papers in the safe, picked up his umbrella and went down in the lift. Feeling the need for a drink before he caught the train home, he went to a pub just off the Strand.

Morley had been so aghast at his information, all his thoughts had been on the political and strategic considerations rather than the personal ones. He had considered Sir Adrian's feelings in that he had decided not to approach him, but he had never thought of Oliver. Now, with a glass of Buck's fizz in his hand, he began to analyse his own thoughts towards the man who was causing all the trouble.

Morley realised that he didn't particularly like Oliver. He had always considered him spoilt and envied the younger man his start in life. When you yourself aspired to the upper echelons and had to lift yourself by your own bootlaces, when your own background was an intellectual and cultural desert, it was not unreasonable to be jealous of the young man who had been born with it all.

But there was more, much more. In his dealings with Oliver, Morley had found him rude and abrasive. He had no doubt that the feelings of dislike were mutual and that Oliver looked down upon him for his background. Morley tried to assess what he would write on Oliver Freemantle's report were Oliver a junior in the Civil Service: *Arrogant . . . lazy . . . unable to hold a job down without help from his father . . . unreliable . . .*

'Talking to yourself, Morley?'

Morley spun round. A stocky man with greying hair, and RAF moustache and tie was standing staring at him.

'Didn't know people in your position talked to themselves,' said the man affably. 'In your elevated state, I'd have thought you had plenty of minions to talk to.'

Morley might have been annoyed at having his train of thought interrupted by such apparent banality, but this wasn't an ordinary meeting. Charles Knight was a business man with connections in Eastern Europe. He knew a lot of people, both 'us' and 'them'. Morley had had contacts with Knight before. Besides, Morley was fairly sure that this wasn't a casual meeting: Knight didn't work like that.

Knight indicated the glass in Morley's hand. 'What's your poison? That is, if I can buy a Civil Servant a drink without it looking like a bribe?'

Morley held up his glass and gave one of his rare grins. Knight indicated to the barman.

'I take it this isn't pure chance?' asked Morley. 'I hope I haven't led you too much of a dance.'

'There's a chap who'd like to talk to you . . .'

Morley looked round the pub. 'Talk to me . . . ?'

'He didn't specify you by name. It was me who thought it might be one for you.'

Morley looked doubtful; at the moment he had enough problems.

'It's not the usual,' said Knight enticingly. 'Whatever it is, it smells different. Quite a different pong. It's like a rose to a nasturtium.'

Morley didn't like direct involvement. There were officers in the Service for that. He could think of several who might do. 'You know Tony Redpath,' he said. 'What about him?'

Knight shook his head. 'No good. Wrong tramline for a start.'

Morley raised his eyebrows.

'If you can think of somewhere for a quiet walk?'

Morley thought. At last he said, 'The Oval, tomorrow morning. It's Surrey versus Somerset. I'll meet him outside the Oval station at eleven. I'll have *The Times* under my arm and a white carnation in my buttonhole. I'll answer to the name Hobbs, Jack Hobbs. We can watch the morning's play together. Is that OK? Not too obvious?'

Knight laughed. After a moment he lowered his voice and said,

'Your man is Egorov. Gennadi Egorov. He's stocky, five feet eight and likes a neat brown single-breasted suit. He always reads the *Guardian*.'

Oliver decided not to go back to London. Safety at that moment meant rural England, so he took a circuitous route westwards through Dorset until he was a few miles from the Devon border. He knew a small hotel at the back of Lyme Regis and rang them. They had a room. He bought the few night things he needed, checked in, then walked down through the town to the sea. He walked along the esplanade to the Cobb, stood on the great stone breakwater, stared back at the dark primeval cliffs and tried to think.

His priority was to protect himself. That meant going to ground; it also meant following the time-honoured ploy and letting his opponents, whoever they might be, know that, in the event of anything happening to him, his information was safe in other hands. From that sprung two questions: who were his opponents and with whom could he share the information?

His opponents could only be the espionage services of Russia or Britain. Perhaps even both. It was simple to say, and out here on the Dorset coast they seemed as unreal as trolls, but their activities could be deadly enough as they'd already demonstrated. How he could let either know anything, he had no idea. So he turned his mind to the person with whom he could share his information.

His father was obviously out of the question. His mother already knew his thoughts, but with her illness and loyalty to her husband was also out of the running. Robin, to whom he would have turned, was dead. He loved Erzsébet, but was still not sure of her. Then he remembered Ilse. Ilse was Press. If she could temper her natural desire to publish immediately, she would be ideal.

He got a pile of coins, found a phone box and rang the *Gazette*. Ilse Lanzmann was still in Moscow, but he was given two telephone numbers, her office and her apartment.

He phoned the Moscow apartment from the hotel and was careful not to use his surname. 'Ilse. Oliver . . .'

For an instant, Ilse was puzzled. 'Oliver?'

'May 1984, Venice, you spilling the coffee over your white dress in the Piazza of Saint Mark. Remember?'

'*Oliver!*' Ilse too managed not to shout out his surname. 'My God, you're about the last person I expected. How are you? How lovely to hear you.'

'When are you coming home?'

'Another week. Why? Are you coming out here?'

'Can you get back before that?'

There was a long pause. At last Ilse said, 'Are you serious?'

'Very.'

'Can't you talk to someone else at the office?'

'No.'

'I don't see how I can possibly get back earlier.'

'Try.' He hesitated then said, 'I'm writing a letter. I don't want it used until I've talked to you. I'll send it to my bank with a cover note. I want you to know where it'll be.'

Ilse had a hundred questions but restrained herself. 'I'll do my best,' she said. 'I'll ring the office, then I'll ring you.'

'I'll ring you,' said Oliver firmly, and put the phone down.

On five sheets of hotel notepaper he wrote everything he had learned from his first discovery of the Sliwinski tape to Colonel Symington's words on the river bank. He folded the sheets carefully, put them in an hotel envelope on which he wrote Ilse's name, then he went out and bought a larger envelope. He wrote a cover note to his bank manager, put the whole package in the large envelope and posted it.

Feeling suddenly very free, he walked westwards along the rocks until he came to a place where he could swim. He swam out until it seemed that he could see the whole of the Dorset coastline, then he lay on his back, his eyes shut and the sun on his face. It was a long time since he had felt such peace.

It was Redpath on the phone the moment he got into the office. 'Just to keep you in touch, old man: Mata Hari is off to Budapest.'

'Mata Hari?' asked Morley, puzzled.

'Oliver Freemantle's paramour. She's on her way home. We wouldn't want to detain her, unless you want her kept?'

Detaining Erszébet Sándor could be an embarrassment. Morley wanted nothing embarrassing. 'Let her go,' he said. 'We've still got the man.'

\*

Morley indicated the pitch. 'Surrey have won the toss and are batting, Somerset are fielding. Think of it as Azerbaijan SSR versus Ukrainian SSR. The object is to hit the ball and run as often as possible between the stumps. Or if you can, get a boundary for four.'

The man sitting next to him, the man he knew as Gennadi Egorov, looked at his score card and nodded.

'When you get the hang of it, you'll enjoy it,' said Morley hopefully, and concentrated on the cricket.

They had met as arranged outside the Oval station and were now sitting on their own in a stand at the Vauxhall end of the ground. Morley already knew one important fact: Gennadi Egorov was not from the KGB. Knight had quite specifically said that he was on different tramlines. Morley understood the meaning of that remark. Egorov was from the other Russian spy organisation that operated in the United Kingdom, Military Intelligence, the GRU.

'If we each had a glass of vodka I would drink to your health,' said Egorov. 'To the health of Great Britain and the Soviet Union. Long may there be peace and goodwill between us.'

'Amen to that,' said Morley, smiling.

'We wouldn't want anything to spoil that peace,' said Egorov seriously. '*Anything!*'

Morley's languid style was deceptive. He was alert and tense. When Knight had told him a chap wanted to meet him, he hoped it might connect with Oliver Freemantle and the Hungarian woman. Now he was certain that it did. 'I'm glad you wouldn't want anything to come between us and upset our excellent relations,' said Morley affably. 'We feel exactly the same.'

Morley applauded a good cover drive and waited.

'I take it, Mr Hobbs, that everyone in your Government is vetted by your Security Service?'

Morley nodded. 'Naturally.'

'You have no cause for alarm anywhere?'

Morley thought very carefully. At last he said, 'What exactly do you want from me, Mr Egorov?'

Egorov shrugged. 'Nothing. Just goodwill.'

Morley kept his eyes on the bowler running in from the Vauxhall end.

'If I was to tell you that you had a traitor at high level, would you be surprised?'

'I should be very surprised at *you* telling me.'

'The person is at the top. The very top!'

Morley was puzzled. Egorov telling him all this made no sense. Yet there was a startling similarity to the information he'd got from Hooper at SIS. Hooper had talked of an anonymous phone-caller in Moscow hell-bent on getting rid of the agent, Zoyenka Semyonovna.

'I take it that the joker in the pack is a Hungarian lady with a Russian name, Zoyenka Semyonovna?'

'You know of her, Mr Hobbs?'

Morley nodded. 'In spite of some efforts to the contrary, Zoyenka Semyonovna is on her way back to the nest. You see, Mr Egorov, in this country we don't like caging exotic birds.' Morley smiled, then added, 'You are implying that while she was in the United Kingdom, Zoyenka Semyonovna was in touch with a senior British Government official?'

'*Minister,*' said Egorov quickly. 'Not official, *minister.*'

Morley still had no idea why he was being given this information, but believed he knew what Egorov was saying.

'I know who the person is you're alluding to,' said Morley quietly.

Egorov was surprised but said nothing.

Morley sat watching the cricket and digesting the information. It wasn't his place to tell a GRU officer that he'd got it wrong. That it wasn't the British Government minister who was in contact with the KGB agent but his son.

'One final word, Mr Hobbs,' said Egorov, remembering the importance of his briefing. 'It isn't just that your minister is *in contact* with Zoyenka Semyonovna. It is more than that.'

'If you mean that the person is one of you, we know that too.'

Egorov smiled. His mission was over. He got up, thanked Mr Hobbs for his attention and walked briskly away.

Morley stayed until the luncheon interval. He enjoyed seeing Surrey, his adopted county, but his mind wasn't on the cricket. He was still deeply puzzled at getting the information, but that Oliver didn't simply pass on what he picked up from his father but was a fully fledged one of 'them' added considerably to the matter.

Oliver spent three days in the small hotel above Lyme Regis. He rang Erzsébet's flat half a dozen times but got no answer. In the end he rang the Malév office and got the news that she'd gone back to Hungary. He rang Ilse's flat and on the third day was surprised to hear her voice. She had just come back from Moscow and her temper was not good. He asked her to buy him an air ticket for the first available flight to Budapest and to meet him that evening in a wine bar in Bridport.

Oliver was sitting at the table near the window sipping his glass of Muscadet when Ilse arrived.

'It had better be good, Oliver. Unless I come up with a headline pretty soon, the *Gazette* aren't going to be at all happy.'

He bought her a drink and asked if she had his plane ticket.

She opened her bag and handed over an airline ticket. 'It's for the day after tomorrow and you'll need a visa.'

'I've got a visa.' He wrote a cheque for the amount of the ticket, took a key out of his pocket and handed it to her. 'That's the key of my flat. The visa's in my passport in the drawer of my desk. Be a darling and bring them both to me at Heathrow.' He glanced at the ticket. 'I'll meet you at Terminal Four at eight o'clock.'

'Why can't you get them yourself?'

'Because I don't want to go home.'

'Why don't you want to go home?'

Oliver closed his eyes as a gesture of exasperation. 'Just promise to get my visa and passport. But take care, have a good look before you leap.'

'Thanks, thanks very much,' said Ilse sarcastically. 'Now would you like to tell me what all this cloak and dagger stuff is about?'

Ilse was lovely as Erzsébet was beautiful. She was short where Erzsébet was tall, plump where Erzsébet was thin, and she had a struggle to keep her figure. Oliver was exceedingly thankful for her presence.

'Ever heard of Colonel Symington?'

She shook her head.

'Look him up in *Who's Who*. Next year he'll be in *Who was Who*. He shot himself four days ago while fishing. There was a line or two in some of the papers about him.' Oliver stared at her. 'You were in Moscow otherwise you might have seen it.'

'Go on.'

'My brother Robin wasn't accidentally killed, he was murdered. There was a witness who never came forward. Robin's death, Stefan Sliwinski's assassination and Colonel Symington's suicide are all linked.'

'Wow!' cried Ilse.

'Exactly.'

'And now you're getting out of the country. Why?'

'Because I don't feel safe here, and Colonel Symington told me to get out before he died.'

'Why Budapest?'

Oliver shrugged. 'Why not?'

'Isn't it an odd place to run to?'

'It makes a change. It's full of thermal springs to soothe the bruised body. I think it's just the place.'

Ilse sipped her wine in silence. They ordered their food and for a while neither spoke. At last she lit a cigarette and said, 'Do you know why all these three deaths are linked?'

Oliver shook his head. 'Not really, although I have an idea.'

'And that's what the letter you were sending to your bank is all about?'

Oliver nodded. 'Your name's on the envelope, but you won't get it unless something happens to me or I write to my bank and authorise them to give it to you.'

Ilse smiled. 'That's a nasty one. A real judgement of Solomon. I adore you, Oliver dear, absolutely adore you, and I'd hate anything to happen to you, but I'd still give my right arm for that letter. Even the *Gazette* can hardly claim that three violent deaths are linked without any proof.'

Oliver was silent for a while. Suddenly he said, 'It's very important that you publish *something*. I want you to imply that you have more incriminating information. Lots more. I want someone or other, and I'm not quite sure who, to believe that the newspapers know everything that I know.'

'Is that your insurance?'

Oliver nodded.

She smiled and said brightly, 'So your life's in my hands?'

'In one way, yes.'

She let out a low whistle.

After a while Oliver said, 'Even if I wanted to tell you everything, there isn't a lot more I could tell you, because all the rest is hazy.' He looked at her and added, 'You've got to believe me.'

She didn't believe him, but she was very pleasant about it. After all, she did have some information, and there seemed to be the promise of more.

'It's still going to be difficult to make up a warning story on such thin evidence,' she said doubtfully. 'It's your insurance, remember. I'm only thinking of you.'

'Keep off drugs, smugglers and hobgoblins,' said Oliver. 'Just pile in the hints about agents and spies.' Very deliberately he added, 'You've just been to Moscow, so it shouldn't be too difficult.'

'My God!' she cried, her mouth falling open. '*You're the Foreign Secretary's son!*'

Oliver leaned across the table and put a hand over her mouth. 'You can't drive back tonight and I've got a double room if you don't mind sharing . . .'

When they were in bed together she suddenly asked, in an awe-struck voice, 'For Christ's sake, Oliver, you're not going to defect are you?'

He laughed and held her tighter.

It was dusk when Oliver approached Priors Hurst. He didn't drive up the main drive but turned off down a lane on the edge of the estate. According to the radio, his father was in Brussels so the police surveillance should be lower than usual. He banked on a policeman at the main gate and his own knowledge of the grounds to get him into the house without being seen.

He parked his car amongst the trees, on a gravel track by the stream. He kept to the shelter of the spinney that ran along the bank of the stream until he was at the rear of the house. Then he walked cautiously up to the walled kitchen garden and crept along its cinder path to the side door. There were lights in the hall and lights upstairs. He put his key in the side door and turned the lock. He entered the house silently and at the bottom of the stairs

called out to his mother. She was in bed and not the least surprised to hear him.

Lady Eleanor welcomed her son with an uncharacteristic hug and suggested that he should read to her. He read three pages of a le Carré then told her that he was taking her advice and going away.

'Mauritius,' she said cheerfully. 'Mauritius is a most beautiful island. And I hope you're taking your girlfriend with you?'

'It's not Mauritius, mother, it's Hungary. Budapest. And she's already there.'

Lady Eleanor's thin, grey face showed a flicker of reaction. Her eyebrows lifted and her eyes opened a shade wider.

'And when are you going?'

'Tomorrow morning.'

'For how long?'

'I've no idea but I'll ring you and find out how you are.' He looked at her and said, 'How are you?'

She gave a wan smile and said, 'It depends on the day.'

She asked no more questions but expressed the hope that he had a very pleasant time. He wanted to tell her about his talk with Colonel Symington but she shut her eyes and it was evident that she wished to sleep.

He kissed her goodnight and said he would be leaving early. Then he went up to his own bedroom and set his old alarm clock for six. He read for ten minutes then fell asleep.

Lady Eleanor read five more pages, satisfied herself that all was quiet, rang the duty officer at the Foreign Office and learned that Sir Adrian had returned to the UK and was to be found at the Inner Temple. She rang the number and from the time it took to be answered assumed that her husband was asleep. The moment she heard his voice, she said, 'Adrian, Oliver is flying to Budapest in the morning.'

'He's joining the girl,' said Sir Adrian quickly.

'Yes.'

Sir Adrian grunted, then said, 'And how are you?'

'Not too bad, not too bad at all.'

'Thank God,' said Sir Adrian with relief. 'I'll be down in a couple of days.'

Lady Eleanor put the phone down and turned off the light.

Unable to get to sleep, she took two more of her pain-killing opiates.

The Security Service had lost Oliver for four days. They picked up his trail from the passenger lists for flights to the USSR and Warsaw bloc countries. As Oliver collected his passport and visa from Ilse and checked in for his flight, Morley received a phone call from Redpath.

'Morley, old man, there's something wrong with our dear old country. All the rats are leaving. Your quarry's now at Heathrow, having a cup of coffee with a Semitic-looking woman and about to leave for Budapest.'

Morley only had a few seconds to think. 'Presumably he's going out there to join the Malév girl?'

'That's what one would imagine, although he doesn't seem to do badly for women in England.'

Morley had more information than Redpath. Morley had had the conversation with the GRU man, Gennadi Egorov. He had seen Egorov's information on a high Government minister mole as referring to Oliver. In which case Oliver's journey to Budapest might be the first stage in his full defection to Moscow. The first stage on his journey home. But Morley had no wish to detain Oliver at Heathrow with all the publicity that would entail.

'Make your mind up, old man, we haven't got long.'

'Let him go,' said Morley.

'Are you sure?' asked Redpath, surprised.

'I'll take the risk. If the girl stays in Budapest, he'll stay.'

'I hope you know what you're doing,' said Redpath and rang off.

Morley decided that now he had entered the world of big risks, he might as well take an even bigger one. There was a fair chance that one part of the Warsaw Pact intelligence services didn't know what another part was doing. It was common in NATO, why shouldn't it be common in the East? He picked up the phone and rang his other contact, Hooper at SIS:

'Do you have good relations with Hungarian Intelligence, AVH?'

'Not bad, not bad at all.'

'Could you get them to minder an Englishman for a few days?'

'I don't see why not. Who is he?'

'His name's Oliver Freemantle, he's leaving this morning on flight BA702.'

'That's not by any chance the Foreign Secretary's son?' asked Hooper cautiously. 'The one who was reporting in the Falklands?'

'The same.'

'For God's sake, what's going on?'

Morley grimaced. 'It's for his own good, that's all.'

Hooper knew better than to ask any more questions. 'I'll put the word through,' he said. 'I can't do more.'

'Tell them you'll do something for them one day.'

'Oh, I do,' said Hooper. 'Every time.'

Morley put the phone down, rang his secretary and told her to get him a seat on the first available flight to Budapest.

## 25

Lady Eleanor's visits to Hempminster were now so infrequent, Molly had virtually taken over the running of the shop. When a stranger arrived with a package that might have contained a small lexicon, Molly's instant reaction was to open it, note the contents in the index and remember to ask Lady Eleanor upon her next visit the price at which the article inside might be sold. She was surprised therefore when, just as she was about to undo the wrapping, Lady Eleanor staggered into the shop and asked whether a package had been delivered. On being told that it had, she asked to be given it immediately.

Lady Eleanor sat in her usual seat, nursed the package upon her lap and said, 'I'm going away for a few days, Molly. I'm going to Budapest. I'm going to take the waters of the hot thermal springs. I'm told that they have the most marvellous therapeutic properties. Oliver is there now making the arrangements.'

Molly expressed her hopes and joy and assured Lady Eleanor that everything would be looked after ready for her return.

Clasping the package to her bosom, Lady Eleanor went out into the street, struggled into her car and drove back to Priors Hurst.

In the hour before Sir Adrian was due, in the privacy of her bedroom, Lady Eleanor unwrapped the package and revealed the two objects inside. They appeared identical. Each was a computerised chess set, the size of a small transistor radio and weighing just two pounds. Looking at each most carefully, Lady Eleanor decided which was which and took one down to the sitting-room.

Fortified by her now customary glass of brandy, she was struggling with the set, trying to play against herself, when Sir Adrian arrived.

He was tired and touchy and instantly poured himself a drink. He stood in the middle of the room staring at the fireplace and muttered, 'Oliver . . .' Lady Eleanor gave him a reassuring smile and he became conscious of his wife's activities. He came and stood by her and put a hand on her shoulder. She got up and left the chess set to him.

With his glass beside him, he took over. He seemed delighted to have something to take his mind away from his troubles and began to master the intricacies of the electronics. Soon he was revelling in the novelty.

'I miss playing chess,' he said wistfully. 'I used to enjoy the odd game with Robin.'

'I was going to keep that for your birthday,' said Lady Eleanor. 'Now I've seen you with it, I think you'd better have it right away. It will do you good, act as a therapy. It's just what you need and as it doesn't require a partner, it's ideal for your travels.'

Sir Adrian picked up the chess set and weighed it in his hand. 'It's quite heavy . . .'

'Surely the Foreign Secretary has someone to carry his briefcase to the aeroplane?'

Sir Adrian grunted.

'I've made up my mind,' said Lady Eleanor over supper. 'If your man Morley is definitely in Budapest, then I'm going. I've asked your secretary to get me a ticket on the first plane.'

Sir Adrian nodded. 'She's turned handsprings and got one for tomorrow, and a visa. That's what I want to talk about. Are you sure you're well enough? Are you sure you know what you're doing?'

She sipped her brandy and looked at her husband. 'Of course I'm well enough. As for knowing what I'm doing, I'm going to take the waters.'

Sir Adrian laughed. 'You're an astonishing woman, Eleanor, a marvellous woman. But then you always were. You've got more guts in your little finger than most men have in their whole body.'

'There's nothing particularly great or heroic about going to Budapest,' she said quietly. 'Oliver's my son as much as yours. My only son. You can't go. Everyone knows your face. No one will know who I am once I get there. Someone can push me about the streets and I'll look like any other old invalid.' She paused then added, 'Anyway, you're off to New York tomorrow.'

Sir Adrian was silent for a while. Finally he said, 'We'll go up together. It'll mean an early start. I'll make sure British Airways look after you on the flight, after that you'll be in good hands with Oliver.' He paused and said, 'As for Morley, I can't make him out. As you know very well, I've always kept that man close, made sure that I did.'

Lady Eleanor nodded.

'Yet he didn't say a word to me about anything, just went off.'

'And alerted the intelligence services,' said Lady Eleanor sombrely.

'Of all the crazy things to do.' Sir Adrian shook his head. 'It's almost as if he'd had a brainstorm. In view of the imponderables, I've taken one or two precautions. Morley's asked the Hungarians to keep an eye on Oliver, God knows why. I've asked them to keep an eye on Morley.' He glanced at his wife and said anxiously, 'Things have got in a bit of a muddle, Eleanor. To put it mildly they've got into a damned nasty hash, but until Morley bugged off to Budapest, I still thought everything would come right in the end. Now . . .' He shrugged, and his face clouded with despair. 'If this gets out in the open . . .' He stopped, closed his eyes and again shook his head.

Lady Eleanor held her husband's hand. 'It won't get out in the open, my dear, I promise you it won't. None of it. Everything will be tidied up. Everything.'

He held out his hand and pulled her to her feet. She stood, shook out her hair and brushed the dead leaves from her clothes. They walked arm in arm to the car. After the fright in the Kerepesi Cemetery, Oliver suddenly felt safe. The two men trailing them hadn't been watching him, but mourners who had dared to visit the ill-favoured Section 21.

They stopped at an hotel to buy an English newspaper, sat in the sun with two glasses of vodka, split the paper in two and shared it.

A column on an inside page brought all his tensions back. 'There's a bit on the Sliwinski murder,' said Oliver. 'The police are looking for a man seen earlier in the Festival Hall . . .' He looked up at Erzsébet. 'They're not that daft, they're not going to leave any tracks.' He went back to the paper. 'Sliwinski's minder Grace Kuberski's disappeared.' Again he looked at Erzsébet. 'She couldn't have done it surely? That would have been far too obvious, besides she loved him. In her way that is.'

'We ought to be going,' said Erzsébet.

They were on a terrace near the road, there was no one near them and the rattle of passing trams ensured that there could be no eavesdroppers.

'There's a lot I want to tell you,' said Oliver, suddenly and with great fervour. 'You've heard bits and you know who my father is, but that's only the beginning. There's a whole lot of things I've never mentioned. I've been wanting to tell you, but I held back, I don't know why.' He leaned across and kissed her. 'It'll be bloody marvellous to get it all off my chest.'

She shook her head. 'No, Oliver, not now please.'

His face clouded. 'I must tell you! I've got to tell you.' He pointed back the way they had come. 'Those men in the cemetery weren't watching you, they were watching *me!*'

'I don't want to know.'

'You what?' asked Oliver in disbelief.

She shook her head. 'I don't want to know!'

'Why ever not? Only a couple of days ago you asked me why I took so long to tell you about my father. Now I want to tell you everything and you don't want to know.'

'I never want to know.'

'I don't understand you . . .'

She shrugged. 'Isn't it enough that I don't want to know? Do I have to explain it all?'

'But I want to tell you! Does that mean anything?'

She got up. 'Let's go back.' She shivered. 'I want a shower.'

'God, you're treating me like a small child!'

She kissed him hard on the lips. 'I wouldn't make love with a small child, would I?'

Oliver said nothing in the car. It wasn't until they got out of the lift and were at the door of her apartment that he broke his sulky silence. 'You're just being bloody-minded. It's good for friends to share things. I *must* share all this with you. I have to!'

She put her finger to her lips. 'You don't have to understand me, you don't have to even try. All you have to do is remember that I love you.' There were tears in her eyes as she put her key in the door. 'I've never told any man that before, it's a lovely thing to be able to say.' She paused, gave Oliver a wan smile and said, 'Surely that's enough for one day.'

Oliver felt the surge of warmth that he had felt before reading the newspaper and been reminded of Sliwinski's death. Then Erzsébet opened the door and he followed her in.

A man was sitting near the fireplace. He was sitting at his ease, his shirt-sleeves rolled up, his shoes off, his feet upon a small table. He had a glass in his hands and was watching television. When Erzsébet and Oliver entered, he turned his head and smiled. He was in his early fifties, handsome, with fine strong features, dark green eyes and gently greying hair.

Evidently surprised, Erzsébet stopped near the door. The man got up, turned the television off, went to Erzsébet and hugged her. '*Erzsébet, kedvesem, hogy vagy?*'

Erzsébet was flustered. Oliver had never seen her flustered before. She glanced at Oliver, returned the man's kiss on her

cheek, then glancing at Oliver a second time murmured, 'Oliver Freemantle . . . Daniel Lazar.'

There was a flicker of surprise on Lazar's face, then he put out his hand and said in very slow, careful English, 'How do you do?'

Lazar took Erzsébet to the window. He stood behind the open curtain and pointed. With his arm round her shoulders, he led her into the hallway. They stood and talked in low tones for several minutes, until finally Oliver heard the outer door open and close. After a while Erzsébet came back into the room.

'A drink?' she asked, with all her normal composure.

'Thanks,' said Oliver. 'And what was all that about?'

'Oh . . . you mean Daniel Lazar, he just came to tell me something.'

'So I saw,' said Oliver coldly. 'Does he often come into your flat and make himself at home?'

She poured two drinks and gave one to Oliver. 'I really believe you're jealous,' she said, laughing. 'You don't have to be, Daniel happens to be my uncle.'

'A very friendly uncle.'

Erzsébet shrugged.

'Is he the husband of Sylvia Beszédes?'

Erzsébet looked surprised.

'You remember, the woman we saw this afternoon in the cemetery putting flowers on your father's grave?'

She shook her head. 'Daniel is on my mother's side.'

'So your mother was a Lazar?'

She nodded.

No more was said. Erzsébet had a shower, Oliver sat and brooded.

They went out to dinner to a small restaurant in the Castle district but the meal wasn't a success. Oliver was haunted by the memory of Lazar and realised how much the man's intimacy with Erzsébet had disturbed him. On the way home, he again questioned Erzsébet as to why Lazar had come to the flat and why an uncle happened to have a key.

'I told you, he came to tell me something.'

'What exactly?'

Erzsébet glanced at Oliver. 'He came to tell me that he'd seen two men watching my apartment.'

Oliver wished he hadn't asked the question.

'And he has a key because he looks after the apartment when I'm away.'

Oliver didn't believe her, but for the moment let the matter rest.

They had walked to the restaurant and they walked back. Lazar was waiting in the shadows at the entrance to the house. Again he said in that slow, careful English, 'How do you do?' Then he took Erzsébet aside and talked quickly and animatedly to her. When she came back to Oliver, she appeared just as flustered as she had been on first seeing Lazar in the afternoon.

'Daniel says that someone has been up on our landing, but they're not there now.'

'He does keep an eye on the old place for you, doesn't he?' said Oliver sarcastically.

They went up in the lift; there was no one to be seen. They went into Erzsébet's apartment and Oliver poured himself a drink. Erzsébet opened a cupboard, took out an envelope, and handed Oliver an old, tattered photo.

A tall, thin girl in her early teens stood beside a handsome man in his mid-thirties. The girl was most certainly Erzsébet, the man Lazar. The man had his arm around the girl's shoulders.

'You think he's my lover, don't you?' she asked angrily, and indicated the photo. 'If you think I had a lover when I was twelve, then you have a very low opinion of me.' She paused, then added with a final flourish, 'You can see how alike we are.'

Oliver accepted defeat but, if the jealousy went, the unease remained.

'Daniel has been a father to me ever since I can remember.'

That was perfectly reasonable in view of the fact that her own father had been killed in the uprising.

But the thought of her father brought a strange disquiet to Oliver. The bizarre visit to the Kerepesi Cemetery, the dive into the undergrowth when the old woman had appeared, the naming of that old woman as her aunt, and now the sudden arrival of her uncle were like a journey into a dark, impenetrable, snow-covered forest, with all tracks obliterated. It seemed as if she was beset by a shadowy, clandestine family, each playing their part in a ridiculous charade.

'He's your *father!*' cried Oliver. 'Daniel Lazar is your father!' Erzsébet turned and stared at him.

Oliver had spoken instinctively. Now the logic began to fall into place. 'You said you were alike and you are. That woman in the cemetery wasn't your aunt, because that grave wasn't your father's!'

'You are stupid!' she cried. 'A fool! You don't know what you're talking about.'

For all her acting skill, she was confused. Oliver knew he was right.

'You've lied to me!' he shouted. 'You've lied to me all along the bloody line! Buying flowers and going out to the Section 21, pretending that that grave was your father's, that he was killed thirty years ago in the uprising, talking about him getting in the way of Russian tanks, and all the time's he's alive! *Why?* Why did you have to do it?'

She stood for a moment apparently untouched by Oliver's torrent of accusations, then she shut her eyes and dropped down into a chair. But she still said nothing.

'You had to make me believe that you were a liberal, is that it?' asked Oliver. 'You had to pretend that your father had been a freedom fighter, a counter-revolutionary to use your own jargon, and that would make me think that you were of the same mind . . .'

'My father was in the uprising . . .' she whispered. 'That wasn't a lie.'

'But he wasn't killed and he isn't in that cemetery!'

She shook her head.

The crack had been made, the flood followed. Just as he had struggled to blot out his thoughts about his father, now he struggled to blot out his thoughts about Erzsébet. But it didn't work. Too many emotions were driving him on and the centre of all those emotions, Erzsébet, was sitting a yard from him, her eyes closed, shaking her head to keep his words at bay.

Everything that he had taken for granted was dark with suspicion. Joyous, happy wonderment had turned to bitterness and betrayal. Every meeting they had ever had, every experience they had shared, every word she had spoken, every glance between them poured through his mind in a kaleidoscope of painful sensations.

'Tony Playfair's party,' he breathed. 'It wasn't just a chance meeting, was it? Tony's a gay, he got set up. You went there to find me, to get in touch . . .' He could no longer escape the

obvious. 'It was arranged for you, wasn't it? Your masters arranged it.'

She shook her head, but it was more to persuade herself than Oliver.

The scales were falling from Oliver's eyes; he was almost blinded by the clarity. 'All that talk the other night in bed about working for British Intelligence and Hungarian Intelligence, all that loving chatter about being spies, all those jokes, they were for real! For bloody real!'

'You started it,' she said. 'You kept it going. It was you, not me.'

He sat sick at heart, staring blankly into her face. 'You're an agent, Erzsébet,' he said quietly, sadly, for an instant his anger spent. 'And I've been fool enough to believe that you were with me for my sake. For our own sakes.' His voice rose. 'I was foolish enough to believe that you actually loved me, when all the time you were observing, listening, reporting.' He paused, then suddenly smiled. 'God knows what you've been reporting. The mind boggles at what you've been telling those stone-faced men in their offices on the corner of Roosevelt Square and Joseph Attila Boulevard.' He mimicked her voice. 'You must remember, Comrade, that he's an Englishman and Englishman aren't all that good in bed. Not like we Hungarians. In the positions he uses he is most conventional.' He threw up his hands in horror. 'My God, I didn't know I was that interesting!'

Erzsébet got up and poured two brandies. Her hands were steady, her cheeks dry, she had recovered her composure. She gave one glass to Oliver and sat back in her chair, saying nothing but staring with that enigmatic smile.

Oliver wanted to crush the glass, hurl it at her and scream out that she was a bitch, but restrained himself. He couldn't bring himself to hurt her physically.

'What exactly are we drinking to?' he asked sarcastically.

'You and me,' she said, raising her glass.

'Still?'

'Of course.' She shrugged. 'Unless you no longer want to?'

Oliver sipped his brandy. 'Let's start near the beginning. If Daniel Lazar is your father, then presumably you are not Erzsébet Sándor?'

'He is Daniel Sándor and I am Erzsébet Sándor,' she said blandly.

Oliver nodded. 'Good, so we have one fact. You are both Sándors, and that grave in the cemetery this afternoon just happened to be that of a Sándor, the name being as common as Smith in England?'

'József Sándor was my uncle.'

'So you switched father for uncle?'

Erzsébet nodded.

'We are getting on,' said Oliver sarcastically. 'And you work for the Hungarian Secret Service?'

'Don't be so stupid, Oliver!' cried Erzsébet. 'This isn't a game and it can't be discussed like a game. We are friends, you and I. I told you, only this afternoon, that I loved you. Isn't that enough?'

'Christ, you're a cool customer!' cried Oliver. 'You come to England, get put up to meet me, go to bed with me, spy on me, deceive me all down the line and then have the nerve to say that you love me. As if that wipes everything else out.'

'It happens to be true. I do love you.'

Oliver realised that she was telling the truth.

'And that's why this afternoon, when we were on Margit Island, you told me not to tell you anything else?' he asked eagerly. 'You stopped me from talking!'

She did nothing to confirm Oliver's words. He wanted the nod that she never gave. He tried to persuade himself that she wanted to give it but couldn't. His anger, his feelings of betrayal returned.

'Or wasn't it that at all? You knew it all, that was it, wasn't it? You'd already found out everything there was to find out and you didn't want to be bored? You knew who my father was, all about my brother, Sliwinski and the Colonel. You knew it all, every bloody thing! So you didn't want to hear me blathering on!'

'Shut up, Oliver!' she shouted angrily, got up and went to the window.

For a long time they remained in silence. Erzsébet staring out into the darkness, Oliver wallowing in the bitterness of his feelings. Suddenly Oliver said, 'I should have guessed the moment I came in here. You don't get an apartment like this for nothing. You've been a good, loyal servant to the dear old AVH, Erzsébet. You've been working for them for years.' Then another thought struck him. 'My God, it's not the AVH is it? *It's the KGB!* My dossier's gone all the way to Moscow! I'm now on microfilm in the Lubyanka.' He was about to say, 'Along with my father,' but stopped himself.

Erzsébet came back from the window, drained her glass, refilled it, sat again in her chair and said nothing.

'Nice man my father, you ought to meet him one day, if you haven't already. You've got a lot in common. You know what you said, "Heroes, traitors, they're only labels . . ."' He gave a sardonic laugh. 'Which are you, my darling? Hero or traitor?'

'Stop being sorry for yourself!' cried Erzsébet suddenly.

'Jesus! My best girl turns out to be a spy and I'm not supposed to be sorry for myself!'

She got up, put a cardigan around her shoulders and went out into the night.

Oliver fell into a fitful sleep. Erzsébet came back in the early hours of the morning and they sat by the electric fire. Oliver went over the same ground with the same bitter results, for Erzsébet said virtually nothing.

They saw the dawn creep up over the house tops, and Erzsébet came and sat on the floor, her head against Oliver's legs, his fingers gently exploring her hair.

The sky brightened and the room was suddenly flooded with colour. They huddled together as they had so often huddled together in her flat in London. Only now they were sapped, both grateful for the silence, Oliver drained by the gall of his recriminations, Erzsébet by the trauma of her exposure.

When she fell asleep, Oliver laid her gently on the couch and covered her with a rug. He watched her for a while then tiptoed towards the door.

'Where are you going?' she asked in a sleepy voice.

'For a walk . . .' He thought for a moment, then added, 'Somewhere warm and womblike.'

'The Széchenyi Baths . . .' she murmured, then her head fell back and her eyes closed.

Oliver watched her until he was sure she was asleep, then took the keys of the Skoda and went out into the morning.

'What exactly does he look like?'

Demichev gave an expressive shrug. 'Why ask? You've already told us.'

'It might not be the same man . . .'

Demichev leaned forward in the water, his eyes firmly focused over Oliver's shoulder. 'He's standing just inside the entrance very upright, as if he's just bought the whole of the Széchenyi Baths from the Budapest City Council. He has the face of an English angel, and the eyes of a kestrel. He's looking around at everything and everyone. And, just as you told us, he has a thin, dark moustache like the one Clark Gable wears in those old movies.'

'Is there anyone with him?'

Demichev made very sure before he spoke. 'No, not that I can see. I'd say he's here alone.'

'In that case, the other one is outside.'

'There's another one?' asked Várkonyi, glancing up from the board. 'The woman's father or her brother?'

'Brother . . .' said Oliver.

Várkonyi shook his head and gave a sad grimace. 'An outraged brother can be more dangerous even than an outraged father.'

'Much worse,' said Demichev, 'very much worse. Outraged brothers, being younger, have much more energy than outraged fathers.'

'I'm making a move,' said Várkonyi, circling his hand over the chessboard. 'If you want to keep your fifty dollars, then I advise you to forget your love life and concentrate.'

'Tibor Várkonyi will take your pawn,' observed Demichev, 'and then you can take his pawn and we can all go back to your affair with this man's wife.'

The two moves were made. The moment he had taken Várkonyi's pawn, Oliver asked exactly what the tall, upright Englishman was doing.

'Watching,' said Demichev, in an ominous voice. 'Watching

everyone. Scanning the baths like an inspector of hygiene taking his final examinations.'

Suddenly Demichev stiffened. His stare beyond Oliver's shoulder intensified.

'Now what's he doing?' asked Oliver quickly.

'It is not what *he* is doing, my friend, it's what the *other* man is doing.'

Oliver felt hopelessly vulnerable with his back to the entrance but dared not turn his head. He must learn everything second-hand through Demichev.

'The other man's arrived?'

'A second man has arrived,' observed Demichev, 'and he's signalled to the first man. I'd say that this second man isn't English.'

'Of course he's not, he can't be,' said Várkonyi quickly. 'You're an idiot, Aurél Demichev. Our young friend told us himself that the girl he's run away with was Hungarian, so her brother must also be Hungarian.' He looked at Oliver for confirmation. Oliver nodded.

'He certainly looks Hungarian,' conceded Demichev sourly. 'That face is Hungarian.'

'Have you ever seen him before?' asked Oliver.

Demichev looked surprised. 'Why ever should I have seen this man before? I don't know everyone in Budapest.'

'You're a taxi driver,' said Oliver. 'You must see lots of people.'

Demichev gave the newcomer a long stare. At last he said, 'No, I've never seen this man before. If I have, then I don't remember him.' He paused, then said, 'Anyway, he's not the sort to take a taxi. He'd have a car of his own, an official car with a driver.'

After a while Oliver said, 'When you first mentioned this man you said, "It's what the other man is doing." What is he doing?'

'His right hand is in his jacket pocket. He may be doing no more than feeling his key-ring or a packet of cigarettes. He might even have cut his finger on the bread knife and be keeping it wrapped in his handkerchief. On the other hand, it is possible that he has something very nasty in that pocket.'

'Does his pocket bulge?' asked Várkonyi cheerfully. 'Does it sag a bit?'

Demichev put his wet hand upon Oliver's shoulder. 'The Budapest sun can be very strong and you're not used to it. It's

become too much for you. You need a hat with a very wide brim.' He took a large white panama straw from the head of a man standing in the water nearby and, passing it over the chessboard, placed it gently upon Oliver's head.

'I'm making a move,' announced Várkonyi, and moved his Bishop to Bishop Four.

'Ten minutes ago I moved my Bishop to Bishop Four.'

Várkonyi indicated the chessboard. Oliver realised that he'd paid no attention to the game from the moment he'd learned that the Englishman with the thin, dark moustache had entered the baths. So far as chess was concerned, his mind was a blank. He looked helplessly towards Demichev.

'I need to think,' said Demichev, scratching the top of his chest. 'I may be a genius, but I still need time to think. On no account do I want Tibor Várkonyi to beat you. If we win, then you and I can split his fifty dollars. Fifteen to you, thirty-five to me. With the fifty dollars you already owe me, that would make eighty-five dollars.'

'What's the Englishman doing now?' asked Oliver after a while.

'First, my friend, let me tell you about the other man, the nasty-looking one, the Hungarian brother of the girl you've seduced. He's now sitting, scowling, and that right hand is still in his jacket pocket.'

'And the other man?'

'Still looking, still searching. Very soon you should see him for yourself. He's walking slowly around the middle bath looking most carefully at each bather.'

Demichev leaned over and pulled the brim of Oliver's hat further down over his eyes.

'What's this Englishman's job?' asked Várkonyi suddenly.

'In Hungary he'd run the restaurant in the Hotel Gellért or he could be a Government minister,' observed Demichev, then he looked enquiringly at Oliver.

'He's a spy,' said Oliver quietly. 'An English spy.'

'And you've run away with his wife?' asked Demichev in astonishment. 'You've run away with *the wife of a spy?*'

Oliver nodded.

Demichev threw up his hands in horror. 'You must be mad!

You might as well run away with the wife of an executioner as the wife of a spy.'

'Spies get shot,' said Várkonyi cheerfully. 'The lad's not as daft as you make out. If that man with the thin moustache gets shot, then his wife will be a widow, and our friend here can live happily ever after.'

'Do you know this man's name?' asked Demichev.

'Of course he knows the man's name,' said Várkonyi. 'He couldn't run away with his wife if he didn't know his name.'

'Morley. Lawrence Morley,' said Oliver simply.

'Twenty minutes ago I made a move,' announced Várkonyi in a bored voice. 'I moved my Bishop to Bishop Four.'

Demichev glanced at the chessboard. 'If you're very quick you should just be able to move your Knight to King's Bishop Three before Mr Morley begins looking into this bath.'

Oliver made the move, then lowered his head and tucked his hands under his armpits.

Aurél Demichev squinted up at the sun. The great, white ball hung directly overhead, the shadows within the baths were short and dark and the transition from light to shade was sharp and dramatic. 'It could be the hottest day of the year,' he announced with considerable satisfaction. 'We always have the hottest day of the year about this time.' He ran his hands through the hairs on his chest and gently shook his bosom. 'On the other hand it could cloud over later in the afternoon and there could be a thunderstorm.'

'Has he reached this bath yet?' asked Oliver quietly.

Demichev stretched himself, lifting his great arms towards the sky and drawing in his breath. Half surreptitiously, half acting, he surveyed the baths. 'Your Mr Morley has just reached our bath and his search would appear to be both systematic and diligent. However, we are very crowded.' He added cheerfully, 'Packed. People are coming in all the time. In another few minutes there won't even be standing room. I fancy that Mr Morley is going to have a most difficult job. And in this heat, a most tiring one.'

Oliver waited.

'He is now walking along the edge of the bath like an inspector of drains.' Demichev shook his head. 'Nothing, not even a T-34 tank, can stop him.'

Oliver held his breath. In spite of the heat of the sun and the

water, he felt the goose pimples rising on his neck. In a moment his hair would be standing on edge.

'He's just behind you,' said Demichev, almost unconcerned. 'At this very moment he's staring at me. We're watching one another, eyeball to eyeball.' He paused. 'Now he's looking at Várkonyi.' He paused again, then whispered, 'Now he's looking at your hat. The back of your hat. He seems to like the back of your hat.'

'How far away is he?'

'Two metres, maybe three. Certainly no more.'

Oliver froze and held his breath.

'We should make a move,' said Várkonyi. 'We should make the whole thing seem natural.' He picked up his Queen and moved it to Bishop Two.

Oliver could think of only one thing. To dive under the water and swim to the far side of the baths. If he did that, the others could make some sort of diversion. Splash about, shout and throw the chessboard up in the air. But there wasn't just Morley, there was the man with him, the man with the pistol. Wherever he swam, they would be waiting for him when he came up. Taking refuge in the Széchenyi Baths hadn't been all that good an idea after all.

'He's still staring at your hat,' whispered Demichev. 'But have no fear, he can't see your face. If he can't see your face, then he can't possibly recognise you.'

'Don't listen to Aurél Demichev,' whispered Várkonyi. 'Make a move. Anything. Anything at all. If you want to avoid a duel, make it all look natural.'

Oliver put his hand on to the chessboard. He clasped his fingers around his Rook. Demichev started humming a tuneless dirge. Oliver picked up the Rook and held it poised over the board. He was just placing it down when a hand appeared from nowhere and ripped the hat from his head.

'Mr Oliver Freemantle, I presume?'

Oliver looked up. The outline of Lawrence Morley's face blotted out the sun.

'You shouldn't have moved, Oliver. You should have stayed still beneath that hat.' Morley bent down and put the hat back on Oliver's head. It was a gesture calculated to make the man in the bath feel even more foolish, helpless and trapped.

'It was your hand movement that caught my eye. Hand movements are like handwriting. Unique to each person. When you picked up your Rook and held it over the board, your thumb stuck out. It was a signature. I remembered another chessboard at another place. I had no doubt then who was hiding in that bath beneath that hat.' He paused and tapped his foot impatiently on the edge of the bath. 'The next thing we have to decide, Oliver, is what to do.'

Oliver said nothing.

'A duel here in the Széchenyi Baths,' whispered Demichev excitedly. 'The first duel since the days of the Empire.'

'The Kerepesi Cemetery would be a better place,' muttered Várkonyi. 'A much better place.'

'I had hoped that your innate sense of decency would have kept you out of this place,' said Morley, glancing around the baths. 'It's hardly the setting for a rational, private discussion.'

'It's a great place, a wonderful place,' said Oliver, making a sweeping gesture. 'A baroque glory, a Biedermeier paradise. Corinthian columns, Roman arches, classical statuary, ivy-covered walls, all surmounted with four stone urns. Where else can you bathe in such elegance?'

Morley followed Oliver's hand.

'You should get in the water and sample the joys of a hot thermal spring. It would do you good.'

Again Morley tapped his foot on the edge of the bath. 'May I ask how long you propose to stay here?'

'Till they shut the gates and throw me out.'

'You're making this a very messy affair, Oliver,' said Morley, and to emphasise his words he grimaced and sniffed the air.

'Very messy indeed. Do try and remember that we are both Englishmen. We really should be able to settle this without making a spectacle.'

Again Morley glanced about him. A few people were interested, watching this strange apparition, but not many. Most were there to enjoy the waters and the sunshine; the eccentric Englishman was not going to disturb them.

'I hoped to be able to offer you the honourable way out,' said Morley, staring down at Oliver; 'the way the Romans dealt with matters of this sort.' He glanced towards the second man. 'My colleague Köpeczi has a spare pistol with a single bullet. With a steady hand that should be enough.'

Oliver said nothing.

Morley spoke to Köpeczi. Köpeczi glared at Oliver, nodded and thrust his hand deeper in his jacket pocket.

'I shall accept your invitation and join you in the waters,' said Morley. 'Köpeczi will keep an eye on you, while I change. I advise you to stay exactly where you are and do nothing stupid. Köpeczi is a marksman.'

Morley turned and walked back through the crowds towards the changing rooms.

Köpeczi commandeered a chair, placed it on the pathway between the baths, sat down, stuck out his legs, kept his hand in his pocket and his eyes on Oliver.

'I think you were about to exchange your Rook for your King,' said Demichev helpfully. 'It's not a bad move in the circumstances.'

Oliver made the move.

It was the hottest time of the day. Although the sun had moved from its zenith and thin strips of shadow were creeping forward beneath the western wall, the heat was trapped within the old baroque building and the air was stifling.

On his chair, Tamás Köpeczi found it hard to keep awake. Every few minutes his eyelids dropped and he would struggle to carry on his vigil, thrusting his right hand deeper into his pocket, and glaring even harder at Oliver.

Köpeczi jerked upright when he saw Morley padding along the paving stones between the baths, wearing the regulation bathing trunks hired from the woman in the kiosk, his white body proclaiming his Englishness as much as his clothes had done.

Morley got into the water, took Várkonyi's position on the chessboard and made his first move: pawn to King Three. Then he nodded at Oliver and said, 'Your move.'

'May I ask whether you're here officially or unofficially?' asked Oliver sarcastically. 'Have you been sent here by HMG or is it some whim of your own?'

'I see it as a matter of honour,' said Morley. 'Your father's honour, your family's honour.'

'Does my father know you're here?'

'No, I've spared him everything. He knows nothing about your activities whatsoever.'

'My activities?'

Morley nodded. 'And I trust it can be kept that way.' He paused then said, 'I wish you to understand, Oliver, I shall do all in my power to see that this matter never becomes public.'

'Christ, Morley, you're mad, completely mad! It's not *my* activities, you fool!'

'Whose activities then?' asked Morley coldly.

Oliver wanted to blurt out all he knew about his father, but could never tell Morley.

'You bloody idiot! You've got it absolutely wrong! No one wants publicity. Hasn't it dawned on you that I'm trying to get away from it all?'

Morley shook his head. 'That won't do, Oliver, it won't do at all. I want you to get out of the baths, dress and we'll go for a drive in the country.' He indicated towards Köpeczi.

'Whose side are you on?' muttered Oliver. 'KGB or MI whatever number it is?'

'What a ridiculous question,' snapped Morley.

A well-built, handsome man in his early fifties stood at the edge of the bath, staring at Oliver. Oliver had been so engrossed with Morley, it was some time before he noticed the man. With a sudden shock he realised that he knew him. He had never seen him in bathing trunks but had no doubt who he was. It was the man who had precipitated last night's quarrel, Daniel Sándor, Erzsébet's father.

Sándor indicated to Oliver, a slight movement with his hand, a gesture perhaps of help, then he walked quickly away towards the changing rooms.

Morley saw none of this for he had his back to the man.

'You've no way out of this, Oliver,' said Morley quietly. 'No way at all.'

Demichev whispered in Oliver's ear and Oliver moved a pawn to Bishop Four.

## 29

Sir Adrian's flight was scheduled for fifty minutes after Lady Eleanor's. They had planned to be ready to leave Priors Hurst at a quarter to eight. At half past seven, after an early breakfast, Lady Eleanor walked out across the dew-laden grass with Septimius Severus at her heels.

Lady Eleanor felt strongest first thing in the morning. Now, upright and fresh, she walked amongst the rose-bushes, denuded of blooms, and talked to them. She discussed her age, her illness, told them of her journey and apologised for being unable to look after them in the future.

She stood on the grass between the two long beds and although she was bidding everything and everyone goodbye, she whispered, '*Au revoir.*' Then she sniffed back a tear and returned to the car. Her last act was to direct Septimius Severus towards the housekeeper.

It was a deeply emotional, understated farewell. The pallid, sickly, much-loved Lady Eleanor, a woman of immense courage, was travelling to a foreign country to take the thermal waters, as so many of her compatriots had in the past. Her husband, the great statesman, was flying in the opposite direction on matters of vital importance not just to Britain but to the whole world.

A housekeeper, a gardener and a policeman saw them into the car, and waved as they were driven sedately down the drive.

They sat in the back, hand in hand, a rug over Lady Eleanor's lap. For a while they were silent, then suddenly Lady Eleanor squeezed her husband's hand and said, 'It didn't go wrong, Adrian, nothing went wrong.'

'No.'

'It's been difficult, but then nothing worth doing is ever easy.'

Sir Adrian nodded.

'Everything we did was right, absolutely right. That's what you have to remember.'

They were both thinking of Robin but neither mentioned him. Sir Adrian had often tried to imagine his son's death, to visualise what had happened, and had had nightmares over it. Lady Eleanor appeared to have expunged the event from her memory. They had never discussed the matter properly and they didn't discuss it now. They had blanked one complete segment of their existence, removed all sense of responsibility for a tragedy in the midst of their own family.

The journey was sixty miles, but for both it was a lifetime. They thought about birthdays, christenings, high days and holidays, and once Lady Eleanor talked of the day her husband's Father Christmas beard had caught alight. It had been Robin who had thrown the water into his father's face, Oliver who had screamed with fear, but all she mentioned was the candle and the flaming beard.

Sir Adrian travelled the world and spent much time in airports and aeroplanes, but he seldom travelled with his wife. Now his heroine was going on an heroic mission. She was ill and she was going to see Oliver. What would happen after she had taken the waters and talked with their son, he had no certain idea. He supposed that in a week or two he would be meeting her instead of seeing her off. His world at that moment was the journey to New York.

Lady Eleanor saw a very much clearer future. She was unsure exactly what would happen when she got to Budapest, but she knew that she would never again travel in England. The view from the car of the fields and farms either side of the road would be the last she would ever see of her native country. She had said goodbye to her roses and her dog. Last night she had phoned her daughter. She would say goodbye to her husband at the airport and to her only son in Budapest. As she had promised Freddy Symington, she really was beginning to tidy things up.

'You must tell me about Oliver and exactly what happens,' said Sir Adrian. 'I'm only away three days. You can ring our Permanent Representative, you have the number.'

Lady Eleanor nodded.

'And you must let me know well before you come back. I'll do my best to meet you.'

Again Lady Eleanor squeezed her husband's hand.

'I worry about you, Eleanor. This journey is going to be a tremendous strain on you.'

'I'll manage,' she said cheerfully.

He nodded, although he had no idea how she would manage.

'I talked to Freddy about it,' she said suddenly, and smiled. 'Dear Freddy. He was very sweet, he listened, but at the time I didn't think he understood a word I said, yet he did. He understood only too clearly.'

'Freddy worshipped the ground you trod on,' said Sir Adrian. 'And it was difficult for him. Damned difficult.' He glanced at the driver, then at his wife and added in an undertone, 'Not that it's been exactly easy for any of us.'

'It wasn't easy for Christ,' said Lady Eleanor simply. 'Nor for Gandhi. Let's just remember that together we've given the Earth another forty years of peace. Possibly even a lasting peace. That's an achievement to be proud of.'

Sir Adrian said nothing, just stared straight ahead.

Lady Eleanor kissed him on the cheek. '*Courage, mon brave . . .*'

Ten miles from Heathrow, Lady Eleanor opened her bag and took out the computerised chess set.

'I'm letting you take this with you,' she said gently. 'I have a tiny set of my own.' She took a miniature chess set out of her handbag. 'As you know only too well, Adrian, I'm no Kasparov, but if we synchronise our watches and agree on a time, I'll take out my set and make a move with white. If you believe, as I do, in ESP, we can have a game together.'

Sir Adrian took the computerised chess set, again felt its weight, then slipped it into his briefcase.

'Eighty-forty-one,' said Lady Eleanor, looking at her watch.

'Good enough,' said Sir Adrian.

'I'll make the move with my white pawn at eleven-thirty.'

Sir Adrian laughed.

'You won't forget?'

'Of course I won't forget. It'll help take my mind off things.' He started chuckling, 'You're a marvellous woman, Eleanor, an astonishing woman.' He sighed and added, 'Even at Cambridge there was no one to touch you.'

They said goodbye in the VIP lounge. Again Sir Adrian reminded his wife to let him know when she was coming back, and

she assured him she would. Lady Eleanor straightened her husband's tie, brushed the dandruff off his collar with her hand and kissed him hard upon the lips as she had done in years gone by.

She was taken in a wheelchair to her flight although she swore she could walk. She was put into a seat by an exit and made comfortable. Flight BA702 to Budapest, scheduled for departure at nine-forty, was thirty minutes late leaving. The delay suited Lady Eleanor perfectly. Provided Concorde Flight BA193 to New York left on time, there would now be only twenty minutes' difference between the two.

High above the Rhine, with the uplands of Bavaria visible as a haze through the window, Lady Eleanor glanced at her watch. It was three minutes to eleven. She hadn't altered her watch, and knew that Sir Adrian wouldn't yet have altered his. They were both on British Summer Time and there were thirty-three minutes to go.

Lady Eleanor laid her head back and closed her eyes.

She had no doubt that all her actions, past, present and future, were correct. They were necessary for the peace and betterment of the world, and had had to be carried out properly and efficiently. Her only regrets were for those who had travelled with her and were weaker than herself.

As she sat relaxed at 30,000 feet, with Germany spread beneath her, the sun streaming down in a narrow shaft warming her hands, she smiled at the irony. Everyone who had been with her on her journey had been a man, and every one weaker than herself.

She had thought a lot about Freddy Symington since their meeting on the hill. She had never felt responsible for his death; other forces were responsible for that. She had always been very fond of Freddy, but had also known that he was weak. Freddy had done what he was asked to do, not from conviction but from fear. That might have made her despise him, but it hadn't. His vulnerability had made her love him all the more.

When she'd told him that she wanted to 'tidy things up', he'd been frightened, but in the end he'd been a true friend. He'd put her in touch with Abdulrahman Khaleen, and Khaleen, in the

unlikely environment of The Vine, had warmed to the idea that a person with terminal cancer could take a bomb on to an El Al flight in their hand luggage.

So dear Freddy had in his way been loyal. Lady Eleanor wasn't enough of a sentimentalist to believe that he might now be in heaven, but she hoped that, wherever he was, he had at last found peace.

Altitude and the journey allowed her to think of Robin. Strong as she was, Lady Eleanor could never have allowed herself to believe that she had been responsible for her own son's death. He'd been killed as a result of a series of unnecessary errors. A moment of carelessness on the part of Adrian in leaving the tape in an unlocked drawer, a moment of unexpected inquisitiveness by Oliver, and Robin's life had been put at risk.

Lady Eleanor acknowledged that Robin had become a liability. Given the codes and rules, his death had become inevitable. It was sad but she accepted it and thought of Oliver. Oliver too had been at great risk, but so far he had survived. Before the day was out she should be with him. She might not be able to explain everything, but she should be able to protect him. That she might yet save her only remaining son gave her slender maternal instincts enormous gratification.

She opened an eye and glanced at her watch. It was eleven-sixteen. Fourteen minutes to go. Adrian would be high over the Atlantic reading his briefs. She knew him and she knew his habits. With his lawyer's mind went great punctuality. In twelve minutes' time he would put away his brief and take out the computerised chess set and place it ready on his lap. He would make his first move one minute after half past eleven.

She loved Adrian and now felt immensely sorry for him. She would have liked to have been in the same place, sitting beside him, but that hadn't been possible.

In a league table of weakness, she had never been able to decide who to put at the top, Adrian or Freddy. Freddy faced some things, Adrian nothing. In the last few months, Adrian knew exactly what they were doing together but, like a child refusing to acknowledge reality, never alluded to it.

Eleanor had nurtured him and in the end moulded him. He made no secret of his passionate, missionary belief in the philosophy of Mutually Assured Destruction and it had been but one more step to persuade him that his true mission in life was to

serve a wider cause than Her Majesty. Mankind was a far more important mistress.

In her case it was different. She was the daughter of an old-style capitalist. Her father, a much respected, wealthy business man, had had considerable interests in the West Country. In her childhood, on the banks of the Severn, she had wanted for nothing. When she was nine her father and mother went to Biarritz on a holiday and the young Eleanor went with them.

She didn't know at the time that the trip was half business, half pleasure, for her father hoped to sell lorries to one warring side or other. In the course of their holiday, they crossed into Spain and were amongst the very first to see the aftermath of the bombing of Guernica.

Eleanor could remember the date and the weather. It was April 26th and the day was fine. They had been driving towards Bilbao in their Alvis when the Heinkels and Junkers had crossed the sky. They had heard the bombs fall and her mother had commented that it was tea-time, four-thirty in the afternoon. In the circumstances, Eleanor had thought the remark obscene and it had stuck with her as the typical, thoughtless pronouncement of a capitalist wife.

That night they had seen the sky red with the fires of the burning town and the following morning had driven as near as they could to the carnage. They had learned then that yesterday had been market day and the centre of the town had been crowded.

Young Eleanor remembered the sights, sounds and smells of the burning Basque town and grew up to hate Fascism and war. When Hitler invaded Russia in the summer of 1941, although she was only thirteen, her joy that her own country was to fight side by side with the Soviet Union was immense. When she went up to Cambridge, in the autumn of 1946, her ideas on life were already well formed.

In her second year she caught the eye of a don who, in the early 1930s, when it had become smart with the arrival of the first Labour Government to be left-wing, had recruited agents from amongst the notorious Apostles. Still on the look-out, the don approached Eleanor. She needed no persuasion and was a willing candidate. But even she could hardly have foreseen her eventual role. Her KGB controller laid her down to mature like a good wine.

At twenty-five she married the up-and-coming young lawyer turning politician, Adrian Freemantle. By then her own politics appeared to have moved more to the centre. In the 1950s, she may have voted Labour, but to the outside world she was moving close to her husband.

As Adrian Freemantle rose through the Tory ranks, Eleanor rose with him. But she never forgot her true calling, and when first her husband became a Cabinet Minister and then, as Sir Adrian, the Foreign Secretary, those who had put Eleanor to sleep couldn't believe their luck. The tall young girl with the deep blue eyes and the elegance of an antelope had matured beyond reasonable expectations into the finest vintage.

Lady Eleanor smiled at so many memories and again glanced at her watch. It was eleven-twenty-four. Six minutes to go. What did Adrian know of all this? At first nothing, then later on it became a hazy, ignored background.

She did no more than keep in touch and for the last twenty years her contact had been Freddy Symington. Then came the alert. First Freddy, like John the Baptist proclaiming that one greater than himself was on the way, and then Stefan Sliwinski with the brief, precise message that was to start her singing. Blue Snow was to be her baptism and her epitaph.

At first she had put it to Adrian in a vague, veiled way, reminding him of his deeply held belief that neither superpower must ever be able to alter the balance of terror. Now it seemed that one was about to do just that. Then she asked him directly about Blue Snow, and he hummed and hawed so much she was certain he knew of its existence if little else. Then she told him what she had to do, and reminded him of his duty to mankind.

He had known yet he had not known. He didn't say that he would acquire the information and she didn't ask him to, but she knew that he would. He would do it for her and for his own beliefs. After that he made several journeys to Washington and each time brought information back. He never faced her with the information, and they never talked about it, instead he acted like Father Christmas. The offerings were to be found in her jewel case.

The mistake she had made was to give Adrian Sliwinski's tape. She had told him to listen to it and then destroy it. Instead, he'd wiped out the message and hidden the tape in an unlocked drawer. After Oliver's discovery she'd tackled him on it. His

reasoning had been as crassly stupid as it had been romantic. He couldn't bear to destroy great music. She hadn't chastised him for it, that would have been too cruel. She hadn't even blamed him, not to his face. She had just reminded herself that his weaknesses were legion.

In so far that he had been foolish and careless, Adrian had been responsible for Oliver's discovery and Robin's death. He'd started going to pieces immediately after Robin's death and Sliwinski's assassination had been the last straw. It was most unfortunate that both he and Oliver were at the Festival Hall when it had happened, but to his credit Adrian had kept his head when questioning Oliver, and found out about the Frenchmen. He had done what he could to cover his errors, but by then it was too late.

Poor, weak Adrian. She supposed that they had been a team, that they had done their work together, but whereas she had always understood and faced the consequences, Adrian had hidden from them. He had never even faced the fact that in the eyes of the Government he served, he was now a traitor.

Eleanor had thought of every possibility, but there was only one solution. There could be no future for either of them. They had gone too far. If Adrian could have looked into himself with honesty he would have agreed.

She took the tiny chess set out of her bag and put it on her lap. The person in the seat next to her smiled. Lady Eleanor smiled back. Poor, dear Adrian, she would have liked to have been with him, he needed her strength and support, but with no one else to tidy up, it just hadn't been possible.

At eleven-thirty precisely she moved a pawn to Queen Four.

## 30

British Airways prides itself on the punctuality of its Concorde flights. On Sunday August 17th, Concorde G-BOAK operating Flight BA193 took off from London Heathrow's 28 Left runway at ten-thirty-three. Over the Bristol Channel, 127 nautical miles from Heathrow, the aircraft accelerated from its subsonic speed of 564 knots to its supersonic cruising speed of 1160 knots. This

acceleration took eleven minutes and covered a distance of 135 nautical miles. At the same time the aircraft climbed from 31,000 feet to its new cruising altitude of 56,000 feet.

At eleven-twenty-five, with the aircraft travelling at Mach 2 some 380 nautical miles west of the south-westerly tip of Ireland, Sir Adrian looked up from the open brief on his lap and glanced first at his watch and then at the in-flight data bulkhead display at the front of the cabin. They were travelling at 1340 m.p.h. at 56,000 feet and the outside air temperature was minus 55 degrees Celsius. They had 2575 miles to go to John F. Kennedy Airport, New York.

He thought of Eleanor racing in the opposite direction with sadness and disquiet. Sir Adrian was no mathematician, but the sum he performed wasn't difficult. The combined speeds of their two aircraft meant that they were leaving each other at about 2000 miles per hour.

He had hated saying goodbye to her at the airport and had felt particularly wretched watching her being wheeled out through the door. He had come to accept that she was ill and hoped she was managing the journey. He had no real idea what she was going to do when she got to Budapest other than see Oliver. He didn't ask himself what papers she might be carrying about her person, nor what her plans were for the future.

At that moment Sir Adrian saw no particular future. This time his mission to the United States was entirely to do with a meeting of the United Nations. In a way that was a relief. Not that he would ever have admitted even to himself that he had abused his position or the Americans' hospitality and trust. Days ago he had persuaded himself that his actions were not for the sake of narrow, nationalist interests but for the greater benefits of mankind. Nevertheless, he was thankful that he could call this visit straightforward.

Robin's death had stunned him. He was surprised how much it had numbed his feelings. He was equally surprised how Eleanor had managed to ride the event. She had acted almost as if she hadn't been the mother. He couldn't even remember seeing her cry. Looking back now he wished they had opened their hearts to one another and shared their sadness; it would have helped. He'd wanted to talk about it, but sensed that she hadn't. He

should have exerted himself more and not been so scared of her feelings.

But then it had always been like that. He supposed that his love for Eleanor was composed of, amongst other things, fear and admiration. He had always feared her disapproval just as he had feared his mother's disapproval. He admired Eleanor's strength of purpose as he had admired his mother's. Eleanor had always seemed so much purer, more holy than him and that again set her far above him in his own mind.

Then there had been the money. Eleanor's family were rich, his poor. Her father had made his fortune, Sir Adrian's father had been a relatively impecunious, not all that successful solicitor. The imbalance of money in the early part of their marriage had had a profound effect. Not until his own career had blossomed had he begun to feel secure, and then it was too late. He was already her slave in more ways than one.

Even without Robin's death, the last few months had been the worst he could remember. He supposed, from his position of inferiority, that it had been easier for Eleanor. She had beliefs he didn't have. He had his own belief in Mutually Assured Destruction, but politically he was true Tory. Again, they never discussed her beliefs, but he knew where they lay. She never preached her Marxism or her love for the Soviet Union, and it suited her to live as a capitalist, but underneath she was still the girl who'd witnessed Guernica and thought her mother a stupid bourgeois.

Married to Eleanor he'd never had a chance.

Although most of his official journeys were in the more sedate and now old-fashioned RAF VC10s, Concorde was no novelty to Sir Adrian. He had flown in the aircraft many times. It allowed him either a meeting in New York before lunch or a chance to finish a day's work in London. Today was Sunday and he had left Priors Hurst after breakfast and would still make the first of his meetings in the United Nations building before lunch. But this time there had been another reason for taking this particular flight. It had fitted in with Eleanor's departure.

Sir Adrian would have liked to have had his wife with him, but that hadn't been possible. In a way he had the next best thing. The present she'd given him.

He remembered their pact in the car, and glanced at his watch.

It was eleven-twenty-eight. He closed his brief, turned in his seat, and asked his secretary for the computerised chess set. He held the game in his hand, was again surprised by the weight, then he laid out the pieces and switched the computer on. Satisfied, he settled back in his grey leather seat, and remembering Eleanor's words about ESP, tried to let his mind go blank.

He was never conscious of any message from her, but he knew that at that exact moment she would be sitting in her aircraft, somewhere over Central Europe, with her own miniature chess set upon her lap. At eleven-thirty precisely, exactly as she had promised, she would make her first move. He knew what that move would be. It would be the move she had always made from the days when she was not just as elegant as a gazelle but as beautiful and fresh as the Queen of Sheba: her white pawn to Queen Four. The first move he would make would be to counter that. After that he would play against the computer's own brain.

At eleven-thirty-one, when he knew that Eleanor had made her move, Sir Adrian picked up his own black pawn and moved it to Queen Four. He held it poised over the square and smiled. It was a personal thought but he had a great need to share it. He turned to his secretary.

'I'm playing Eleanor. I'm sure relativity comes into it somewhere, but I'm not certain where. She's going in the opposite direction and we're parting from each other at 2000 miles per hour. She's made the first move and I know exactly what it was. Now I'm making the same move and she knows exactly what that is.' Sir Adrian chuckled and added, 'After that we're in the lap of the gods.'

With a considerable flourish, as if it would help Eleanor to see what he was doing, he placed his own black pawn firmly down upon Queen Four. As he did so, the pound and a half of Czechoslovakian plastic explosive hidden in the back of the chess set detonated.

Concorde G-BOAK was a magnificent piece of aviation engineering, designed to fly at twice the speed of sound at an altitude far above that used by other passenger-carrying jets. The strains on the aircraft at such speed and height were considerable. The heat generated by the skin friction was 127 degrees Celsius, causing the airframe to stretch eight inches. Yet the outside air tempera-

ture was minus 55 degrees Celsius, so the temperature difference between the skin and the air was of the order of 182 degrees.

The aircraft was long and narrow and with the massive thrust of its four Rolls-Royce Snecma Olympus 593 engines and the sixty tons of fuel still in the tanks might be considered more as a dart-shaped rocket tearing through an extremely hostile environment than as an aeroplane.

In the confined space of the front passenger cabin, the pound and a half of plastic explosive was more than sufficient. Sir Adrian was sitting on the starboard side window seat of Row D. There was no slow motion effect, no time to see death entering the cabin, no time to consider. So far as the human eye and body were concerned the happening was instantaneous.

Sir Adrian himself was blown to pieces by the explosion, but even the two pilots and the engineer in the nose of the aircraft and those passengers sitting in the rear cabin had only microseconds, the time of a heartbeat, of consciousness before the rupture in the airframe assumed catastrophic proportions.

The hole torn by the explosion was like a hole in a giant dam. The pressurised air inside the aeroplane shrieked to get out into the deep freeze cold. The hurricane took with it limbs, people, baggage, seats, instruments, cabin equipment and larger and larger pieces of the aeroplane itself. Then the fuselage became its own high explosive and the disintegrating fragments filled the icy stratosphere. Thousands of pieces hung in space while the great engines went on thrusting themselves and fragments of the wings forward in a crazy, twisting, smoke-spumed arc towards the wastes of the Atlantic ten miles below.

There was no time for a Mayday call, no time for anything. G-BOAK disappeared in an instant from every radar screen and communication channel. The debris spiralled down through the late summer clouds that had hidden the sea and for a while some of the lighter pieces, life jackets and bodies, lay upon the choppy ocean. Then gradually more and more fragments of wreckage joined those heavier pieces that had plunged straight to the bottom, 15,000 feet down and 500 nautical miles south-west of Ireland.

'Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower;

he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay.'

It was a long time since Lady Eleanor had prayed a Christian prayer and her lips hardly moved, but the verse was fresh in her mind.

She put her chess set away, fastened her seat belt and looked down on the parched brown fields and farms of Hungary. She wondered for an instant whether her husband had been as predictable as she had expected but was sure that he had. He was always predictable. He was as predictable at chess as he had been in life.

Although she didn't know it at that moment she had no cause for concern. Her first act of tidying up had been an unqualified success. On that patch of grey Atlantic where the Concorde had fallen, little was visible on the surface and on the ocean bed the debris had scattered itself over more than ten square miles.

The disaster to Concorde G-BOAK would be exceedingly difficult to decode.

Lady Eleanor was met at the airport by the First Secretary from the Embassy. He expected to take her to her hotel and was surprised to be told to drive as fast as he could to an address in the old city of Buda. He was even more surprised, upon arriving at a small square below the ramparts, to be imperiously dismissed.

His last sight of the strange, sick woman was as she waved back at him and disappeared into a five-storey apartment block.

## 31

'As for that woman, your contact, Sofia, I wouldn't rely on her,' said Morley, glancing up into Oliver's face. 'She's being taken care of.'

'Sofia?' asked Oliver, genuinely puzzled.

'Erzsébet Sándor or, as you may know her, Zoyenka Semyonovna.'

It was like being kicked in the groin. That all his thoughts and beliefs about Erzsébet had been confirmed in one sentence by

Morley sickened him. He stayed silent, staring at the chessboard, hating the man and feeling hope and life draining away.

His position couldn't have been grimmer. Morley was unable to see sense or reason, Erzsébet had betrayed him and Köpeczi, the AVH man, covered him with a pistol. The sun was going down and he had been in the hot thermal springs of the Széchenyi Baths so long, his flesh had softened. His fingertips were white, undulated and flabby. He was turning into a corpse.

He could now visualise the end and there were only two possibilities. If he could get Demichev or Várkonyi to create a diversion he might swim underwater across the bath and take his chance. What he would do after that, should he manage to avoid Köpeczi's bullets, he had no idea. The only other course was to pretend to go along with Morley's crazy idea of honourable suicide and hope that outside the baths his luck would change. But in the baths he felt safe.

The shadows lengthened, a few small evening clouds dotted the sky, Morley took Oliver's pawn with his pawn and Oliver took Morley's pawn with his Bishop.

'It's certainly an odd day in the Szechényi Baths,' observed Demichev to the sky. 'The oddest Sunday I can remember. First we have our young friend here arriving unexpectedly and telling us about the woman he's seduced, then we have the outraged husband and brother staging a very dramatic interlude, and now, suddenly, *the mother-in-law has arrived!*'

Oliver followed Demichev's gaze. For an instant, the sight was beyond his understanding. In his present situation it made no sense. The tall handsome man with the dark green eyes and gently greying hair that he had seen an hour ago here in the Széchenyi Baths, Erzsébet's father, was pushing an old wheelchair. In the wheelchair, hunched forward, her hands grasping a walking stick, her face pallid and gaunt, was a thin, frail woman dressed in English tweed.

As Sándor threaded their way through the bathers and sun-bathers, Lady Eleanor looked straight ahead at her son.

Oliver had only two thoughts. Either the heat, the glare and the lack of food, coupled with his day of stress, had sent him mad, or Köpeczi had already shot him and he was now in an afterlife.

'*Christ! Mother!*' he managed to gasp, and struggled to stop himself crying.

Lady Eleanor smiled with relief. She was not too late.

Morley turned his head and was as shocked as Oliver.

'Oh, my God, Lady Eleanor!' he cried in astonishment. 'Lady Eleanor *here in Budapest?*'

Sándor stopped the wheelchair. Lady Eleanor stared down at Morley with unconcealed disdain. 'I might say exactly the same to you, Mr Morley, might I not?'

'Why come to Budapest *now?*'

'To take the waters.'

Morley shook his head, his mouth agape. 'It isn't possible . . .'

'It is Mr Morley, it is possible.'

'You don't understand.' Morley glanced at Oliver. 'You don't know what's happening!'

Lady Eleanor shook her head. 'You're correct, Morley, I don't know what's happening. All I do know is that you're a fool.'

'I planned to spare you all this! I intended to settle the matter privately. Keep the whole affair away from you and Sir Adrian.' Morley closed his eyes and held his head in his hands. 'Publicity,' he muttered. 'The one thing we don't want.' He paused then shouted, 'And I had a plan, a bloody good plan!'

Oliver had never witnessed such a change in a man. Morley's world was collapsing as he spoke. There was more than simple disappointment in his face. It was as if all he had worked for, all he had fought for was being wrenched from him. He stood stunned, unable to understand how plans made with such care could be going wrong. How an ordered life could be so abruptly, unreasonably shattered.

'I was determined to keep everything from you and Sir Adrian!' cried Morley. '*Everything*. That was my priority, the only way to tackle such a delicate matter.'

'You're an idiot, Morley,' cried Lady Eleanor. 'A complete idiot. Now get out of the water and leave my son to me. I haven't much time and I want to talk to him.'

Morley glanced at Oliver. It was the glance of a defeated man still reluctant to let his intended victim go.

'Your son is a traitor, Lady Eleanor!' Morley pointed at Oliver. 'An agent! *A Soviet spy!*'

'Nonsense! You've no idea what you're talking about!'

'Your son is a spy, Lady Eleanor, we have irrefutable proof!'

'You're not just an idiot, Morley, you're mad! Demented!'

Lady Eleanor held out her walking stick to beat Morley.

The strain of the day, the unbelievable appearance of Lady

Eleanor, the insults he was now suffering, the crumbling of his carefully laid plans and the certain knowledge that, thanks to the foolishness of this woman, all would now be public, combined to make Morley snap. He struggled to get out of the bath. When he was half-way out, his torso clear of the water, one arm on the paving, he shouted at Köpeczi and indicated Oliver.

'Shoot him!' he cried. 'Shoot the bastard!'

Köpeczi leapt from his chair and whipped out his pistol.

'Dive!' cried Demichev, and slipped down into the water.

Várkonyi swept his arm across the chessboard, sending every piece flying towards Köpeczi like a shower of shrapnel, then went down after Demichev. Oliver filled his lungs with the warm afternoon air and dived as deep as the bottom of the bath would allow. Underwater, he swam for the far side.

'Shoot him! Shoot him!' cried Morley, pointing into the turbulent water and indicating the hazy, broken form he took to be Oliver's. 'Shoot the swine!'

Köpeczi went to the edge of the bath and knelt, looking down into the water, his pistol held ready, apparently watching for the target. But even if Köpeczi could have identified Oliver four feet under the steaming, choppy water, he could never have hit him at such a depth. His bullets would have ricocheted from the surface or fallen harmlessly to the bottom.

Then there were his orders to consider. Köpeczi had been told to accompany the Englishman Morley, assist him, but see that he did no mischief. Nowhere in those orders had he been instructed to kill.

Köpeczi therefore performed in the time-honoured way. He decided to please everyone. He fired single shots into the water so that Morley would be satisfied, and aimed away from the submerged Oliver so that he shouldn't even be hit by a spent bullet. His only fear was that an innocent bystander might stop a ricochet.

Women and children screamed. Morley, half in the water, half out, went on exhorting Köpeczi to 'Kill the swine!' Lady Eleanor swung at Morley with her stick. The noise of shots and screams within the baths, trapped by the walls, echoing upon their bare surfaces, rose in a great crescendo and alerted the four Rendörseg police by their car parked outside. They took their pistols from their holsters and rushed up the steps.

One of the two plain-clothes policemen was first into the baths.

He couldn't see Köpeczi kneeling by the edge of the biggest of the hot baths shooting into the water, for the AVH man was obscured by Lady Eleanor and her wheelchair.

He could hear shots, women and children screaming, and he could see a bather half in and half out of the water gesticulating wildly. The bather had his back to the policeman but one arm was pointing into the water. In the heat of the moment, in the midst of the chaos, the policeman decided that this must be the villain who was turning a Sunday afternoon family outing into a ghastly panic. He steadied himself, took aim and fired three shots.

Morely had lost all reason and control. He had been shouting at Köpeczi to kill Oliver, he could hear the Hungarian crowd screaming all around him, feel Lady Eleanor's stick and at the same time he had seen, through the hot water, glimpses of Oliver swimming away. In the midst of this frenzy, wondering why nothing had gone right, he was struck in the back by three nine-millimetre bullets.

For three seconds he remained in that bizarre pose half in, half out of the water, part of his body supported on the paving that edged the bath, then with his last breath he thrust out his left hand and grasped the only support near to him: the footrest of Lady Eleanor's wheelchair. As he toppled forward into the hot steamy water, he took the wheelchair and Lady Eleanor with him.

When the great splash subsided, Morley floated face downwards, streamers of blood flowing from his bare back, first in delicate festoons of pink but then slowly joining together into an opaque mass of dirty scarlet.

Next to Morley, like scrap in a rubbish pond, the rim of a wheel broke the surface. For an instant, in the confusion and panic, no one thought of Lady Eleanor. Everyone's eyes were on the grotesque sight floating above her. Then with a great shout, Sándor leapt into the water, dragged the wheelchair away and with Demichev's help lifted the body on to the paving.

They laid her out in the evening sun and gave her artificial respiration, but her eyes never opened. She had been in the water for less than thirty seconds but there was no life in her. She had made no effort to save herself and had been conscious for only a few moments. She had died more or less as she had fallen.

Her last, brief thoughts were not of the Order of Lenin she might have received but of the fact that she had accomplished all she had set out to do and Oliver was safe. There was a bonus: he need never know a thing.

## 32

Aeroflot Flight SU618 to Leningrad, due to leave Budapest at 16.55, was held back for forty-five minutes and diverted via Moscow. Erzsébet reached the airport fifteen minutes after ETD, and after the minimum formalities the Tupolev TU-134 was airborne at 17.25.

In the plane tiredness overwhelmed her. It had been a long, upsetting, wearisome day after a bad night. She hadn't seen Oliver again after he left in the early morning. She hadn't even had time to leave him a note. Now the dull, sickening pain of not being able to explain herself hurt almost as much as the parting itself.

Oliver had talked of needing somewhere warm and womblike. Half asleep, she had suggested the Széchenyi Baths. When Oliver didn't return and she discovered that her car was missing, she rang her father. Her father went to the baths and reported that Oliver was in the water playing chess with the other Englishman. An AVH man appeared to be in attendance.

Erzsébet had waited for the woman she had only heard of but never met. Lady Eleanor had handed her the microfilm and she had told Lady Eleanor where Oliver was. Her father had driven Lady Eleanor to the baths. After that she knew nothing.

In spite of her atheistic upbringing, Erzsébet prayed that Oliver was safe.

Oleg Sergejevich Romanov had driven her to Sheremetyevo Airport when she had left Moscow. As she expected, he was waiting to meet her, but this time his demeanour was quite different. He whisked her through the same VIP channel with scarcely a leer, and took her straight to the large black Zil limousine. He opened the door with exaggerated politeness, and as Erzsébet got in, she understood the reason for Oleg

Sergeyevich's changed behaviour. Sitting in the far corner of the Zil was the tall, thin, shadowy figure of Anatoly Safronov, the Chairman of the KGB.

'Zoya!' whispered Safronov, and held out his hand.

Erzsébet took the fingers in the darkness.

'Come and sit close to me.'

She sat in the middle of the seat. He put his arm around her, making her most uncomfortable.

'It's been a long time, Zoya, a very long time. I wasn't able to see you go, but I was determined to meet you. Nothing on earth could have stopped me. Nothing.'

She smiled and Safronov saw her face against the lights of the airport buildings.

'You missed me?' asked Safronov hopefully, then added, 'I certainly missed you.'

Erzsébet nodded. 'Oh, yes, I missed you, Anatoly Michailovich, but of course I was every busy.'

'You did very well, Zoya, very well indeed,' said Safronov, putting his hand on her thigh. 'We're all very proud of you.' He glanced at her in the darkness. 'Secretary Daranov is particularly pleased.'

Before she had left Moscow, Safronov had warned her to keep her emotions in check. She had quite evidently failed. The only man she could think of was Oliver and the only man near her was Safronov.

The information she had fixed to her body suddenly seemed inhuman, dirty and obscene. She put her hand down her blouse and into the cleft between her breasts. Safronov watched her.

'That should be my privilege,' he said and she felt his hand on her breast.

She pretended to laugh, but it was a cry. Together they pulled the warm envelope from her body.

'Is it all here?' asked Safronov, putting the envelope into his briefcase.

She nodded. 'Everything I was given.'

'Well done,' he said, and put his hand back on her thigh.

In the growing darkness they drove down the Leningrad Highway towards the lights of Moscow. Safronov talked of them going to his dacha by the Black Sea for a holiday. They both needed a break and it wasn't too late in the year.

'I am considering divorcing Nellya Dmitrievna,' he said suddenly. 'We should have been divorced years ago. We've nothing in common any more. I'm a nuisance to her, she's a nuisance to me.' He glanced at Erzsébet.

Erzsébet made a noise but it was not decipherable.

'But as you know only too well, my dear Erzsébet, Secretary Daranov doesn't approve of Politburo members divorcing. However, we may now have in our possession one or two stout levers that could well persuade him otherwise.' Safronov gave a thin chuckle. 'First, our great coup in getting the information on Blue Snow.' With great satisfaction, he tapped his briefcase. 'Blue Snow was very much the Secretary-General's baby; he owes the KGB an immense debt. Secondly, there's a certain American woman now in Moscow whose arrest would be most embarrassing to Yevgeni Ivanovich . . .' Safronov paused, then added, 'I have a complete dossier on her. A complete, unanswerable case. We could arrest her tomorrow and charge her with espionage and give Yevgeni Ivanovich the worst headache he's ever had.'

Erzsébet knew nothing of Grace Kuberski, Sliwinski's minder; all she did know was that the bars of the cage Safronov was making for her were getting closer together by the second.

'Indeed,' said Safronov gleefully, 'Secretary Daranov couldn't afford her arrest. So, putting the two together, we have a very strong hand. And then, of course, I would have no difficulty in proving Nellya Dmitrievna's adultery.' His hand moved on Erzsébet's thigh. 'So all in all there's hope.'

They drove to the Lubyanka where Safronov handed in the microfilm for translation and copying. Then they drove out again to her apartment off the end of the Kutuzovsky Prospekt.

'I made sure your apartment was kept warm and clean for your return,' said Safronov as they got in the lift. 'I had a woman sent in every four days.'

'Thank you, Anatoly Michailovich,' said Erzsébet, and tried to smile. 'That was very thoughtful of you.'

'I like to look after you,' said Safronov, in a sensuous voice, and kissed her hard on the mouth.

Before she could put her own key in the lock, Safronov had put his key in. He entered the apartment as if he owned it, which in a way he did. When he took off his jacket, loosened his tie and helped himself to the vodka Oleg Sergeyeovich had

brought, Erzsébet had no doubt that he intended staying the night.

'You have some thermal baths in Budapest?' Safronov asked suddenly.

'The Széchenyi Baths.'

Safronov nodded. 'What exactly was happening there today?'

Erzsébet felt icy cold. 'How do you mean, what was happening there?'

'There was a shoot-out. A certain Englishwoman was killed, so was an Englishman.'

She heard nothing more he said, and felt nothing he did. She was conscious that his breath smelt and his excitement had made him sweat, but sick at heart her thoughts were with another.

She remembered fragments of her time with Oliver in England and Budapest: driving across the Danube with Castle Hill and the bridges glittering like fairyland, cooking Töltött Paprika in her London flat, motoring through the English lanes in his MG, drinking English beer in country pubs and sitting, hugging each other on the windswept beach, on the primeval Dorset coast. She remembered too struggling to teach him Hungarian and, for an Englishman, he wasn't a bad pupil.

When at last Safronov fell asleep, Erzsébet wept long and silently.

When Academician Yerokhin was ushered into the Secretary-General's apartment, Daranov was on his feet, holding out a copy of the fifteen-page report and waving it excitedly.

'Sergey Allyevich, Blue Snow, the ultimate in space systems, a Phase II SDI in all its detail. Destroying missiles in the terminal phase *is out*.' He made an expressive gesture with his hands. 'All research in the United States is now on the destruction of missiles in the Initial Boost Phase, *just after launch*.'

'We still have the laws of nature, Comrade Secretary-General.'

'They've been stretched like elastic, Sergey Allyevich.'

Daranov thrust the report into the Academician's hands.

'Even that dolt Bukovsky can't write it off any longer. And it's simple, as all good systems should be. Just as we envisaged, satellites to provide the warning and tracking information, high-powered lasers on the ground, mirrors in space and a battle management computer for overall control.'

'If you're talking about the destruction of nuclear missiles *immediately* after launch as you were earlier, Comrade Secretary-General, then there's still the earth's atmosphere.' The Academician shook his head. 'Nothing has changed.'

'Read it! Go on, read it! If Blue Snow goes ahead, in a decade the Americans'll have the capability of destroying the whole of our missile arsenal *right over our own territory!*'

The Academician sat and read. As he did so, as he turned the pages, his eyebrows rose and from time to time he gave a little grunt. The Secretary-General watched him like a hawk.

'See how far and fast the research has gone, Sergey Allyevich. You can explain the details to me in a minute, but they're racing ahead and overcome your objection about the earth's atmosphere.' The Secretary-General indicated a paragraph on the page the Academician was now reading. 'That's the important bit, ". . . dramatic breakthroughs . . . the ability of lasers to transmit through the earth's atmosphere without losing optical quality . . ."'

A page further on and Daranov was again reading aloud: "'A giant leap in the technology of missile interception over great distances . . . high-level accuracy in missile tracking required for Initial Boost Phase interception"' . . . It's all there, every bit of it.' He went back to his desk, sat and waited.

The Academician put the typescript down.

'Well?' asked Daranov sharply.

'I should like a copy to take away and think about, Comrade Secretary-General.'

Daranov handed the typescript back and waited.

'It needs a lot of thought,' said the Academician carefully. 'I should like to discuss the contents with my colleagues . . . we need more details . . . more data on test results . . . more information on the equipment being used . . . however . . .'

'However what, Sergey Allyevich?'

'It does seem that the Americans have made immense progress,' conceded the Academician cautiously, then quickly covered himself. 'Although, of course, the Boost Phase covers a considerable period, three to five minutes, and we have no idea what part of the Boost Phase they're thinking of . . .'

'Stop wriggling, Sergey Allyevich, stop wriggling!' Daranov picked up the typescript and waved it. 'They're talking about

destroying missiles within the first minute of launch! This means nothing less than the destruction of our own nuclear missiles in our own atmosphere! In our own environment! It means the destruction of the Soviet Union!

There was a moment's pause, then very gently the Academician nodded.

'So I wasn't wrong in saying that we now face the most serious threat to our security since the explosion of the first atom bomb in the New Mexico desert forty years ago?'

'You were not, Comrade Secretary-General.'

'And I wasn't wrong in saying that we must now consider whether we make a pre-emptive strike *before* Blue Snow can be operational.'

'Or face the Americans with our knowledge,' said the Academician quietly, 'and work on counter-measures. There are always counter-measures to any weapon system.'

'More expense, Sergey Allyevich, more roubles for arms. We can't afford it!'

'As a rule of thumb, Comrade Secretary-General, counter-measures are cheaper than the weapon system they're designed to nullify.'

Daranov nodded, but he was hardly listening. The superpower relationship was entering a new phase, the world had a new threat. Tomorrow he could start dealing with it. Tonight, he had another thought.

So far as he knew the Order of Lenin had never been awarded posthumously to a foreigner. Never let it be said that the Soviet Union didn't look after its own. Late as it was, he would draft a letter to the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet proposing that Kvali be awarded a posthumous Order of Lenin.

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Oliver sat in the window seat looking down the drive. He'd never been particularly fond of the dog he called Septicaemia, now it sat at his feet as if it had no other friend in the world.

As the silver Golf GTI appeared through the trees, Oliver glanced at his watch. Ilse was dead on time.

They sat by the fire in the large, panelled sitting-room. Ilse itched to ask the questions burning her tongue but respect for a family half wiped out stopped her. She looked at the paintings and furnishing; although much was old and nothing priceless, there was a considerable inheritance.

'So all this is now yours,' she said at last. 'And if I hadn't known you better, I might have thought you'd planned it.'

'Planned it?' cried Oliver in horror.

Ilse shrugged. 'Your father killed in an air disaster that could be sabotage, your mother killed in a really weird gun battle at some hot baths in Hungary, where incidentally you were also present, your elder brother killed in a mysterious car accident, all in three months . . .' She stopped and looked at Oliver. 'And now you're the master of this fine estate.'

'For God's sake, you can't think . . . ?'

'If I was a policeman, I would. I'm surprised some big plod hasn't pulled you in for grilling long ago.'

Oliver saw it that way for the first time. 'Christ!' he said, and shook his head.

'That could also account for you asking us to run your insurance article. It wasn't easy suggesting a link-up between three deaths without a shred of evidence, and hinting darkly at more to come, but we did our best.'

Oliver hadn't seen the *Gazette* article, but he thanked her.

'Whether you really wanted us to do that article as a safeguard on your life or whether it was just a big bluff, I've no idea.' She smiled. 'Of course, you could prove your innocence by giving me that letter you sent to your bank?'

Oliver looked at her, but said nothing.

'Let's start at the beginning,' said Ilse. 'You told me that the deaths of your brother, Stefan Sliwinski and Colonel Symington were all linked.'

Oliver nodded.

'You didn't say how. You just said pile on the hints about agents and spies . . . remember?'

'That's what I thought then.'

'You mean you don't think it now?'

Oliver shrugged.

'Have you ever heard the word "Kvali"?''

'No. Should I have done?'

'It's a Georgian word meaning a furrow. There was a liberal

newspaper published in Tiflis at the end of the last century called *Kvali*. We think it's a codename.'

Oliver thought of Erzsébet and went cold. But *Kvali* couldn't have been her codename. Morley had called her Sofia.

'Even heard of Zoyenka Semyonovna?'

The cold froze to ice. Morley had given that as Erzsébet's other name. Oliver shook his head and hoped he looked convincing.

'Why do you ask about *Kvali* and Zoyenka Semyonovna?' he asked quickly. 'How did you hear about them? What do you know about them?'

She told him about the Moscow phone call. 'So we know that *Kvali* and Zoyenka Semyonovna were operating in England. We've also turned up one or two interesting facts in France. Shortly after your visit, the two men you spoke to were found dead in a burned-out house.'

'One was the witness who saw the man run from Robin's blazing car,' said Oliver quietly; 'the other the man who took me to him.'

'Also Germany was quite rewarding. Your brother had mess debts and gambling debts. He met a man the night he was killed, and drove away from a restaurant with him. We think it was his blackmailer. Needless to say the man's disappeared.'

'Assassins, the same people who did Sliwinski in,' said Oliver flatly.

Ilse stared at Oliver.

'A trail of havoc, a trail of death . . .' murmured Oliver.

'With you in the middle.'

Oliver said nothing.

'Oh, come on Oliver, for God's sake. The whole thing's too bloody bizarre to go on with this question and answer game. Your father killed on the same day as your mother, you in the baths playing chess with this man Morley from the FO, your mother being wheeled in and then the gun battle, ending up with your mother and Morley dead. Why were you in Budapest in the first place? Why did your mother go there? What about that guy Morley? Why were you playing chess with him? Christ, the questions are endless.'

'I told you, I went to Budapest because I thought I was in danger, my mother had cancer and hoped the thermal baths would help her, Morley went there trailing me.'

She looked at him, her mouth open, 'Are you an agent?'

He laughed. 'I didn't defect, did I?'

'OK. Who is or was the agent?'

'I honestly don't know. I've had my suspicions, but that's all. I've no proof.'

'Morley?' asked Ilse.

Oliver shrugged. 'He knew my brother, he visited him in Germany, he knew me and my parents, he knew Colonel Symington and he knew Stefan Sliwinski . . .'

'Symington, you were there when he shot himself!' cried Ilse.

'Just before he shot himself.'

'Why did he do it?'

'He was very lonely after his wife died . . .'

'For Pete's sake!'

'All right then, in the course of your nosing about, have you come across Project Blue Snow?'

'Blue Snow?'

'It's American folklore. In an icy winter the snow fell blue and melted into ink. That's about all I know.'

She shook her head.

'Symington told me about Blue Snow and told me to get out of the country. That's when I decided to go to Budapest. I told my mother I was going there and she decided to join me. Morley got to know about it, and you know the rest.'

'I don't know the rest at all. What about Concorde?'

'Metal fatigue. The planes are ten years old. The strain on the airframe of constantly going supersonic is horrendous.'

'And you're saying that your mother and father killed within hours of each other, five thousand miles apart, is pure coincidence?'

Oliver nodded.

'I need a drink,' said Ilse. 'A strong one.'

'There's a hell of a lot missing, Oliver, and you know there is. All you're doing is protecting someone.' Ilse stared at Oliver then suddenly blurted out, 'My God, *your father!* Your father was a Soviet spy, like Blunt or Philby, and your mother got to know and killed him!'

Oliver felt sick at heart, but he struggled not to show it. 'So she blew up Concorde with a hundred people on board?' he said flippantly.

'Yes. To keep the family name clean. It's just the sort of thing a woman like your mother would do. For her, the most important thing in the world was that the name Freemantle shouldn't be shamed.'

'And Robin?'

'That would be another reason for her killing her husband. Your brother got to know what his father was doing.'

'I thought my brother had mess debts and was being black-mailed?'

She seemed not to hear. She stared at Oliver and said, 'You were safe because you didn't know.'

'And Sliwinski?'

'Mixed up in it somewhere, so was Symington . . .'

'A nice fairy story . . .'

'There's one thing missing,' said Ilse. 'Why did you go to Budapest?'

'It's a very beautiful city.'

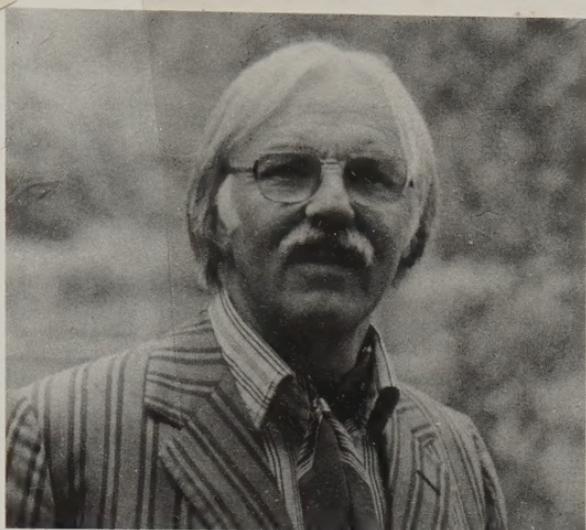
She shook her head. 'That's not enough. Not nearly enough. There must be something else.'

## EPILOGUE

It was the week before Christmas; Oliver was in Ilse's flat watching the News at Ten. Two items of news were from Moscow. The first was an announcement that the Soviet Union were to speed up research and development of a satellite weapon that would seek out and destroy United States space mirrors to be used in an extension of the Star Wars programme. It meant nothing to Oliver and he let it pass.

The second item was on the Yves St Laurent dress show in Dom Modele, the Ministry of Trade's House of Fashion. Soviet Russia's first lady, Eugenia Matveyevna, was being shown around by the designer. Behind her was the one Politburo face Oliver knew, Yevgeni Daranov. The cameras and commentator picked out one other Politburo member for special attention, the Chairman of the KGB, Anatoly Safronov.

It was the woman immediately behind Safronov that made Oliver gasp and brought tears to his eyes. The camera was only on her for a moment but she left her indelible mark. She was tall, had green eyes and an Eastern look. She walked with great elegance and appeared to be at peace with the world. Oliver knew her as Erzsébet Sándor and wondered what Safronov knew her as.



**Raymond Hitchcock**, who was born in India in 1922 and now lives near Winchester, served in the Royal Engineers in the Second World War until he was wounded in Normandy in 1944.

Besides cartoons for *Punch* and articles for magazines as diverse as *Penthouse* and *World Medicine*, he has had several television plays produced, the latest being *The unknown soldier* (BBC 2 'Screen Two', February 1985).

His first novel *Percy* was filmed and became a bestseller in France. There followed *The gilt-edged boy*, *Venus 13*, *Attack the Lusitania!*, *Sea wrack*, *Archangel 006* and *The tunnellers*.

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